REGIONAL SECURITY

U.S. MILITARY ENGAGEMENT IN CENTRAL ASIA: "GREAT GAME" OR "GREAT GAIN"?

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The region of Central Asia has acquired a new strategic importance in recent years. Comprised of five states, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, Central Asia has emerged as a region of strategic importance given its vast energy resources, its regional threats of narcotics production and trafficking, and by virtue of its geographic location. It is the geography of Central Asia, however, that has contributed most to making the region both a short-term and a longer-term security priority to U.S. national interests. Its proximity to Afghanistan was crucial in planning the operations against the Taliban in neighboring Afghanistan, endowing the Central Asian region with elevated strategic importance in the new security paradigm of post-11 September. Although the U.S. military presence in the region was well established long before 11 September, the region became an important platform for the projection of U.S. military power in Operation Enduring Freedom.

The Central Asian states also play an important role as "security sentry" for the ongoing stabilization effort in Afghanistan and in better positioning U.S. forces in the medium-term safeguarding of stability in Pakistan. Over the longer-term, Central Asia's strategic importance stems from several other factors, ranging from trans-national threats posed by Islamic extremism, drug production and trafficking, to the geopolitical threats inherent in the region's location as a crossroads between Russia, Southwest Asia and China.

But the region also faces more fundamental internal challenges, ranging from an overall deficit of democracy, and the related predominance of "strongmen over statesmen," to economic mismanagement and widespread corruption. These factors significantly impede the reform efforts of these states in transition, further contributing to a significant loss in state power. It is this set of internal factors that presents the most daunting challenge, however, as the core fragility of these states cannot be effectively overcome simply through policies relying on enhancing their security or military capabilities.

The core focus of Western policies in the region over the past decade has largely been driven by considerations related to the development of their energy reserves and the challenges of securing export routes amid the competing interests of the regional powers. This long-standing energy focus has now been superseded by a pursuit of security and stability, within the prism of the global fight against terrorism. There has been a fundamental and sweeping change in U.S. policy in the region underway for some time, however. The foundation for current U.S. policy in the region rests with the new strategic partnership between the United States and Russia. But as Russia reasserts its position in Central Asia, the region, as well as the Caucasus, may very well emerge as the next arena in this mounting competition between Moscow and Washington, making the quest for stability and self-sufficiency among the infant states in the region even more important.

The Course of U.S. Engagement in Central Asia

Pre-11 September

In the period immediately following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the subsequent emergence of the newly independent states in 1991, U.S. policy toward Central Asia centered on a security relationship with Kazakhstan. This initial focus on Kazakhstan stemmed in large part from the need to secure the Kazakh nuclear arsenal and, in December 1993, resulted in the signing of a Cooperative Threat Reduction (CTR) agreement to dismantle and destroy the country's over 100 SS-18 missiles.

By 1994, the U.S. cemented its bilateral security cooperation with Kazakhstan through a defense cooperation agreement that forged new cooperation in defense doctrine and training. The neighboring states of Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan also joined Kazakhstan in entering NATO's Partnership for Peace Program (PfP). Central Asian membership in the NATO PfP served as the main avenue for Western security engagement and a number of officers from these states, as well as from Tajikistan, participated in PfP exercises by 1995. The U.S.-Kazakh defense relationship was expanded in 1995 to include deeper cooperation in nuclear security and defense conversion efforts.

The U.S. approach to Central Asia was also driven by overarching geopolitical considerations, with an underlying goal of containing the influence of China, Iran and Russia. The promotion of Turkey as a key U.S. proxy force in the region was also designed to bolster U.S. geopolitical objectives, although widespread disappointment and frustration among the Central Asian states over Turkey's failure to meet their early expectations significantly limited Turkish appeal and influence in the region.

Another core element in U.S. policy throughout the 1990s was the danger of proliferation, as well as the need for regional security. As with Kazakhstan, the U.S. entered into a bilateral security relationship with Uzbekistan in 1998. Uzbekistan also became the first recipient of a sizeable transfer of military equipment under the Foreign Military Financing program in 2000. The nature of the security threats in Uzbekistan was also slightly different than in Kazakhstan, however, as the U.S. was also gravely concerned with the mounting power of an Islamic extremist network based in Uzbekistan. And although the U.S. also reached a CTR agreement with Uzbekistan based on the Kazakh CTR, the immediate threat was from the mounting Islamic insurgency in the country.

