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Security Perception in Central Asia

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For the past three years I have been engaged in a project on the changing security environment in Central Asia. One of the main issues in my research has been that of the relative stability in the region (with the exception of Tajikistan). The other has been the role of the military in the post-Soviet polity in Central Asia, particularly in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. Unlike many Third World countries, the military establishment in these republics kept a low public profile (at least until the militant incursion into Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan in 1999 from Tajikistan). My assumptions were that a) there were institutions in place that allowed the negotiating and settling of political differences between the republics and b) the governments perceived that there was a low level of external threat to the security of these republics and this kept the military from entering politics. With these assumptions in mind I designed my research and divided it into three stages. First, I completed background research and a historical review of military and security developments. Second, I conducted a series of interviews and survey studies. Third, I attempted to verify the findings of my research by comparing them with mainstream Western thought about politics in the region.

The first stage was relatively easy, but time consuming. There was a rich body of literature published during the last nine years on security issues in Central Asia, although many of the recent publications are of a prescriptive nature and ignore primary sources and data from these republics. After the disintegration of the USSR Kazakhstan emerged as a true superpower, possessing a nuclear weapons arsenal which easily matched those of France and England combined. However, the combined pressure from the US, other major Western powers and Russia, as well as the inability of the Kazakh national army and national security agencies to protect the nuclear weapons, forced President Nazarbayev to give up the country's nuclear arsenal. A significant part of the Kazakhstani elite vigorously resisted this move, fearing the rise in power of the hard-line Russian nationalists who openly questioned the legitimacy of the existing borders between Russia and Kazakhstan and who demanded the cession of a large part of Kazakhstan to Russia. Yet President Nazarbayev decided to "trade in" the nuclear arsenal in exchange for the US-Kazakhstan treaty on Strategic Partnership, which guaranteed that Washington would "take seriously" any external threats to the territorial integrity and security of the country.

Meanwhile, all the Central Asian leaders had consistently supported the establishment of a multiple-level security system with as many international players involved in the region as possible, unanimously joining the Central Asian Forum, the CIS, the CIS Security Treaty, the OSCE, the NATO Partnership for Peace, etc. Initially, Uzbekistan emerged as a true regional superpower. As it had 25 million people, half the population of the region, it was able to build a strong army of over one hundred thousand, the largest in Central Asia. Uzbekistan managed both to avoid a steep transitional recession and to preserve its industrial base and military industrial enterprises. Moreover, the republic became self-sufficient in oil and gas as well as in refinery capacity. Meanwhile, it took nearly a decade for Kazakhstan to reform its national army and border guard troops, as its defense forces were chronically under-funded and its officer corps was plagued by accusations of corruption (an attempt to sell MIG-21s to North Korea is a case in point). In the case of Kyrgyzstan, the government initially planned to get away with a small defense force of 4,000 to 6,000.

This apparent unanimity among the republics was broken on the eve of the 21st century. A major disagreement emerged in 1999 when Uzbekistan left the CIS Security Treaty (in Russian, *Dogovor Kollektivnoi Bezopasnosti*, or DKB) and joined its rival grouping — GUAM (consisting of Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, and Moldova). In the meantime, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan faithfully believed that the DKB was the cornerstone of the regional security system.

The general political picture of the region was relatively clear and straightforward, yet there were several issues difficult to explain. There is a general consensus in the Western international relations literature about the rivalry between Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan and about the competition between leaders of these two countries for political dominance in the region (see, for example, Olcott 1996). However, there are few insights or comprehensive explanations of this rivalry in the literature.

The second stage of my research was designed to clarify the issues of this rivalry and its implications for security development in the region and for the role of the military in public life in these republics. In addition, in my interviews the issue of attitudes towards the US military bases could not be ignored. Although both Tashkent and Astana condemned the September 11 terrorist attacks and expressed their full support for the US-led war in Afghanistan, it was Uzbekistan who immediately offered its former Soviet bases for permanent US military bases in Central Asia. In November of 2001 the first 1,000 US military personnel and US military airplanes arrived at Uzbekistan's Khanabad airport. In early 2002 Washington doubled its assistance package to Tashkent from $83 million to about $160 million, half of which would be spent on the modernization of Uzbekistan's armed forces. In June of 2002 a Kazakh state-controlled TV station announced that the US Department of Defense had officially approached the Kazakh Foreign Ministry requesting permission to use the Almaty civil airport for US military aircraft involved in the antiterrorist campaign in Afghanistan.

