

**CENTRAL ASIA:  
CRISIS CONDITIONS IN THREE STATES**

7 August 2000

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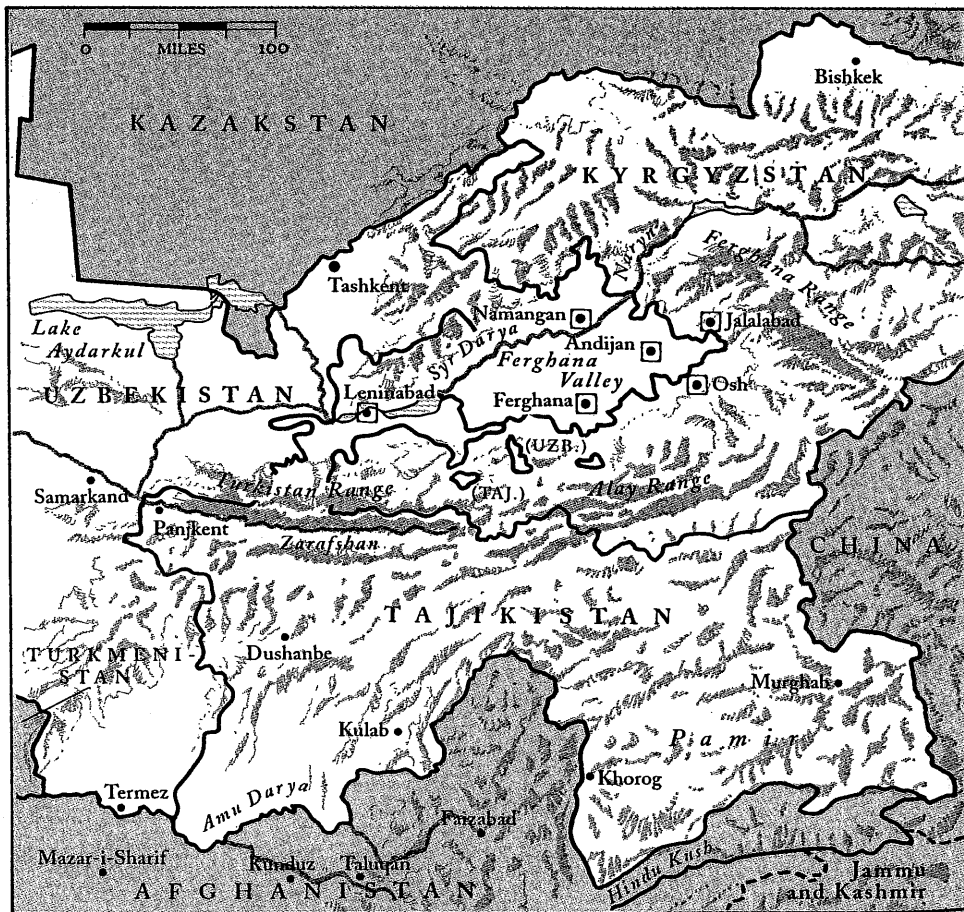
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Commonwealth of Independent States - Central Asian States







## **CENTRAL ASIA: CRISIS CONDITIONS IN THREE STATES**

### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan each face the prospect of civil unrest and large-scale violence. This is not a certain outcome and may be avoided if the governments make substantial changes in domestic policy, but the risks are high and mounting. Popular expectations after 1991 for more pluralistic politics or for representative government have been seriously frustrated. The standard of living for large sections of each population has been falling now for fifteen years. And there are political forces already mobilised to exploit any outburst of popular discontent, though the aims and capacities of opposition groups in each of the three countries are quite different.

In Tajikistan, the peace settlement that ended the bloody civil war is now under threat, with the government retreating from its power-sharing commitments and proving unable to integrate all opposition militias into its armed forces. The rate of political assassinations has intensified in the first half of 2000 and the formal power structures of the state have proven to be largely irrelevant to the daily political processes. The rapidly expanding drug trade out of Afghanistan and the associated trade in guns are exacerbating an already grave situation of lawlessness.