Officially, U.S. policy was even more ambitious, with longer-term goals of democratization and marketization, a consolidation of regional security and cooperation, and an open and unfettered environment to allow the development of the regional energy resources. This last goal effectively translated into an effort to bolster the territorial integrity and security of the Central Asian states mainly as a counterweight to Russian interference or manipulation.

By 1999, the U.S. expanded military engagement into Central Asia, aiming to bolster the economic and political independence of both Central Asia and the Southern Caucasus. There was an important stress on military-to-military cooperation, both to Westernize and professionalize the regional militaries but also to entrench the U.S. presence in this increasingly geopolitically important region. The U.S. also articulated a desire for greater regional integration and cooperation, with assistance in border control and security to combat drug trafficking, in nonproliferation, and other trans-national criminal activities. Counter-insurgency and rudimentary counter-terrorism also emerged as key focal points in the wake of armed incursions by elements of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) into Kyrgyzstan in the summer of 1999.

Following the need to contain these emerging security threats, the U.S. formulated an extensive new Central Asian Border Security Initiative (CASI) in April 2000, with $3 million in additional security assistance to each of the five Central Asian states. As the IMU's military operations escalated in Uzbekistan in August 2000, with several Americans even taken hostage, the State Department formally added the IMU organization to the official U.S. roster of foreign terrorist groups. The IMU was also linked to the al-Qa'eda network of bin Laden in September 2000, adding an even greater significance to the regional security effort.

As U.S. engagement rapidly extended through the Central Asian region, the importance of stability in Tajikistan and its vulnerability to the nearby Islamic militancy also led to a new U.S. focus. With a symbolic visit to the country in May 2001, the then head of the U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM), General Tommy Franks, recognized Tajikistan as "a strategically important country" and pledged U.S. security assistance.[1] The Tajiks were then successfully persuaded to follow their Central Asian neighbors into membership in NATO's Partnership for Peace Program.

Central Asia and the NATO Partnership for Peace Program

As stated earlier, the NATO PfP served as a key channel for U.S. (and Western) military engagement in Central Asia. Through PfP, the newly independent, yet still vulnerable, Central Asian nations were able to gain significant experience and contacts with the U.S. military establishment. For the U.S. and NATO, the program also offered a unique venue for fostering a greater integration of these states into Western political and military institutions. Central Asian involvement also promoted important civil-military reforms designed to enhance internal stability and democratization, and served to generally institutionalize relations with the United States. A significant byproduct of this effort was its inherent deterrence of influence or interference from the potentially threatening regional powers of China, Iran and Russia.

As early as 1993, a number of military officers and civilian officials from Central Asia participated in training sessions of the George C. Marshall Center in Garmisch, Germany, and the contacts and experience derived from the broadening military-to-military programs began to lay a foundation for the modernization of the countries' fledgling armed forces. This investment was also important in initiating a concerted effort to overcome the legacy of decades of outdated and inappropriate Soviet military indoc-

[1] The five Central Asian states were formally transferred from the jurisdiction of the U.S. European Command to Central Command (CENTCOM) in October 1999.

trination and training. For the first time, the national Central Asian militaries were able to begin the formulation and development of their own national military doctrines, based on their unique national security needs rather than on external imposed Soviet determinants.[2]

Participation in NATOs PfP multinational military exercises also played an important role in fostering greater regional cooperation and reintegration. These exercises provided crucial training in peacekeeping activities and aimed at developing interoperability, both of which were seriously absent in these countries. In August 1995, forces from Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan participated in Fort Polk's Operation Nugget exercises in peacekeeping tactics for land forces, and were later joined by a Kazakh contingent in a follow-up round in July 1997. Forces from each of the three Central Asian states also completed an international amphibious exercise in North Carolina, along with forces from Canada, the Netherlands, and sixteen other Partnership for Peace member nations. Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan also joined with the U.S. and other NATO and Partnership for Peace countries in March 2001 for exercises in Nova Scotia.

In addition to such out-of-area training, the armed forces from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan formed a new joint peacekeeping unit in December 1995. Formed under the auspices of U.S. CENTCOM, this new unit, Centrazbat, was empowered to promote stability in the region and enable the three member states to share tactical information and experience in peacekeeping and limited security patrol maneuvers. Multinational exercises centering on this Centrazbat unit have been held annually with forces from the U.S. and NATO member states providing field and command training.

