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The New "Great Game" in Central Asia after Afghanistan

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The term *'Great Game'* was originally coined by R.Kipling to label the 19th century Anglo-Russian rivalry for hegemony in Central Asia. After the demise of the USSR, this buzzword has been liberally exercised by analysts and observers of the region to describe the great powers' various endeavors to fill the strategic void, and ranging from their military ventures to mere competition for its energy resources and pipelines. After the Afghanistan war, writers have discovered that the age-old 'Great Game' is entering a new and more dangerous phase. They warn that the intrigue continues today, with new powers skirmishing over the 'fabulous' oil and gas wealth of the Caspian Basin, with new intimations of Islamist violence, and no one willing to openly concede defeat. But only a few scholars try to explain what specifically is the real Central Asia today.

The shaping of national frontiers in Turkestan

In his 1920 *"Letter to the Communists of Turkestan*" (as the Russian part of Central Asia was known at that time), V.I.Lenin asked them to investigate how many national republics would be established there and what they should be named.[1] 82 years ago, the idea of sovereign ethnic-based states was alien and exotic for the local Muslim population. The concepts on ethnic division of Turkestan were as vague then as they are now in the contemporary multi-ethnic Afghanistan. The Bolsheviks applied to V.Bartold, the renowned scholar on Central Asia, with

the question how they should divide the region. He warned them that Central Asia had no historic experience of the paradigm of an ethnic state, and it would be a great mistake to divide the region along ethnic lines now. Nevertheless, the present boundaries and infrastructure were designed by the USSR based on a strong belief of the 'unbreakable union' of fifteen Soviet republics. As a result the borders, in some cases disputed (with the most intricate maze of border patchwork being the Fergana Valley), were never delimited or demarcated.

The imaginary frontiers of Soviet times have now become real. Now the 5 independent *'stans'* are able to communicate with some of their own parts only across the territories of neighbors. The new fragmentation of Central Asia is a painful process, which has become a serious impediment for cross-border migration of labor and trade. Some locals face real national borders for the first time in their lives, like the women from Uzbekistan crossing borders to collect cotton in Tajikistan, or the families from Kyrgyzstan going to work on tobacco plantations in Kazakhstan. Another tool of the "cold peace" among Central Asian neighbors is the imposition of customs and visa duties. Their corrupt law-enforcement and customs officers have turned the borders into a new source of illicit income.

Since the latest war in Afghanistan, extra security measures have caused new problems for ordinary people: each Central Asian country started to expel visitors from neighboring states, afflicting the poor and seasonal workers. During the ongoing Operation Migrant, for example, Kazakhstan has deported more than 50 thousand CIS citizens. Security measures in Uzbekistan resulted in the shooting of Tajik, Kyrgyz and Kazakh citizens along the Uzbek frontier. There are many cases of Uzbek border guards moving their posts deep into the Kyrgyz and Tajik territories in order to punish the real or imagined rebels. Uzbekistan's decision to mine its border with Tajikistan has led to numerous deaths of seasonal migrant workers.

A new heated discussion is taking place now between the Central Asian countries. The downstream Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan demand more water for irrigation from Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, which are located upstream in the region's river system. Both upstream countries have hydropower stations on rivers flowing to Uzbekistan, southern Kazakhstan, and eventually into Turkmenistan. The two main rivers Syr-Darya and Amu-Darya provide three quarters of the region's water. There is a competition for the Syr-Darya water between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan's ambitions to expand its irrigated land exacerbates tensions between Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan over shares of the Amy-Darya water.

The USSR constructed in the 1980s two major hydropower stations, Toktogul in Kyrgyzstan and Nurek in Tajikistan, with 19.3 and 10.5 billion cubic-meter reservoirs respectively. The dams allowed for the accumulation and regulation of water to support the downstream republics. Electric power generated by these two stations had been distributed through the Central Asian energy network. Uzbekistan was the main producer of cotton for the Russian textile industry and its irrigation needs were considered to be the priority issue.

Under these circumstances, priority was given to water accumulation in upstream reservoirs rather than to demand for electric power in upstream republics. Kazakhstan, a major producer of coal, and Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, the suppliers of natural gas, followed instructions from Moscow and provided for the energy needs of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, while all fuel prices were regulated and were much lower than those on the world market.