Kyrgyzstan at the national level enjoys considerably better circumstances than Tajikistan, but most people in Kyrgyzstan feel the country is in crisis. Extreme poverty and massive unemployment in certain parts of the country raise the prospect of localised trouble, while the trade in drugs and guns is also undermining order in the more vulnerable areas. An armed incursion by Tajikistan-based terrorists in August 1999 and the consequent unsanctioned air attack by Uzbekistan on a target inside Kyrgyzstan have only served to aggravate the pervasive sense of insecurity.

Uzbekistan is stronger and wealthier than either Tajikistan or Kyrgyzstan. But it too faces deteriorating social and economic conditions in important localities. The government's draconian responses to a number of terrorist incidents and to the underground Islamist opposition are aggravating a growing sense of grievance in some communities. Uzbekistan's greater wealth will not protect it from a new economic crisis, which looks fairly certain without significant structural reform. Uzbekistan views the relative weakness of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan as justification for a robust, sometimes chauvinist conception of its leadership responsibilities in regional security. This disposition is an important risk factor for crisis in Central Asia.

The Ferghana Valley, which spreads across part of the territory of Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, is of particular concern. The living standards of large numbers of people there are particularly depressed and continue to deteriorate. The Valley was the location of the August 1999 terrorist incursion into Kyrgyzstan and of an earlier bloody inter-communal incident (in 1990) between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks. Political or social differences between the various ethnic communities are not substantial. But the size of the Uzbek

community in the parts of the Valley belonging to Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan provides considerable potential for ethno-nationalist provocation.

Afghanistan, as the source of gun and drug trading, is a major risk factor for a new crisis involving Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. But concerns that the rise of Taliban has boosted the threat to Central Asia from Islamist extremists are exaggerated. The serious security problem more likely to arise from resurgent Islamist politics is that of a violent reaction against government use of force to suppress Islamist political movements with legitimate political interests.

These threats and insecurities are exacerbated by the sharp differences in relative military power between Uzbekistan on the one hand and Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan on the other. Uzbekistan also has aspirations to regional military leadership that are sometimes viewed in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan as threatening. Uzbekistan's attacks on targets in the two countries in response to the terrorist incursion into Kyrgyzstan in August 1999 and its bombing of targets in Afghanistan in June 2000 have fueled these concerns.

Any new crisis in Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan or Uzbekistan is more likely in the first instance to be localised and of a humanitarian nature. But there is a sufficient bedrock of grievance, insecurity, mistrust and perceived vulnerability to take seriously the prospect that some localised incident – such as a riot, border clash or terrorist incursion – could rapidly transform itself into widespread violence or civil unrest domestically, or into interstate military confrontation.

The governments of the three states have not ignored these problems. Responses have covered a range of policy areas, included welfare arrangements, education, administrative reform and language policy. After some years of ineffective efforts to expand regional cooperation or even of hostility towards regionalism, the three governments have joined with the other two Central Asian states in a renewed commitment to regionalism as another way of addressing many of the problems. But the combined policy responses are not likely to have the desired effects. All three governments at present lack the vision, the personnel and the resources to have much impact.

The current and prospective levels of involvement of the international community in the three Central Asian states probably cannot fill the gap in vision, personnel or resources that the national governments need for effective conflict prevention.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

The recommendations in this first Central Asia report are broad in scope and necessarily tentative. The issues demand, and will receive, more detailed examination in subsequent reports. But the recommendations summarised below offer a broad guide as to how the undoubted potential in the region for trouble, including violent conflict, might be avoided.

### **General Perspective**

1. Major powers and international agencies should stop treating policies toward Central Asian states as a sub-set of policy toward Russia since other major powers (especially China and Japan), and the IMF and World Bank, are now potentially greater determiners of regional order.
2. A more helpful perspective from which to view the Central Asian states may be as part of a larger 'Inner Asia' region, linking them with Mongolia and Afghanistan.
3. There is an urgent need for commitment of resources by external powers and international organisations to allow a more comprehensive and sustained policy analysis effort on developments at the local level within Central Asian states.

### **Poverty and Economic Development**

4. International assistance to Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan must take more account of the risk of crisis inherent in the region's serious poverty and in its localised manifestations. Efforts should concentrate on direct humanitarian support to those in extreme poverty, stabilising education and employment creation.
5. Japan and China must be encouraged to give more resources to the development needs of the three countries.
6. As a matter of priority, donors and international agencies should extend support for a regional system of education and research at a number of levels (university, technical schools, and civil service development schools).
7. There is a general need to evaluate existing and projected development assistance and financial support strategies, and donors should convene an early meeting for Central Asia, Afghanistan and Mongolia.
8. National and local governments in Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan must work more vigorously to restore or newly develop commercial, technical and social links across their borders.
9. The international community must swing its weight behind consolidation of this Central Asian Economic Union, whatever the implications for established programs of regional development.