Much of the burden of training and interacting with the Central Asian militaries fell to the U.S. Special Forces.[3] The development of the Special Forces was a natural and necessary product of the recognition of a new nature of military threat coming from unconventional, irregular and often covert, insurgent or terrorist groups. The Special Forces are composed of small, purpose-designed units tasked with a wide variety of missions and roles. These highly trained specialized units are able to assume a number of highly focused missions quite beyond the ordinary capabilities of the more conventional, general-purpose units.

Training Central Asian units was, therefore, an appropriate assignment and best utilized the specific talents and skills of the Special Operations Forces. Such training missions, officially known as Foreign Internal Defense (FID), have long been a standard SOF assignment. The very nature of the U.S. Special Forces as an unconventional and highly specialized adaptive force makes them suitable for training an infant military to counter threats of insurgency and terrorism.

Over the longer-term, such interaction also promotes two pillars of U.S. foreign policy objectives: democracy and the protection of human rights. As reflected in the very motto of the Special Forces, De Oppresso Liber (To Free the Oppressed), the Special Forces exude a model of military honor and professionalism that is sorely lacking in these infant former Soviet republics. Fortunately, the SOF was well positioned and experienced in Central Asia even before the region would take on an abrupt and drastic strategic importance for the United States after 11 September, 2001.

Post-11 September

The fundamental shift in the geopolitical landscape in the aftermath of 11 September cannot be stressed enough, as it abruptly recast and reordered U.S. strategic priorities in nearly all respects. This shift is marked by a new U.S. focus on regions and states that were traditionally regulated to the periphery

[2] The only exception of the five Central Asian states is Tajikistan, which formed its national armed forces from the core remnants of disparate armed groups actively engaged in the country's civil war. All other Central Asian states reconstituted their armed forces based on the units inherited from the Soviet Turkestan Military District.

[3] The Special Forces, known officially as the U.S. Army Special Forces and unofficially as the "Green Berets," comprise a very small element in the overall U.S. military known as Special Operations Forces (SOF), codified by the Nunn-Cohen Amendment to the Goldwater-Nichols Defense Reform Act of 1986.

of U.S. strategy but that have now emerged as "partners" or "players" in the overarching U.S. global war on terrorism campaign.

Such regions and nations are roughly split within these two camps: "partners" or "players." These states and, more broadly, these regions, are seen from Washington as either being partners in a cooperative effort to help in the U.S. campaign against terrorism or as players to be either pressured or coerced into a more compliant role in the campaign. It is in this sense that Pakistan, for example, has emerged as a "partner" endowed with enhanced strategic importance and greater tactical utility for the United States. Saudi Arabia, as a contrary example, is now seen as a "player," with significantly less strategic clout or even reliability, and no longer a "partner."

These regions and, more specifically, their constituent states are also now viewed through this partner-or-player prism. In terms of U.S. security policy, the traditionally marginal states of East and West Africa, for one glaring example, are now essential to the U.S. counter-terrorism effort against the al-Qa'eda networks of Kenya and Djibouti, and the network's penetration into the diamond markets of Sierra Leone. Even "failed" or "failing" states in generally conflict-prone regions are now enjoying U.S. attention of a grand scale.

The new security environments in Central Asia and the Southern Caucasus also demonstrate this shift in U.S. security policy, although both have different aspects and issues for U.S. strategy. Both regions also offer the U.S. important roles as platforms for power projection, from Central Asia into Afghanistan and, at least potentially, from the Caucasus into the northern Middle East (most notably into Iran). But it was Central Asia that benefited most, and first, from the shift in U.S. security. Uzbekistan, and to a lesser degree Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Kazakhstan abruptly emerged as key frontline partners in the U.S. war on terrorism and served as crucial platforms for Operation Enduring Freedom, the combat operations targeting the Taliban and the al-Qa'eda network in Afghanistan.

The Central Asian role in Operation Enduring Freedom was both broad and extensive, with forward basing in Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, unfettered access to airspace and the use of bases in Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan. Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan also allowed more limited access by coalition aircraft. Most significantly, Uzbekistan provided the full use of its airbase at Karshi Khanabad and Tajikistan allowed the U.S. military to use its air space and territory, but was subsequently pressured by Russian coercion to tone down its logistical support. The Tajiks still provided the use of its Dushanbe airport, albeit on a contingency basis.