The management of water and energy resources has dramatically changed since the unexpected collapse of the Soviet Union. The transition to market economy demanded a new horizontal cooperation between the newly independent states as the downstream countries,

Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, have no significant reservoirs able to accumulate an adequate amount of water for seasonal regulation.

The water problem has become a serious threat to the natural environment of Central Asia. Dependence on cotton cultivation and the irrational use of water and energy greatly contributed to the rapid evaporating of the Aral Sea, once the fourth largest lake on earth, which is now becoming a deadly desert.

The main disagreement between the upstream and downstream countries stems from the fact that the latter require water mostly in the time of cultivation for irrigation purposes, whereas Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan need water mainly for electric power production during the winter season, when their electricity consumption increases twofold. In addition, Uzbekistan frequently halts gas supplies to the upstream smaller countries during winters, making the heating problem most sensitive there. To survive in wintertime, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have to increase the use of electric power generated by their hydropower stations by discharging water from their reservoirs. As a result, in summer, the reservoirs are not able to deliver an adequate amount of water for irrigation in Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan. Uzbekistan, the world's fifth largest cotton producer, earns 75% of all its hard currency from the export of cotton.

Many experts believe that water-related tensions could partly be resolved if water were used more efficiently. Central Asia consumes 110 to 120 billion cubic meters of water annually, which is several times more than in the Middle East. The efficiency of irrigation systems here is low. An estimated 60% of water is wasted due to irrational use and ineffective irrigation. In Uzbekistan alone, 20 billion cubic meters of water is wasted every year. This is equal to the amount of water that Soviet planners intended to divert from the Irtysh river in Siberia to Central Asia to save the Aral Sea.[2]

Islamic upheaval in the Fergana Valley

The Fergana Valley, divided presently between Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, is the very heart of Central Asia. At the same time, Fergana exhibits the most vivid example of the Islamic evolution taking place throughout the region and exposes Afghanistan's ideological impact on Central Asia. This is a hard, rural place, with cotton fields worked with sweat and picked by hand. The people are desperately poor. They see little that the new national governments have done to help their lives. Dissatisfaction is high, the lure of Islam as an answer to their dreary existence is strong.

When Central Asia was surprised by the collapse of Soviet authority in 1991, lawlessness filled the void. Assaults and robberies became rampant. A Fergana man named Juma Namangani and his companions became vigilantes, collaring crooks and administering beatings as punishment, according to local residents. "I'm not saying I supported them," said an old Namangan teacher. "But when they were here, they were disciplined, and they kept peace in the streets." The man who headed the group remains a mystery. There are only a few blurry photos of him, he did not give interviews.

Today, his mother's house is watched by spies and cameras. His old mosque is closed to the public. People in his home town of Namangan shift their eyes and mumble that they really didn't know Juma Namangani. They have good reason. The government of Uzbekistan considers this crony of Osama bin Laden to have been the country's number one terrorist threat, and any hint of association with him can land a person in prison.

Juma Namangani was born Jumaboy Hojiev and graduated from local agricultural vocational school before he was drafted into the Soviet army in 1987. His service in the airborne corps in Afghanistan during the Soviet occupation gave him a tough-man image when he

returned home in 1989. Here he studied with an Islamic scholar and took on radical Islam as his politics. With a like-minded partner, Tahir Yuldash, and a *nom de guerre* taken from his home town, Namangani began working to replace the government's rule in the Fergana Valley with law based on his political interpretation of the Koran, and eventually founded the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), considered by the government, and now by Washington, to be a terrorist organization.

When G.W.Bush mentioned the IMU in his September 20 speech to a joint session of Congress, it was a nod to Uzbekistan to gain its cooperation in the campaign against Osama bin Laden and the Taliban movement that sheltered him. But the IMU has the credentials to earn a mention on its own merits.