## **Security**

10. The member countries of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) should make a bigger political and resource commitment to rational and effective staffing of the organisation's field offices in Central Asia.
11. Counter-terrorism strategies and border controls should remain important elements of the security planning of Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan and the assistance policies of external powers, but these policies will be counter-productive if they continue to seriously restrict cross-border trade or begin to threaten other economic development.
12. Major powers should step up their efforts to bring about an end to the civil war in Afghanistan: the longer the fighting continues, the longer drug and gun trading will corrode security and social order in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan.

## **Governance**

13. National and local governments in Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan urgently need to give greater weight to public opinion and genuine popular consultation in framing their policies.
14. The judicial system in each country needs urgent rehabilitation. The use of police investigations and the courts to harass political opponents should be addressed by donors, with performance benchmarks being set, in particular, by the World Bank and the IMF.
15. Issues of fundamental political order at the structural level, such as the method of election to largely unresponsive and unrepresentative parliaments, may need to be a less immediate priority for the international community, as compared to promoting genuine community consultation and acceptance of the virtues of a more pluralist and just society.

**Central Asia/Brussels, 7 August 2000**





## **CENTRAL ASIA: CRISIS CONDITIONS IN THREE STATES<sup>1</sup>**

### **I. INTRODUCTION**

The political order of Central Asia<sup>2</sup> remains transitional, both in domestic affairs and in international relations. On the one hand, the prospects for consolidation of a post-Soviet order look good in individual areas of policy for particular countries. National economic performances in recent years have improved according to some indicators. Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, in partnership with Russia, have successfully negotiated border treaties and an associated security and confidence-building regime with China. On the other hand, there are mounting problems in other areas of policy, such as social welfare, internal security or foreign policy. Some of the most serious problems, such as the availability of firearms, remain beyond the control of the governments concerned. Serious potential threats to consolidation of domestic order are beginning to emerge from new tensions in international relations between several Central Asian countries. There is an intensifying insecurity in all governments about lack of a coherent regional order. This insecurity has not been dispelled by new moves in 2000 toward closer cooperation by leaders of Central Asian states.

Three countries of Central Asia are particularly at risk of being caught up in a new regional crisis: Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. The threat to these three countries is greater than for Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan because of at least four interacting sets of political circumstances, mentioned here in brief, but explained in more detail later in the report.<sup>3</sup> First, Uzbekistan is militarily much more powerful than either Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan and in August 1999 unilaterally launched bomb raids on targets in their territory. Uzbekistan has no confidence in the capacity or willingness of its two smaller neighbours to prevent threats to it from operating out of their territory, and the two smaller countries

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<sup>1</sup> This report is one of the results of a fact-finding mission undertaken by a team of five specialists, each with long experience of Central Asia or international affairs. The team visited the capital city and a major provincial centre in Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan, interviewing officials, specialists and community leaders. The primary purpose of the mission was to investigate whether the International Crisis Group (ICG) should establish a field-based research project in Central Asia, where that project should be based, and what the scope of its initial research program should be. Individual members of the team spent additional time in Central Asia participating in conferences on regional security or conducting other field work. This report is also based on recently published research as well as extensive consultations over several months with specialists in Central Asian affairs.

<sup>2</sup> In this report, as in common usage, Central Asia comprises Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. For reasons discussed below, this report focuses on the last three of these countries, while also addressing a number of region-wide and external issues. The report does not treat Central Asia as a homogeneous geopolitical entity: there is considerable diversity among the countries in their political styles and degree of pluralism, their economic and social conditions, and their geopolitical standing. But for many purposes the national leaders of the five former-Soviet countries and leading international players conceive the destiny of each state within a conception of Central Asia as a whole.

