

Conference, Symposium, and Panel Reports

Terrorism, Geopolitics, and Multinational Security Cooperation in Central Asia

On 22-24 February 2006, the Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies (APCSS) held this conference on the complex security environment of Central Asia as the region continues to struggle with the phenomena of terrorism and religious extremism, poverty and corruption, political instability and authoritarian governance, as well as great power (China, Russia, and the United States) suspicion and rivalry. These challenges are not uniquely Central Asian, but the region seems to be particularly vulnerable to them as its young nations are undergoing a significant political, social, and economic transformation. How the region copes with these issues will extend important lessons to the world as a whole.

This forum examined the trilemma posed for Central Asia and the broader Asia-Pacific region. First, for the war on terror in the region to be successful, it must evolve into well-implemented stabilization and reconstruction efforts as well as dramatic improvements in governance and human rights. Second, no country on its own can alter the situation in Central Asia, for such an effort requires cooperation between all of the major powers and stakeholders in the region (India, Iran, Pakistan, and Turkey). The magnitude of the problem of terrorism, which affects most if not all countries in the region, should preclude another variation of the Great Game. Finally, while the number of regional organizations and security forums in Central Asia has been growing, the low degree of coordination among them triggers counterproductive rivalries and plays into the hands of extremist elements. Since terror knows no borders, what happens in Central Asia significantly impacts developments elsewhere.

Although the counterterrorist effort in Central Asia has successfully marginalized the Taliban and al-Qaeda, the localization of the terrorist threat means that new autonomous extremist cells continue to emerge in Central Asia. The sources of proliferation of radical Islam can be found in socio-economic deprivation, widespread corruption, and political authoritarian-

ism. The only efficient way to successfully eliminate the extremist threat in Central Asia is through a combination of dramatic political, economic, and social change. As for the struggle's military component, enhancing Central Asia's counterterrorism capacity should be the priority.

All Central Asian states are experiencing an Islamization of their societies and political activities. After decades of forced Soviet-style secularization, desecularization and a subsequent Islamization are seen by the populace as a progressive, democratic, and inevitable process. Ruling elites sense and acknowledge this trend; but instead of channeling it into a broader democratic process, they are attempting to manipulate and tightly control the Islamic clergy. Suppression tactics work in the short-term, as evidenced by the decline of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan's activities. Much more problematic, however, is the long-term containment of an organization such as the non-violent Hizb-ut-Tahrir, which is also aspiring to create an Islamic state in Central Asia. Hizb-ut-Tahrir's growing popularity all over Central Asia is, in many ways, an expression of popular protest against corrupt governments.

While there is no way to be certain whether Islamization will become more balanced or increasingly radical in Central Asia, it is important not to overreact to the rise of Islam and ignore the role of culture, ethnicity, and nationalism. The reality of power, assuming that Islamic parties do gain power in more of the Central Asian states, has the potential to change radicals as they become preoccupied with the socioeconomic issues that predominate in the actual politics of ruling. Additionally, Islamic radicalism is less interesting to national majorities, who are concerned with establishing the state's identity, than to national minorities, who are drawn to the social justice platform. Helping and facilitating the progressive and inclusive formation of the region's nation states seems to be a reliable way of minimizing the political effects of Islam's rise.

There was a consensus among the presenters that the great powers' growing presence in Central Asia should not lead to a new version of the Great Game. This task remains complicated, however, not only because the great powers continue to treat each other with suspicion, but also because the Central Asian states are, at times, willing to manipulate the great powers against each other. Excessive geopolitics was defined as damaging to long-term developments in Central Asia. Therefore, the great powers need to accommodate each other in the region rather than focus on zero-sum tactics.

The complementarity of the great powers' role should be emphasized and better promoted. Russia's historical ties to the region connect it with the

European tradition and also serve as a conduit for much of the region's energy. China's economic influence contributes to development and modernization as well as to closer relations with the Asia-Pacific. India offers an Asian example of combining the democratic tradition, religious freedom, and economic dynamism. The American presence helps strengthen the sovereignty of those Central Asian republics that remain wary of powerful neighbors and makes them more visible in the international arena. Its democratization effort is welcome, but it must proceed incrementally and be tuned to domestic realities within each country. At the same time, American support for human rights needs to be more consistent to avoid setbacks, like in Uzbekistan. In principle, Central Asian states recognize the need for multinational cooperation but remain somewhat uncomfortable about rapid movement in that direction.

Presenters at the conference were Baktybek Abdrisaev (Utah Valley University), Ehsan Ahrari (Strategic Paradigms, Washington, DC), Rouben Azizian (APCSS), Sanjay Chaturvedi (Panjab University), Jon Chicky (U.S. Department of Defense), Elizabeth Van Wie Davis (APCSS), Jim DeHart (U.S. Department of State), Feng Shaolei (East China Normal University), Fu Jen-Kun (Ching Yun University), Roger Kangas (Marshall Center, Germany), Alisher Khamidov (The Johns Hopkins University), Fatima Kukeyeva (Al-Farabi Kazakh National University), Alexey Malashenko (Carnegie Moscow Center), Robert T. Moeller (U.S. Central Command), Yury Morozov (Center for Military-Strategic Studies, Moscow), Askar Nursha (Kazakhstan Institute of Strategic Studies), Thomas W. Simons, Jr. (Harvard University), Nadia Usaeva (Radio Free Asia), Shi Ze (China Institute of International Studies) Sohail Zaidi (Command & Staff College, Quetta), and Irina Zvyagelskaya (Center for Strategic and Political Studies, Moscow).

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