I found that conducting interviews in Kazakhstan was a challenging task. First, very few high officials wanted to talk at all, and it took considerable persuasion to get the interviews completed. Moreover, many of those who talked just voiced official views without going into any valuable details. Second, I found that very often the views expressed by those interviewed depended entirely on their perception of the nationality of the interviewer. A case in point: one person expressed totally different views on the same questions when he talked to me one day (I was introduced as a scholar from Australia) and to my local Kazakh assistant a few days later. This problem of "changing views" makes the issue of verification and of the help of the local researchers absolutely crucial for the outcome of the research. For example, some respondents condemned the idea of the US military presence when they talked to me, while to my Kazakh assistant they often presented a more nuanced and complex picture of Kazakhstan's attempt to maneuver between the interests of China, Russia and the US. Yet despite all these difficulties, I believe that my research in Kazakhstan was very productive, as I clarified many issues by following intensive debates among local experts on the changing nature of security threats in the region and on the pros and cons of establishing military bases on Kazakhstan's soil.

During the third stage I analyzed all my interview notes and my local newspaper clippings. My preliminary findings indicated that there were several important long-lasting implications of recent events for security perception from a Central Asian point of view. First, the role of the military was minimal in the political life of these republics during the first decade of independence. This was due to the peaceful transition from the Soviet past and to the absence of external or internal threats which might elevate the importance of the military in public life. There was also a consensus that defense and security forces could not be used for political ends within the republics. However, since September of 2001 the role of the military has been increasing dramatically in response to both the threat of militant incursions and of growing political instability due to issues of the leaders' succession.

Second, the rivalry between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan does exist and it is growing, as there is a list of scores to be settled between the two. These range from bribery, extortion and humiliations (on the borders as well as inside the countries) which both sides have claimed were directed against their own citizens and businesses, to unpaid bills and disputes over water, gas, transit of goods, territory, and other issues. Unfortunately both countries have quite large defense forces and continue to acquire advanced military weapons and ammunition.

Third, the regional cooperation and negotiation mechanisms are in disarray. During the past three years the Central Asian Forum (formerly, the Central Asian Economic Union) has been on the brink of collapse due to the inability of the members to resolve their differences. The CIS Collective Security Treaty excludes Uzbekistan, one of the most important regional players, and Turkmenistan. The Shanghai Forum lost its integrity as three of its members accepted the presence of US military bases, which may potentially be utilized against other members, namely China and Russia.

Fourth, for many local politicians the establishment of US military bases may become an additional stabilizing factor in the region in the absence of regional security cooperation and negotiation institutions. In the meantime the opponents of US military bases believe that the US presence is a clear signal of full support for the existing regimes, who are increasingly impatient in dealing with each other. In addition, uncertainty about the future of the US presence in the region "brings an element of instability into the relatively stable environment" (in the words of the head of one of the think-tanks in Almaty [pers. comm., April 2002]), as the Chinese and Russian place in the new security architecture has not yet been spelled out .

Overall, my research indicates that the security environment in the Central Asian region is becoming much more complex for a number of reasons, and I believe that the voices of local experts and local policy makers about nuances of regional politics are absolutely critical for understanding the complexity of these developments.

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Afghan Communities in Uzbekistan

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Surprisingly, Uzbekistan never had sizable Afghan communities on its territory before the early 1990s. However, since the demise of the USSR, Uzbekistan has found itself a home to Afghan refugees. Their number was estimated by UNHCR at 8,000 in 1993. No significant increases in these figures have been reported over the last several years.

In October and November of 2001, as part of my broader research on the dynamics of Afghan refugees in the region, I conducted a survey among Afghanis in Tashkent. Due to the uncertain legal status of the overwhelming majority of Afghanis in Tashkent and their aversion to public exposure, snowball sampling was the best available technique to conduct the survey. It was carried out among 91 heads of Afghan households in Tashkent, including 53 Pashtuns, 25 Tajiks, 8 Uzbeks, and 5 Hazaras.

The survey and accompanying research revealed two interesting results. First, it was established that at least two major waves of migration from Afghanistan to Uzbekistan have taken place. The first wave comprised a group of people who came to the former Soviet Union to study, and became refugees after 1991. They are relatively well-off and have a higher level of education than the second wave, which came during the first years of independence when government policy was still relatively flexible. The second wave Afghan communities are compactly located in specific districts of the capital and struggle to earn their livelihood under highly unfavorable economic circumstances aggravated by the restrictive attitude of the Uzbek government.

Secondly, I conclude from my research that the Afghan communities in Uzbekistan are multi-ethnic, containing representatives of all four main Afghan ethnicities (Pashtuns, Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Hazaras), and yet they seem not to be affected by the inter-ethnic divisions that are prevalent in their home country. In Uzbekistan they consider themselves a