In 1997, members of the group assassinated corrupt regional Uzbek officials, leaving the head of one of them on the gate of the home of the Namangan internal affairs chief. In 1999 and 2000, armed IMU squads made sallies from Tajikistan into Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, vowing to replace the governments with a unitary Fergana Valley Caliphate. In February 1999, the group set off bombs in Tashkent that killed 16 people and narrowly missed President Karimov. In August 1999, the IMU kidnapped four Japanese geologists, receiving several million dollars for their return two months later. The next year, they seized four American mountain climbers in Kyrgyzstan, though the hostages escaped after six days.

Uzbek authorities also said the IMU was involved in heroin and arms smuggling. In the valley, however, people do not think so. "The government uses the threat of the Islamic fighters just to keep their power and keep the people under pressure," said an unemployed brick maker. "The government has made them into extremists."

The paths of Karimov and Namangani crossed only once in 1991 when Karimov, Soviet

Uzbekistan's Kremlin-appointed chief, was campaigning for president in this country's first post-independence election. It was a brief period of political freedoms, which were crushed by Karimov after he won. In the fall of 1991, he came to Namangan. Told there would be a march of opponents, Karimov agreed to meet them. He was joined on the speakers' platform by Namangani, who challenged the country's iron-fisted boss, and someone videotaped the session. "At one point, you could see Karimov blanch," said a Tashkent academic who has seen the tape. "The crowd was clearly hostile, and Namangani could have done anything he wanted with Karimov at that moment."

The unnerving encounter apparently did not sit well with Karimov. After his election in December 1991, doubly alarmed by the Islamist militants' civil war breaking out in neighboring Tajikistan and student demonstrations at home, he cracked down on political opponents and those he deemed Muslim radicals. Namangani had been sentenced to death in absentia by the Uzbek courts, and Karimov is widely quoted as offering to "shoot him in the head" himself.

Namangani and Yuldash left the valley and fought for some time with Islamist rebels in the mountains of Tajikistan. They reportedly passed through Afghanistan and stayed for a while in Peshawar (Pakistan). There they are believed to have made lasting connections with both Osama and the Taliban.

At the age of 32 Namangani became a top officer in Afghanistan's ruling Taliban militia and one of its most feared, along with another local Uzbek warlord (and Karimov's protégé) General Dostum, who was fighting against the Taliban. Like Dostum, he had a reputation for cruelty: if any soldier defied his orders, the whole squad was shot, according to stories from the battle for Mazar-e-Sharif, the center of Afghanistan's Uzbek part, besieged by Dostum's Uzbek forces. After the fall of the city, the fate of Namangani and his men is unknown. Uzbekistan kept

closed its Friendship Bridge across the Amu-Darya into Afghanistan, largely out of fear that Namangani will try to cross it. And it unexpectedly allowed US troops to use the nearby air base of Hanabad in hopes that the Americans would demolish the IMU.

The USA enters the arena

After the Afghanistan campaign, American military build-up in Central Asia is relentlessly accelerating. 3000 US troops arrived in Kyrgyzstan to supplement the 1500 soldiers already stationed in the neighboring Uzbekistan. Agreements have been made for the use of Tajik and Kazakh airfields for military operations, and even the neutral Turkmenistan has granted permission for military overflights.

There exists a misunderstanding about the relationship of Central Asian states to the war on terrorism. The leaders of Central Asian republics, in their eagerness to accommodate the American forces, have different motives for encouraging US troop deployments. We hear about their cooperation with the USA, as if they are doing a favor that should be rewarded. Nothing could be further from the truth. For a decade, the Central Asian states have faced the threat of Islamic radicalism, terrorism and drug trafficking. All of the Central Asian states have identified these issues as their main security threat, and Afghanistan as the locus of the threat.

To address this threat, Central Asian governments have arrested countless suspects. But we must be careful in levying charges on them. When we demand that Musharraf, Arafat or Mubarrak crack down hard on Islamic Jihad groups, Palestinian terrorists and Muslim brotherhoods, are we not asking them to do exactly what we criticize Central Asian governments for doing? Now the situation is changing, thanks to the US military intervention, which ousted the Taliban in Afghanistan, and expending billions of dollars to address a threat that hangs over these countries.