<sup>3</sup> Some of these also apply to Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan but not all.

have no trust in Uzbekistan's capacity for moderation. Secondly, all three are being destabilised, though to varying degrees, by the trade in drugs and guns from Afghanistan and other spill-over effects from the continued civil war there. Thirdly, of the Central Asian states, it is only Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan which border Tajikistan and therefore are the first port of call for the hundreds of thousands of refugees that would be on the move if the civil war broke out again. Fourthly, and perhaps most importantly, the fundamental geographic circumstances common to these three countries aggravate their political problems.

The complicating geographic circumstances are several. After 1991, each came to control parts of the Ferghana Valley. What were once internal administrative borders, across which flowed lively social and economic exchange and across which individual collective farms or villages had expanded, became new national borders. The making of new inter-state borders in 1991 also increased tensions in the Ferghana Valley on ethno-nationalistic lines, where demographic evolution over six decades had not respected the arbitrary divisions of the territory between various nationality-based republics of the USSR. For example, there are as many Uzbeks in Kyrgyzstan's part of the Valley as there are Kyrgyz, and ethno-nationalists make considerable play of these distinctions.<sup>4</sup> Thus, the social or economic fabric of each part of the valley is intimately connected with that in the rest, and a crisis in one locality could readily set in train a cross-border crisis.<sup>5</sup>

The three countries are also small, land-locked and poor. Table 1 shows data for the surface area, population and per capita income levels for each compared with its neighbours.

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<sup>4</sup> Terms like 'Uzbek', 'Kyrgyz' and 'Tajik' are used in this report to refer to people or communities identified by their governments or self-identifying as such. The forced identification by governments of every person as exclusively one 'nationality' or another based on parentage, language or some other practice was common in many countries before the Second World War, but was especially prominent in totalitarian regimes of the 1930s. In most countries of the former USSR, this practice of compulsory identification by nationality persists. Concepts such as ethnicity and the appropriateness of discrimination based on ethnicity remain highly contested both in theory and in politics. But many people happily identify according to their nationality, and are very keen to protect the 'minority rights' granted them during the Soviet era. In some countries of the former Soviet Union, governments have been actively discriminating against minority nationalities.

<sup>5</sup> The Ferghana Valley is of special concern, but decisions at the national level in the three countries remain central to the prospects for a new crisis, and there are several localities outside the Ferghana Valley where conditions are either sufficiently desperate or fragile for some outbreak of trouble to erupt.

**Table 1 Comparisons of Surface Area, Population & Income Levels**

Country	Area (km <sup>2</sup> )	Population (millions)	GDP Per Capita <sup>6</sup> (US\$)
Tajikistan	143,100	6.1 <sup>7</sup>	943
Kyrgyzstan	198,500	4.5 <sup>8</sup>	1927
Uzbekistan	447,400	24.1 <sup>9</sup>	2376
Turkmenistan	488,100	4.4	2345
Afghanistan	647,500	25.8	n.a.
Iran	1,648,000	65.2	5480
Kazakhstan	2,717,300	16.8	3037
China	9,596,960	1,246.9	2935
Russia	17,075,200	146.4	4531

The three countries face other natural constraints. High mountain ranges in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan make communications among their regions difficult, especially in winter. These geographical divides reinforce regional political cleavages within the two countries.<sup>10</sup> In Tajikistan, in winter, the city of Khujand in the north can only be reached by road from Dushanbe by travelling through Uzbekistan. The isolation of Khujand<sup>11</sup> in winter has been aggravated by severe restrictions imposed by Uzbekistan on road transport from Tajikistan in the past eighteen months, especially when punishing tolls for transport vehicles were

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<sup>6</sup> These are real per capita income levels estimated in purchasing price parity terms for 1995 from UNDP, *Human Development Report, 1998*, [www.undp.org/hdro/98hdi2.htm](http://www.undp.org/hdro/98hdi2.htm). The per capita income of the three states studied in this report has declined since 1995. For example, for Kyrgyzstan in 1998, the World Bank estimated it at \$440. Tajikistan had an estimated GNP per capita of \$350 in 1998. The UNDP's 1995 figures are used in the table because they allow comparisons between the various countries in purchasing price parity terms.