Russian pressure on Tajikistan is still potent, with the presence of roughly 7,000 troops from Russia's 201st Motor Rifle Division (MRD) and an additional 11,000 Russian border guards stationed in the country. By November 2001, however, Tajikistan agreed to negotiate the U.S. utilization of three additional airbases, at Khujand, Kurgan-Tiube, and Kulob, the best equipped of the three. U.S. access to these airbases in southern Tajikistan was significant for the establishment of a land bridge into northern Afghanistan, as well as the obvious benefit of providing for additional sorties as missions would be only an hour from their target lists.

It was the role of Uzbekistan, however, as the country with, comparatively, the most capable and advanced military in the region, that was most significant. The U.S. and Uzbekistan concluded an agreement to expand military-to-military cooperation through joint seminars, training, and partnerships with U.S. units. This also provided the Uzbeks with an important external guarantee of security and, internally, endowed their military with much greater potential for combating and eventually defeating the Islamic extremist groups.

U.S. and Russian Interests: Converging or Clashing?

Equally serious and perhaps an even more immediate threat, is the potential for a clash between the competing interests of Russia and the United States in the region. Although this is tempered somewhat by

the overarching U.S.-Russian strategic partnership, Russian interests in the region and its continuing geopolitical ambition to maintain dominance in Central Asia present its own set of security challenges to the U.S. role in the region.

This potential clash of interests was demonstrated in late 2002, with the Russian Air Force's deployment of aircraft at the Kant airbase in Kyrgyzstan. The purpose of the deployment was ostensibly not to create a Russian base in Kyrgyzstan, but to develop a joint Russian-Kyrgyz military operational airbase to support the multinational Collective Rapid Deployment Forces (CRDF), established under the Collective Security Treaty (CST) and comprising one battalion from each CRDF member state—Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.[4]

Central Asia: The Threat of Islamic Insurgency

The threat to Central Asian security from the region's active and violent insurgent Islamic extremist groups has undergone a significant change since the overthrow of the Taliban and the reconstitution of a new Afghanistan. Recent attention to this security threat has shifted from a priority focus on the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, officially linked to the al-Qa'eda network, to the Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT).

Much of this new focus on the HT came after the demise of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan effectively ended the IMU's role as the dominant threat. The collapse of the IMU was also speeded by a gradual erosion of its ability to utilize logistical and operational bases in Tajikistan from 1997-2001. The IMU actually relocated to the Taliban Afghanistan, changing its name to the Islamic Party of Turkestan (IPT) and voluntarily assuming a subservient role to the Taliban. The U.S. victory over the Taliban, therefore, soundly defeated the IMU (or IPT) as well.

Although the end of the IMU removed a decade-long threat to regional security, the continued weakness of the Central Asian states, both in terms of limited capacities for sufficient border and even territorial control by the police and military, still fosters a security vacuum that may allow other like-minded Islamic extremist groups to emerge. This security vacuum is also exacerbated by continued security deficiencies in Afghanistan, by rising anti-Americanism in Pakistan and the potential for greater support among the disenfranchised populations of the impoverished Central Asian states. The U.S. military may also inadvertently encourage this, offering new targets of opportunity for these groups.

A related challenge is the perception, both real and exaggerated, of U.S. support for the generally repressive and autocratic Central Asian regimes. And with a focus on policies interpreted as being driven by obligations to reward the Central Asian states for their cooperation and by incentives aimed at ensuring continued security collaboration, there is a general feeling that the U.S. has mislaid its earlier agenda of economic and political reform. This is further exacerbated by the deepening socioeconomic disparities and mounting poverty in the region, as well as by the dominance of small, corrupt clan-based elites. It is also these very same elites that usually constitute the overwhelming majority of contacts with the West, and that tend to monopolize military-to-military cooperation.

Hizb ut-Tahrir-al-Islami

Hizb ut-Tahrir-al-Islami exploited the overall focus on the IMU and used the inattention to its own activities to garner influence in many parts of the region throughout the 1990s. Unlike the IMU, the HT

[4] See: W. O'Malley, R. McDermott, "The Russian Air Force in Kyrgyzstan: The Security Dynamics," *The Analyst*, Central Asia-Caucasus Institute, The Johns Hopkins University, 9 April, 2003.

initiated a fairly impressive campaign of recruiting and influence-building based on a self-espoused "non-violent" approach, focusing more on securing grassroots support by exploiting widespread unemployment, economic disparity and political alienation. This approach also marks the distinction between its London-based spokespersons' public platform of radical anti-Western (and rabid anti-American) rhetoric and its local approach stressing indigenous needs and concerns. This distinction also allows the HT to identify with the impoverished local population on a much deeper level than any pan-Islamic or anti-Western agenda could ever accomplish. This is most clearly evident in the HT's local tactics of articulating such local concerns as the dangers of drug trafficking, prostitution and HIV/AIDS, poverty, and official corruption.