Uzbekistan has agreed to the deployment of American troops at its Hanabad air base. In return, the USA will be providing Uzbekistan $160 million in aid in 2002, which is an increase of $100 million over earlier figures. Washington is providing the additional funds in spite of its criticism of the Uzbek government's record on human rights and democracy. Two days before the visit of US Secretary of State C.Powell in December 2001, the Uzbek parliament voted to offer Uzbekistan's ruler Islam Karimov the presidency for life.

Karimov has clearly attempted to get economic assistance, security guarantees, and overall American support for his ambitions to be the regional hegemon in Central Asia. Nowhere is new American presence more visible than in Tashkent. Groups of uniformed though unarmed American soldiers can be seen walking around the airport, waiting for chartered busses to transport them to downtown hotels. The troops do not mingle with Uzbek citizens, but the appearance in streets of many athletic-looking Americans, clad in civilian attire, suggests the build-up is steadily continuing.

The United States is also engaged in a rapid military build-up in Kyrgyzstan. At the Manas airport near the Kyrgyz capital of Bishkek, the US is building a 37-acre air force base. This base will also serve as administrative headquarters and contain warehouses to store munitions. Manas is suitable for both military and relief flights, able to accommodate fighter jets as well as large cargo and refueling planes. The United States is planning to relocate fighter jets from Pakistan to Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. Construction of the US base at Manas airport should establish Kyrgyzstan as a hub for reconstruction operations in Afghanistan and for Central Asian stabilization efforts.

Favorable terms have been secured for the soldiers who will serve in Kyrgyzstan. They will be free to enter and leave the country, to wear uniforms and to carry weapons. They will also

be immune from prosecution by the local authorities. Washington also has signed basing agreements with Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, which provided airport facilities for the war in Afghanistan, and is discussing a similar arrangement with Kazakhstan.

The local public opinion on the American military presence appears to be mixed. Many residents -- especially in the Fergana Valley -- disapprove of the anti-Taliban war in Afghanistan. In Tashkent, on the other hand, a large majority of those questioned expressed approval for the anti-terrorism campaign. Nearly all the people I spoke to there, though, did not believe that current conditions necessitated the construction of an American base in Kyrgyzstan. They presume the Americans' real motive is to supplant the Russian influence in Central Asia.

Given that the US build-up is coming at a time when anti-terrorism operations in Afghanistan are moving into the reconstruction phase, it appears likely that the US military is settling in for an extended stay in Central Asia. Local analysts say that with Russia's grip on the region loosening, the United States is aiming to check the expansion of Chinese influence in the region. Besides, both the two smaller states, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, are hoping that Western engagement will successfully overlay intra-regional tensions, specifically those caused by Uzbekistan. The possibility of extending the oil and gas pipelines to southern Asia may also tempt the US to maintain some sort of security presence east of the Caspian Sea.

The Shanghai Group's response

Central Asia has been transformed from a strategic backwater to the crucible of international diplomacy and, in this new geopolitical environment, Washington remains opaque about its ultimate intentions and exit strategy. Some American foreign policy planners hold that after destruction of Al Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan the USA should leave the post-war stabilization and reconstruction to others. Such a course runs the danger of condemning all

Central Asia to further waves of instability from Afghanistan.

The United States is quickly building up its military capacity in Central Asia, and soon could be in a position to back tough words with actions. The US air force has established a presence at Afghan bases in Baghram and Kandahar, as well as at Hanabad in Uzbekistan and Manas in Kyrgyzstan. These facilities can help the US military gain air superiority throughout Central Asia, and even into the Middle East. This expanded and deepened US presence in Central Asia involves an intensification of the rivalry with Russia, China and Iran in the so-called 'New Great Game.'

As a consequence, Russia's role as Central Asia's principal security manager is under threat. Moscow was happy to see the destruction of the Taliban, and President Putin has scored some important diplomatic gains in return for Russian cooperation, most notably a more understanding attitude in the West to Russian military operations in Chechnya. But if there is no timetable for the departure of American troops from Central Asia, Moscow is likely to perceive the US response to terrorism as little more than an excuse to extend American military presence into the region, which Russian strategists have portrayed since the end of the 19th century as the country's soft underbelly.