<sup>7</sup> About 70 per cent of Tajikistan's population live in rural areas. Ethnic composition is Tajik (60 per cent), Uzbek (23 per cent), with the remainder being mostly Russian, Kyrgyz and Tartar. The official language is Tajik, although Russian is widely used in government and business circles. In confessional terms, 80 per cent of the population are Sunni Muslim, while 5 per cent are Shia Muslim. See US Central Command, 'South and Central Asia', [www.centcom.mil/subregional\\_strat/asia\\_region.htm](http://www.centcom.mil/subregional_strat/asia_region.htm), accessed 26 June 2000.

<sup>8</sup> The predominant ethnic 'nationality' is Kyrgyz. Other nationalities represented include Russians (about 18 per cent) and Uzbeks (about 13 per cent). In terms of religion the population is 75 per cent Muslim; 20 per cent Russian Orthodox and 5 per cent other. Central Command, 'South and Central Asia'.

<sup>9</sup> Some 60 per cent of the people live in over-populated rural communities. The population is concentrated in the south and east of the country (especially the Ferghana Valley). The predominant nationality is Uzbek (about 80 per cent), with Russians (5.5 per cent), Tajiks (5 per cent), Kazakhs (3 per cent), Karakalpak (2.5 per cent), Tartar (1.5 per cent) and others (2.5 per cent). The predominant language is Uzbek, but Russian is widely used. The nation is 88 per cent Sunni Muslim, 9 per cent Eastern Orthodox and 3 per cent other. Central Command, 'South and Central Asia'.

<sup>10</sup> The charges have both an economic, revenue-raising intent and a political intent to insulate Uzbekistan from the 'trouble' in Tajikistan. A toll or charge of US\$300 was imposed on all transport vehicles, including those carrying produce to markets in Uzbekistan and passenger buses. It is not unusual to see buses from Tajikistan waiting at border crossing points to Uzbekistan while someone is sent to raise this money, a sum equivalent to more than a year's salary for many workers in Dushanbe. Thus, in a bus occupied by 50 passengers, each must pay one quarter of a month's salary to cross the border in the vehicle.

<sup>11</sup> Khujand and its surrounding Leninabad Province sit astride the western 'entrance' to the Ferghana Valley. This is one of the poorest regions the Valley as it has been particularly hard-hit by Tajikistan's economic collapse, with 92 per cent of high school graduates unable to find work.

imposed. The town of Khorog and the surrounding Badakhshan region, located on Tajikistan's border with Afghanistan, is more accessible by road from Osh in Kyrgyzstan than from Tajikistan's capital, Dushanbe. In Kyrgyzstan, about 93 per cent of the surface is covered by arid mountains, which separate its demographic and economic centres, the Chui Valley in the north and the Ferghana Valley in the south.

Uzbekistan does not suffer as badly from its topography, but it too has poorly developed links between its eastern and western parts. More importantly, it is heavily dependent on Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan for water. Uzbekistan can only provide for one third of its water consumption, and most of its agriculture is dependent on water channelled from Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Uzbekistan consumes an estimated 52 per cent of the total water resources of the five Central Asian states.<sup>12</sup>

The first section of this report gives a comparative overview of the domestic order in the countries of Central Asia, from a political, economic and social point of view, and it takes the influence of Soviet rule as a central theme. The subsequent three sections address in turn key trends in each of the three countries chosen for analysis in this report: Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. The report then looks at some external influences, including the effect of the situation in Afghanistan, including the trade in drugs and guns; terrorist threats; religious-based political activism; and military threats. The policies and actions of the international community (great powers, regional neighbours, and international organisations) are then addressed. The concluding section of the report canvasses a series of recommendations for action by the governments of Central Asia, external powers and international organisations.

In broad terms, two main viewpoints have informed this analysis. One opinion among specialists of Central Asian affairs, from within these countries as well as from outside, is that important parts of the region now face some sort of catastrophe if urgent measures are not taken in a wide range of policy areas. The only areas of dispute among these specialists are how soon such a disaster might occur and what particular form it will take.<sup>13</sup> Scenarios range from sustained terrorist campaigns to collapse of water supplies, or even inter-state war, but any would involve large-scale population movements and serious deprivation of even the most basic means of survival for tens of thousands, and possibly hundreds of thousands of people. This could threaten the stability of all states of Central Asia.

Other observers see the situation of these countries as less desperate, contending that even if social tensions or deprivation levels are high, these circumstances can persist for some time without further catastrophe. This argument calls into doubt the prospects for any kind of sustained armed uprising, given the lack of strong, organised political structures with this as their goal. It is further argued that the capacity of the societies to bend under pressure should not be underestimated

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<sup>12</sup> Information supplied by the Institute for Water Management, Tashkent.