This localized strategy in the region also exploits the vulnerabilities of the Central Asian states. Specifically, the HT has become entrenched in two key areas: the political and religious. The HT has effectively exploited widespread alienation among a seriously disenfranchised and polarized population to present itself as the only true grassroots or populist organization seeking to represent (and advocate) the interests of the general population. In this regard, the HT portrays itself as a movement for economic and political justice, albeit stemming from an underlying Islamic foundation.

It has also significantly exploited the rather undeveloped nature of Islam in the region. With an already mounting hunger for information and exposure to Islam and Islamic traditions in the early years of the post-Soviet period, the HT was able to quickly offer religious instruction and non-threatening indoctrination. By establishing a network of informal Islamic teaching and semi-education, the HT emerged as the popular source for religious instruction. And by avoiding the more expensive (and more public) institutionalization of Islamic teaching through madrasahs, for example, the HT soon acquired a virtual monopoly on religion and matters of faith in the region. This also meant that they became the providers of preference for pseudo-civil duties, offering Islamic marriages, divorce and even informal family court services.

Given the rise in popular support and increasing authority of the HT organization, the secular governments of Central Asia recognize the HT as a serious threat to their rule and are now urging the U.S. to label the group as a terrorist organization (following the Russian and German decisions to outlaw the group). Although most analysts have warned of the dangers of such a move, contending that an identification of the group as "terrorist" would only radicalize an already popular grassroots organization, driving it underground and perhaps provoking a violent reaction, others argue against this self-fulfilling prophecy argument and stress the threat posed by the HT to the regimes of the region, although usually downplaying the serious shortcomings, widespread corruption and human rights violations of these regimes.

Although this debate is as yet unresolved, due consideration to more effective measures to prevent the HT from emerging as a truly terrorist group may be more productive to U.S. policy in the long run. The leverage of U.S. engagement in the region may actually offer two new sets of tools to more soundly combat the appeal and resort to violence by the more radical of the region's extremist elements. Such tools would include first greater pressure for democratic reform in the autocratic states of the region, with a widening of the nation-building programs vital to conflict-prevention.

The U.S may also gain from the inherent contrast with the Russian presence in the region. Both in terms of historical legacy and by virtue of the perception of a current Russian threat to the region, ranging from the reasonable, a threat from the Russian military, to the exaggerated, a threat from the sizable Russian minority population, the U.S. stands to benefit. Additionally, the positive approach of U.S. Special Forces in the region, with a successful civil affairs operation, only reinforces this contrast. In fact, the U.S. effort to combat drug trafficking actually expropriates one of the core elements of the HT platform. Once this contrast is promoted, the local population will not see the U.S. presence as much of a contradiction to the HT. The test here would be to contain any new rise in anti-Western rhetoric, although the rather underdeveloped state of Islam in Central Asia has meant that it has not become as inherently defensive or confrontational as in other regions.

The second set of new tools relates to the nature of U.S. engagement. The counter-insurgency and strengthening of capacity of the region's militaries, already well underway, can be presented as an effort

to build the infant states of the region. By focusing on capacity building that does not automatically arm or strengthen the regimes themselves, any potential fear or opposition to these programs by the HT may be countered with an appeal to nationalism. Such an appeal to national identity, whether it is Uzbek, Kazakh, or Kyrgyz pride and national feeling, is perhaps the most natural defense against religious-inspired extremism.

And by building stronger national armies and police, the resulting improvements in border security and the rule of law may become the most effective avenue toward meeting the very goals of justice and social order espoused by the Islamic groups like the Hizb ut-Tahrir. In fact, the debate over the nature of the HT, as agents of transition or advocates of terrorism, actually obscures the larger challenge of securing "regions at risk."

Thus, the real challenge to dealing with the HT and other lesser groups is in linking U.S. security efforts to the important social and political needs of each of the Central Asian states. Central to this challenge, as recent experience in Afghanistan has revealed only too well, is the test of time: U.S. engagement must be based on the long-term, instituting sustainable policies to promote national and regional stability. Any abrupt departure or withdrawal from these regions would seriously impede the U.S. engagement and may result in the "blowback" that emerged in Afghanistan in the wake of the Soviet retreat.

