

## **Islam, Oil and Geopolitics**

*Elizabeth van Wie Davis and Rouben Azizian, eds.*  
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Emerging from the heap of the Soviet empire into a backwater landmass, the Central Asian republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgystan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan have been increasingly gaining in significance and importance as the rumblings of a new Great Game is being sounded on their territory. According to this book, the three great powers – the United States, Russia, and China – are expected to play determinate roles in the politics

and shaping of this region's evolution on the world stage. The role of these newly independent republics, however, is less clear or easy to forecast, however, for they seem to be still in the process of forging their national identities and deciding upon the thrust of their global relations, alliances, and interests.

In addition, whether they will continue to be able to maintain their newly gained independence, particularly given their vulnerability as landlocked countries, remains a significant question. Russia, their earlier master, is seeking to reassert its position in what it considers to be its natural sphere of influence. The rising neighboring Chinese giant is developing both economic and strategic interests beyond its borders and into that region. The American superpower is intruding as a major player into both countries' backyard under the pretext of fighting terrorism and spreading freedom and democracy (p. 2). The outcome of the interplay of sometimes traversing yet frequently conflicting geopolitical as well as economic interests is what this book seeks to explore. Fusing the explosive elements of geopolitics, religion, and energy, this four-part book brings together twenty international policy and security analysts in a conversation about the meaning, from different perspectives, of a post-9/11 world to the United States and its allies (actual or potential), Russia, and China, as well as to regional powers and the Central Asian republics.

Part I (chapters 2-7) deals with issues of peace and conflict in Central Asia, including Afghanistan, particularly as permeated by Islamic ideology, currents, and groups. All chapters deal with extremism, terrorism, and separatism, yet attempt to offer distinct (even if overlapping) perspectives and explanations as to their real or underlying causes. Mikhail Konarovsky (chapter 2) relates these phenomena to the ruling administrations' failure to deal with security and urgent socioeconomic problems. He concludes that in order to stem this tide of violence and instability, cooperation is necessary among Russia, China, India, the United States, and the European Union (p. 25). Najibullah Lafraie (chapter 3) agrees and points out that Afghanistan's main problem is warlordism and warlords who have little regard for the "central government." He calls for a genuine intra-Afghan dialogue, more foreign assistance, and a rapid American military withdrawal, as this provides an excuse and incentive to recruit the fighters who feed the antigovernment insurgency (pp. 40-41).

Chapter 4 explains radical Islamist mobilization in terms of grievances related to identity, as in the case of the Uyghurs in China's Xinjiang region (Gaye Christofferson). Christofferson suggests that the creation of an inde-

pendent and autonomous Uyghur identity, to be allowed without interference or imposition from either Beijing or Washington, is the best defense against al-Qaeda making inroads by promises or offers of an identity, as well as the best guarantee of stability (p. 58). In chapter 5, Kamoludin Abdullaev stresses the failure of political and economic transformations as well as the republics' massive corruption as the main causes of violence and instability, and not Islam as such (p. 75). This is mainly the point that Alisher Khamidov expands upon in chapter 6, where he suggests that radical Islamist movements such as Hizb-ut-Tahrir and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan may be countered by fighting corruption to bring about a good measure of social justice as well as political liberalization (pp. 3, 88, and 90).

Aleksi Malashenko (chapter 7) insightfully distinguishes between religious political radicalism and terrorism. As he puts it, eradicating terrorism is not the same thing as eliminating Islamic opposition, even of the radical type. Systematic military, police, and special services actions will not suffice to control terrorism or radicalism. Preventive measures, such as a dialogue that would involve radical leaders, however, can change the mentality that supports such behavior. The purpose is to achieve stability on the basis of a consensus among the broad spectrum of political forces (p. 103).

Part II (chapters 8-10) deals with energy and the increasing demand for energy resources – particularly oil and gas – in China and Japan. Central Asia is seen as a promising source to meet such demands. Despite Japan's strategic interests there and in the Caucasus, Manabu Shimizu (chapter 8) concludes that the country does not expect to import oil or gas from the Caspian region due to its geographic remoteness. However, the fact that possible increased oil production from that area would free up additional oil on the world markets would benefit Japan (p. 119). As for China, Kang Wu (chapter 9) indicates that in 1993 the country became a net importer of oil despite its huge coal reserves. With the construction of the Kazakh-China oil pipeline, Central Asia will be well placed to supply China's increased oil demand, along with the Middle East, Africa, and Russia (p. 143). This is consistent with China's strategic decision to diversify so as not to be dependent on any particular actor or party for its energy supplies.

Robert Smith (chapter 10), in his chapter about Central Asia and Asian Pacific energy requirements, appears to be of the same mind as Shimizu. Despite Central Asia's abundant energy resources, the region is unlikely to meet Asian Pacific energy demands, except for China, due to the difficulty of transporting oil and gas to their markets. Smith remarks that China may

become increasingly vulnerable to security threats, for the Kazakh-Chinese oil pipeline can be sabotaged, both possibly and easily, by disaffected Uyghurs (p. 157).

Part III (chapters 11-15) deals with the broader geopolitical calculations of regional great powers, including China, India, and Russia (chapters 11, 12, 14, and 15), as well as Iran and Turkey (chapter 13). The chapters dealing with India, Iran, and Turkey examine the growing and expanding roles of these three regional powers, in addition to their opportunities and constraints. Finally, part IV (four chapters) focuses more on the Central Asian Republics as actors, particularly in terms of their relations with their broader Asian context: Asia Pacific. It also includes a chapter on Mongolia (chapter 18; Orhon Myadar) and its ambivalent relations in the region.

This book, part of a growing literature concerning a region about which little has been known, provides such knowledge to those interested in area studies from broad and diverse perspectives. It is a bit dated, however, in light of more recent developments in Russian policies and power projection capabilities. This is particularly so in the case of its military campaign against the former Soviet Republic of Georgia and the extension of an active economic as well as largely naval role in the Mediterranean and South America (2008). The 2008 world financial crisis is also likely to influence the global distribution of power, which is likely to impact heavily on the region's future. The rapid unfolding of world events imposes great demands on continuously updated studies and analyses of this kind.

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