<sup>13</sup> See for example, Anara Tabyshalieva, 'The Challenge of Regional Cooperation in Central Asia: Preventing Ethnic Conflict in the Ferghana Valley,' United States Institute of Peace, Washington DC, June 1999; Center for Preventive Action, *Calming the Ferghana Valley: Development and Dialogue in the Heart of Central Asia*, New York, 1999.

and that in circumstances of extreme poverty, political opposition begins to fade as people fear to lose what little they have.

For its part, this report concludes that any new Central Asian crisis is more likely in the first instance to be localised and of a humanitarian nature rather than involve inter-state military conflict. But the seriousness of the social and economic conditions in particular localities, in combination with trends in national and international politics, could rapidly propel one or more of these three countries into a situation involving use of military force.

Whichever view proves correct, it is now urgent for each national leadership, and community leaders at all levels in each country of Central Asia, to take responsibility for more difficult choices if their governments are to survive and if the region is to avoid significant conflict.

## **II. SOVIET LEGACIES**

The Central Asian republics played their part in the collapse of the USSR. The collapse occurred in part because of the failure of most republics to find common cause and because Moscow could not adequately redistribute diminishing finances between the republics. The new found independence was the result of many years of struggle by local elites in the union republics either for possession of power and resources or, in the Baltic countries and Ukraine, for independence and national political sovereignty or both. In the Central Asian republics, the movements for independence were no less powerful but did not involve the pursuit of political sovereignty outside the Soviet system. They were simply of a different character (essentially about the right to dispose of resources)<sup>14</sup> and were conducted far away from the public and even Moscow's official gaze.

Thus when the transition occurred in Central Asia, the political elites remained quite committed to perpetuating Soviet era patterns of politics and patronage, even as they moved forward on reform of the electoral and parliamentary systems.

### **A. Authoritarian Political Culture**

When sovereignty was devolved from Moscow with little notice, local elites who had concentrated on their relationship with Moscow turned their attentions to each other. The intra-elite struggle over political control (and access to resources) took on different forms from the Soviet era and acquired a new intensity. The intra-elite rivalry was shaped initially by the rhetoric of democratisation that had come out of Gorbachev's reforms and by a fairly powerful ground-swell of popular support for democratisation. Thus, the initial response to independence appeared to offer an entrenchment of democratic processes.<sup>15</sup> As in Soviet times, however,

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<sup>14</sup> One specialist has observed regarding Kazakhstan, this 'political control brought with it the right to control the privatisation of the nation's resources,' and the same is true elsewhere. See Martha Brill Olcott, 'Democratization and the Growth of Political Participation in Kazakhstan,' in Karen Dawisha and Bruce Parrott (eds.), *Conflict, Cleavage and Change in Central Asia and the Caucasus*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1997, p. 201.

<sup>15</sup> For example, all countries held contested elections and freedom of speech became more widely practised. As successor states to the USSR, all countries of the region acceded to the Helsinki

when local elites manipulated the propaganda of communism as a tool to remain in power, a number of political groups in Central Asian countries were merely using the propaganda of democracy and pluralism as a tool in their pursuit of power. The counter-trend toward authoritarianism became more powerful as the decade proceeded.

Political shocks of various kinds, either domestic or international, and weak institutional capacities in many areas of government, gave political leaders in Central Asia both the motivation and the justification for this reversal. These shocks included the civil war in Tajikistan (1992-1997), the Russian economic crisis of August 1998, terrorist incidents in 1999 and cross-border military operations also in 1999. The leaders have also used the danger of terrorism, drugs and Islamic extremism as a justification for curtailment of basic liberties,<sup>17</sup> and now openly reject liberal democratic conceptions of political order.

The leadership preference for authoritarianism is uniform enough to warrant the use of the term political culture. This culture, or set of political practices, is heavily influenced by the centuries-long social tradition of paternalism, by Soviet-era authoritarianism, and by the strong conviction that the fundamental order of society is based on loyalty and patronage, rather than on equity or consensus. At the international level, this last characteristic plays itself out in some cases as commitment to a starkly 'realist' conception of diplomacy that 'might is right'.