This lesson also confirms the dangers posed by the "failed" and "failing" states that are now so prominent on the U.S. national security agenda. And with no real national capacity or regional security organizations able to assume the mantle of security and stability, the U.S. has firmly entered a region necessitating longer-term stamina and endurance.

Constraints and Considerations

While generally the performance of U.S. military forces in the global war on terrorism to date has been impressive, there are some troubling factors indicating a more difficult period in the next phase or next theater in this campaign. The transformation of the U.S. military sought by the Bush Administration and directed by Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld tends to favor the operational needs of the U.S. engagement in Central Asia and the Southern Caucasus. The stress on a future force defined less by size and more by mobility and swiftness, and that is easier to deploy and sustain, complements the force structure and operational characteristics of the U.S. effort in Central Asia and the Southern Caucasus. Much of this transformation is driven by the three primary risk areas set forth in the 2001 Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR): force management, operational, and institutional risk.

The Special Forces: A Special Role

The abrupt 11 September shift in security, as well as the subsequent campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq, have only reinforced this effort and led to a new priority, in both policy and funding, for addressing asymmetric threats and for the Special Operations Forces (SOF) that are best poised to meet this threat. The SOF are now positioned with an enhanced role that, according to new Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low Intensity Conflict Thomas O'Connell, given its "unique capability to meet the complex new challenges of the global war on terrorism has increased their importance as a primary tool in the nation's defense—as opposed to merely a tool for leveraging conventional forces or for smaller, specialized mission."[5]

[5] Testimony of Thomas O'Connell, Senate Armed Services Committee hearing on his nomination as Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low Intensity Conflict, 10 July, 2003.

The "Great Game" or the "Great Gain?"

The dangers posed by "failed" and "failing" states, with their inherent internal instability and the collapse of effective state authority, invite a rapid multiplication of challenges to U.S. engagement beyond the initial period of entry. Moreover, this scenario also reveals the risks inherent in the U.S. presence in such restive areas, as the fundamental threats to these states' very sovereignty greatly complicate U.S. objectives and may make any future U.S. disentanglement from these weak states very costly indeed.

The Central Asian region also shares a landlocked dependency with the southern Caucasus, both in terms of relying on an external guarantee of security and in terms of economics and energy export routes. This dependency, combined with the internal weakness of these states, contributes to the challenges facing a sustained U.S. engagement in the region. Yet even given this shared dependency, the outlook for the U.S. engagement in Central Asia is generally more promising than with the case of the Caucasus.

The outlook for the Caspian remains conditional on the broader fate of the U.S.-Russian strategic relationship, however, with the weak states of the region increasingly subject to this larger dynamic. There is promise that the Caspian region may benefit from a new "Great Gain" stemming from the coordinated policies between Washington and Moscow and resulting in greater regional stability, development and conflict resolution. There is an equally strong likelihood, however, that the Caspian may well revert to the confrontational pattern of the "Great Game" marked by regional and global rivalries. The determining factor for the Caspian rests with the course of the U.S.-Russian partnership and its ability to overcome the internal challenges posed by the fragile states of the region. The stakes are high, however, as the security and fate of the entire region hangs in the balance.

Thus, the course of the U.S. engagement in Central Asia and the Southern Caucasus faces a wide array of challenges and constraints, although it is as evident that it is far too late, and too costly, for any real consideration of a withdrawal at this stage. As the U.S. military engagement deepens in the coming years, the stability and security of the region and its component states are now solidly dependent on the durability and stamina of the U.S. commitment. They will continue to seek further reassurance that the U.S. and its allies will complete the task of stabilizing Afghanistan. The course of post-war Iraq will also be a factor in this test of engagement endurance, as well as posing its own test of commitment. But the key to transforming the U.S. engagement from burdensome to bearable lies in leveraging, not limiting, a new "partnership for security."

The best way to accomplish this is for the United States to bolster its commitment to the region through deeper NATO involvement, developing existing partnerships with each state and using the Partnership for Peace as a bridge to an enhanced partnership for security. The key challenges in a broadened NATO role in the region will relate to promoting the reform of the armed forces of these states, whilst avoiding feeding the rivalry between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, and encouraging democratization, civil-military reform, enhanced interoperability with Western forces and real regional cooperation. One can only hope that these expectations are adequately met in the medium- to long-term, especially given the looming threats of a Russian reassertion of, and a Chinese ambition for, geopolitical dominance in each strategic region.