Russian policy-making elite is divided over how to respond to the geopolitical shift that has occurred in Central Asia. The sudden arrival of US forces in Central Asia has prompted some analysts in Moscow to accuse the government of 'losing' Central Asia. Hawkish statements are coming from such leading figures as the State Duma speaker G.Seleznyov, who said during his recent tour of the region: "Russia will not endorse the emergence of permanent US military bases in Central Asia."[3]

In addition, Russian security officials claim there is a score of top secret Russian military

facilities in Central Asia that the USA and NATO are keen to gather information on. In Kazakhstan, there is the Sary-Shagan anti-missile launching site and the radar station, which is part of Russia's early-warning system. In Kyrgyzstan, there is a Russian navy long-distance communications center, and a testing site for the nuclear submarines' rockets on the lake Issyk-Kul. There is also a space surveillance station, located at Nurek in Tajikistan.

China also initially acquiesced in the US action in Afghanistan not least because of evidence that Al Qaeda was training Muslim separatists operating in the Xinjiang Autonomous Province of western China. Beijing has generally deferred to Russia in Central Asia on security issues, preferring instead to focus on expanding trade links across the region. China now states publicly and unapologetically that it views the US presence as a hindrance to its strategic objectives in the region. In the Chinese opinion, the American basing rights in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are part of the broader strategy to contain the expansion of Chinese influence.

The Chinese diplomats have alleged specifically that the USA was seeking access to an air base near Semipalatinsk in Kazakhstan, the old site of Soviet nuclear tests. The base was designed by the USSR specifically to support possible strategic operations against China. Kazakh officials dispute the Chinese claims, saying that Washington has asked for access to military bases in southern Kazakhstan, but not in Semipalatinsk to the north. The bases under discussion were at Taraz and Chimkent.

The Sino-Russian response strategy was unveiled at a meeting in Beijing in January 2002. It consists of the transformation of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), created in 1996 as a forum for border demilitarization and trade promotion, into a regional security structure capable of conducting 'joint anti-terrorist operations.' As all the Central Asian states (bar Turkmenistan) already belong to the SCO, this should be viewed as a direct attempt to

reduce the rationale for a Western security presence in the region.

The presidents of Russia, China, and four Central Asian countries -- Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan -- signed in St. Petersburg on 7 June 2002 a charter transforming the SCO security bloc into a fully fledged international organization with a permanent secretariat based in Beijing. They agreed to set up a regional antiterrorist structure to be based in the Kyrgyz capital, Bishkek, and signed a political declaration underlining the SCO's joint goals. The political declaration says the aim of the Shanghai Group is to fight terrorism, prevent conflicts, and ensure security in Central Asia.

China sent its delegation to Central Asian republics in January. The delegation announced in Tashkent a Chinese economic assistance to Uzbekistan in the amount of $600 million (compared to the $160 million pledged by the USA). Thus, Uzbekistan has managed to attract assistance from both the United States and China.

In addition, Uzbekistan has left the anti-Russian GUUAM alignment that it joined three years ago, informing in June 2002 the other members of that group -- Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, and Moldova -- of its decision. The group has discussed at length -- but not yet established -- a peacekeeping battalion and a free economic zone.

Kazakhstan also has friendly relations with both China and the USA, and the government does not appear eager to make a choice between the two. Since 1991, Kazakhstan has pursued a 'multi-vector' foreign policy that seeks strong relations with Russia and with China. In addition, President Nazarbaev has fostered amicable ties with the USA, especially in the sphere of energy development.

The anti-terrorism campaign has increased the pressure on Astana to abandon its 'multi-vector' policy, and settle on one strategic partner. Local observers believe that the government is

inclined to align itself with the United States, given the US ability to develop and pay for Kazakhstan's natural resources. However, from the start of the anti-terrorism campaign, Nazarbaev has proceeded cautiously, offering words of support for US actions, but hesitating on the implementation of concrete cooperation measures.

The role of Iran

President Bush has signaled that he reserves the right to extend the war on terrorism to other countries. Iran, Iraq and North Korea were the three named by G.W.Bush in his "State of the Union" address in January as future potential targets. While the harshest words were reserved for Saddam Hussein, the language on Iran was unambiguous: "Iran aggressively pursues… weapons of mass destruction and exports terror, while an unelected few repress the Iranian people's hope for freedom."[4]

Thus, the president addressed the Iranian nuclear program built around the Russian nuclear power reactors at Bushehr, as well as Iran's ballistic missile program. Only recently, the former Iranian president Hashemi Rafsanjani threatened to use nuclear weapons against Israel: "If a day comes when the world of Islam is duly equipped with the arms Israel has in possession, the strategy of colonialism would face a stalemate because application of an atomic bomb would not leave any thing in Israel but the same thing would just produce damages in the Muslim world."[5]

US intelligence agencies have spotted scores of Iranian intelligence and military personnel deep inside Afghanistan working to obstruct the pro-American government now in place in Kabul. These operations are prompting heightened worries inside the Bush administration because of the fragility of the interim government in Afghanistan. The Iranians' objective appears to be destabilizing Afghanistan so that it rejects the presence of Western

military forces. The Islamic regime in Tehran fears that the pro-Western government in Kabul will inspire pro-Western sentiments inside Iran, where a power struggle is under way between reformers and Shiite fundamentalists. The Shah of Iran was ousted in 1979, leading to the Islamic revolution.

US special envoy for Afghanistan Z.Khalilzad has repeatedly charged that hard-line elements around Iran's spiritual leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei are helping to arm and finance groups within Afghanistan in a bid to establish pockets of influence and discourage cooperation with the government in Kabul. He said their purpose is to create what he termed centers of Iranian influence in Herat (80 kilometers from the Iranian border) and in surrounding provinces. In northern Afghanistan, Iranian agents reportedly are arming ethnic Uzbek warlord A.Dostum's faction operating around the strategic city of Mazar-e-Sharif. Khalilzad also said that the Revolutionary Guard Corps had helped members of Al-Qaeda escape from Afghanistan to Iran and were helping the fleeing fighters to travel on from Iran to other destinations abroad.

After the failure of five Caspian littoral states to reach an agreement on delimitation of the Caspian Sea at their April 2002 presidential summit in Ashgabat, the Iranian president M.Khatami toured Central Asian capitals to discuss two issues: energy routes and the American presence. He called for Central Asian leaders to step up exports of oil and gas through Iran as the shortest route to world markets. At the same time, he sharply criticized progress by the USA in developing a military presence in the region for its war on terrorism. Referring to Washington, Khatami said in Almaty: "One must not get entrenched on this or that territory, setting up bases under the disguise of an antiterrorist campaign. This is sheer humiliation for our nations that have the right to resolve their problems on their own and decide themselves what is good and bad for them."[6]

US-Iranian tensions over Afghanistan and Central Asia are high for several reasons. One is their continuing rivalry on the world stage as Washington accuses Tehran of supporting terrorist groups in the Middle East and seeking nuclear weapons. That rivalry has now been exacerbated on the regional level by the presence of American troops in Afghanistan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. Tehran sees the deployments as a threatening buildup of American military power in what Iran has historically considered its backyard with high expectation of Islamic revolutions and governments based on Islamic law.

Three challenges facing the USA in Central Asia

At the risk of simplification, I would suggest that there are three fundamental challenges that will confront any model of American involvement in Central Asia, which pertain to local politics, public welfare and regional security.

1) Without exception, all Central Asian governments have justified their concentration of power in the hands of the executive, the avoidance of elections, the retarded development of participatory government, and their curtailment of civil liberties in terms of national security. The authoritarian governments of the region hope that American patronage will deflect international criticism of their human rights records and failure to democratize. They also hope to obtain American military support in their battle to suppress Islamist rebel groups based in and around the Fergana Valley.

Karimov has justified his political repressions by the threat posed by the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan. Now that its leader Juma Namangani is presumed dead, Karimov says his regime is threatened by another Islamic movement known as the Hizb-ut-Tahrir, or Party of Islamic Liberation, which advocates the creation of a Caliphate in the Fergana Valley. Although party members claim they want to attain their political objectives by peaceful means, they are

being harassed by authorities in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and even in Azerbaijan. Human rights groups believe that Karimov still holds an over 7000 political prisoners.

When I was in Tashkent in January, the Uzbeks voted overwhelmingly in favor of extending the presidential term in office from five to seven years in a referendum that also created a bicameral parliament, which currently has one 250-member chamber. Officials said only 9 percent voted against extending the tenure. The decision will come into effect at the next presidential election in 2005. The polls were monitored by 125 observers from 33 countries. However, both the USA and the OSCE refused to send monitors.

This is not the first time in his political career that Uzbekistan's 63-year-old president has changed the length of his tenure. In 1995, a referendum made him president until 2000, averting the need for reelection in 1996. When elections were held in 2000, he won the right to retain his position for another five years. Karimov has now been the leader of Uzbekistan since 1989, when he was appointed first secretary of the Communist Party of Uzbekistan. International human rights organizations argue that Karimov is following the example of Turkmen president Niazov to make himself president for life.

Turkmenistan is one of the most tightly controlled places on the planet. Its former communist party boss and incumbent self-styled President 'Turkmenbashi' (Chief of the Turkmen) Saparmurad Niazov has constructed a personality cult rivaled only in North Korea and is squandering the country's mineral wealth on sprawling palaces and rotating golden statues of himself.

Only two days after the Uzbek referendum, Karimov was invited to visit the United States. On 12 March 2002, Karimov had a White House meeting with G.W.Bush. The centerpiece of his trip was the signing of a five-point "Declaration on Strategic Partnership and

Cooperation Framework." The document obliges the USA to provide aid that encourages 'civil society development' in Uzbekistan, which in turn reaffirms a commitment to implementing democratic reforms.

The situation is reminiscent of the Cold War, when the USA supported anticommunist countries however poor their human rights records might have been. Proponents of the current stance say the end justifies the means and that Washington's new containment policy might work against terrorism just as they believe it did against communism.

2) But the security arrangements and political reforms hectored from Washington will not survive without economic development. The deepest source of internal instability throughout the region is neither religious extremism nor ethnic conflict but poverty. Widespread throughout the region, poverty is particularly acute in the vast mountain zones defined by the Karakorum, Hindukush, Pamir, Tienshan, Kohibaba, Alatau and Altay ranges. It is no accident that these lands have been the venue for most armed conflicts in the area.

Take a typical Uzbek family in the Fergana Valley where 70% of the population live on the minimum salary, which can practically buy only 100 loaves of flat bread a month, excluding other expenses. The traditional Uzbek family consists of 6 or more persons, and they usually consume at the very least 5 breads a day. This example is a basic indicator of the real state of Uzbek society.

The most pressing needs of economic development are surprisingly simple: to enable Central Asians and Afghans to feed their families and create jobs for themselves and others. Until these needs are met there will be no end to opium production and drug trafficking. Until they are met there will be no peace in the region.

This will not be accomplished through the vast infrastructure projects proposed at the

Tokyo international conference on rebuilding Afghanistan or a Central Asian Marshall Plan. Instead, the focus should be on village level agriculture, small businesses and farms, and the removal of impediments to entrepreneurship at all levels. It is therefore important to open the ancient trade routes that linked Central Asia and Afghanistan to their natural ports and trading partners in Iran and Pakistan.

3) Although Uzbekistan remains the strategic pivot of the region, each state has its own agenda. Kazakhstan's long border with Russia and its substantial ethnic Russian population ensures that it cannot break with Russia. However, President Nazarbaev's struggle for regional supremacy with Karimov dictates that he cannot stand by and allow him to forge a close strategic partnership with Washington. Nazarbaev's trump card in diversification of his security options is the considerable Western investment in his country's oil industry.

Tashkent's ambitions to be the regional hegemon in Central Asia are well known. It has seized disputed lands from neighboring states, refused to pay for water from Kyrgyzstan and violated the gas-for-water agreements. The Uzbeks are fond of reminding that they are selling gas at about half of the prevailing global prices and do not conceal their greater regional ambitions. Uzbekistan is a complex and volatile state, which persistently behaved in a heavy-handed way.

Uzbekistan has gradually slipped out of Russia's security orbit over the last three years and now seeks outside support from Washington for both the regime's internal security and its more expansive designs. If it becomes involved in an armed conflict with a Central Asian neighbor, what then would be the American role?

In this context, Washington may encourage expectations upon which it cannot deliver and also lead to tensions among the Central Asian rulers who want to perpetuate their

authoritarian regimes and gain outside support for themselves and their regional ambitions. There is no simple way to resolve all these tensions peacefully and amicably. It is hence unlikely that we can expect true stability in Central Asia anytime soon, even under conditions of American leadership.

Double-standard approach to Central Asian authoritarianism

Thanks to the Soviets, Central Asia is ruled by secular governments. But it is also left with a heritage of authoritarianism, corruption and disrespect for law and human rights that persists to this day. We are only gradually coming to appreciate the seriousness of the birth defects present in Central Asia. It is important that we recognize this, and apply the same standards to all, rather than selectively, according to who happens to be in favor in Washington at the moment. Bluntly, we cannot nod at authoritarianism in Central Asia and preach against it in Russia. Critics believe that the Bush administration is prepared to turn a blind eye to human rights abuses in Central Asian countries in return for their loyalty. Why should Washington not start to make the case for democracy in Central Asia? Plainly, it cannot afford to push this idea too fast. Such a change could be counter-productive. For this reason, American policy in Central Asia has been governed by *Realpolitik*. Like the Russians before them, the Americans have preferred stability to uncertain experiments with democracy. Doesn't stability have to be paramount in a region that contains so much mineral and energy resources? And who is to say that democracy suits Central Asians anyway? They appear to have rubbed along happily without it for long enough. But, like a lot of conventional wisdom, it may not be so very realistic at all.

The Iranian revolution of 1979 pointed to the danger of depending on military bases and the friendship of autocratic regimes. Propping up such regimes can have the paradoxical result of weakening them by making them seem less legitimate. The average citizen in Tashkent or

Almaty enjoys fizzy drinks and soap operas no less than the average citizen in Atlanta or Chicago. But something else that they may want has so far been denied to them: a chance to choose their own leaders by holding proper elections, just as westerners do. Might democracy one day become a unifying ideal both can share?

The despots who run the Central Asian republics dismiss this as a dangerous fantasy. That is no surprise: most have much to fear from genuine elections. More surprising is the existence in the West of a whole industry of intellectuals and diplomats dedicated to exposing the preposterousness of the very idea. These experts invoke sophisticated reasons why the Central Asians are unsuited to democracy.

All the '*stans*' that emerged from the Soviet empire inherited borders that owed less to a well-shaped sense of nationhood than to the administrative convenience of Moscow. In such countries, people identify strongly with their tribe or clan, and with a wider Islamic fellowship, but only weakly with the state. Holding such a state together therefore requires a strong and usually repressive power at the center. These things may complicate the growth of democracy in Central Asia.

If Islam is inimical to democracy, somebody should tell the Turks and the Iranians, who in markedly different ways are exercising the muscles of pluralist politics. Those who consider Central Asian democracy a fantasy should ask how long the existing system can last. As I made certain at various points of my trip, the appetite for politics is keen on all levels of local society. The obstacle has not been religion or tradition, but the refusal of those in power to accept the people's verdict. With ballot boxes blocked, no wonder opposition flows towards the mosque, the only institution no Central Asian regime dares ban.

America cannot change Central Asia at a stroke. It will not risk knocking the legs away

from standing allies such as Karimov and Nazarbaev. In the Cold War, great powers have collected allies where they can, without too much scruple. But the struggle against the forces unleashed by Osama bin Laden is a most unusual war. It is in large part a struggle about values. The West must loudly declare that liberal democracy is a universal ideal that should be applied to Central Asia too.

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ENDNOTES

[1] V.I.Lenin, *Collected Works in English, in 45 volumes* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House/Progress Publishers, 1963-80), vol.38, p.129.
[2] Stephen Kinzer, "Uzbekistan Journal," *The New York Times*, 20 November 1997.
[3] *Nezavisimaya gazeta* (Moscow), 24 April 2002.
[4] *The Washington Post*, 30 January 2002.
[5] *Iran Press Service* (Tehran), 14 December 2001.
[6] *The Almaty Herald Weekly*, May 23-29, 2002.