Ruling elites in Central Asia regularly assert that the differences in political culture between their countries and the West are so great that it is wrong to expect Central Asian countries to adopt Western models. Some go so far as to explicitly argue that the people cannot be trusted.<sup>18</sup> There is near-universal scepticism in Central Asian countries that any of the present governments will be very responsive to popular sentiment or support political reforms that would make that sentiment more influential.

Some do offer more hope for the development, at least in the longer term, of pluralist institutions. As one specialist from the region observed, 'conditions already exist in Central Asian societies for establishing a democratic infrastructure' in the region, including 'participation and representation, political decentralization and federation, respect for essential civil rights and liberties, cultural pluralism, a democratic macro-community, and equal and extensive opportunities to participate in self-actualizing work experiences.'<sup>19</sup> This author predicted that it will be 'possible to transform Central Asia's societies with their authoritarian content into genuine law-based democracies with civil pluralism.' But even this author argued for an 'evolutionary transition to democracy.'

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agreement on Security and Cooperation in Europe, thereby demonstrating at least a theoretical commitment to common expectations about political development and human rights.

<sup>17</sup> Some of these leaders take the view that phobias in some Western countries about drugs, Afghanistan, and Islamic fundamentalism will weaken the resolve of OSCE partners, especially the United States, to press hard on Central Asian governments as they become increasingly authoritarian.

<sup>18</sup> See Eugene Huskey, 'Kyrgyzstan: The Fate of Political Liberalisation,' in Dawisha and Parrott (eds.), *op. cit.*, pp. 267-8.

<sup>19</sup> Dr. Yokubjon Abdukholikov, 'Dialectics of Democratization and Authoritarianism in Central Asia,' *Central Asia Caucasus Analyst*, Field Reports, 24 May 2000.

There are certainly political activists in each country of Central Asia who vigorously support liberal pluralism, parliamentary democracy and extensive limitations on state power. But these sentiments have yet to work their way effectively into the structures of governance because they do not even yet have widespread support in the platforms of the major opposition groups in Central Asia. While democracy activists from within Central Asia and outside have managed to promote a wide range of civil society projects and to engage many partners, at least one multinational organisation operating in all countries of the region observed to ICG in May 2000 that they may have reached a plateau of interest among local communities in such activity and there was really little hope in the immediate foreseeable future of a broadening of interest in political activism in favour of liberal pluralism on the Western model.

## **B. Economic Catastrophe**

The political order in these countries might not be so parlous if the economic welfare of many of their people had not deteriorated so consistently for the last fifteen years. Independence for the former Soviet republics of Central Asia in 1991 brought economic catastrophe.<sup>20</sup> The collapse of the federal government meant the end of direct budget support from Moscow for Central Asian states.<sup>21</sup> This affected most areas of civil administration and social security in the Central Asian Republics. Other effects of the collapse included the withering away of the intra-Soviet distribution networks for both exports and imports, a sharp decline in industrial production, and large scale emigration of a significant part of the management and intellectual elites. Within one or two years after December 1991, it became painfully obvious to the governments in Central Asia that the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) framework would have little to offer, though Tajikistan and Kazakhstan have seen more in it than the others.

The catastrophe resulted in massive restructuring in the economies of Central Asia, three features of which included a shift of employment away from secondary industry to rural primary industries, a resultant de-industrialisation, and a growth in the relative importance of the trade and services sector.<sup>22</sup> The impact of the collapse of the centralized system was further aggravated by actions taken on the local level. Industrial enterprises in the region had large reserves and could have stayed afloat longer 'if there had not been massive, uncontested stealing and if such resources had been sold off at dumping prices.'<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> For example, in Kyrgyzstan, in the six years from 1990 to 1996, GDP fell by 47 per cent; industrial output fell 61 per cent by volume; agricultural output fell by 35 per cent, and capital investment by 56 per cent. Uzbekistan suffered less, with GDP falling by 17 per cent, agricultural output by 23 per cent, and capital investment by 42 per cent. Surprisingly, industrial output actually increased slightly (by 5 per cent). See Umirserik Kasenov, 'Post-Soviet Modernization in Central Asia: Realities and Prospects,' in Rumer and Zhukov (eds.), *Central Asia: The Challenges of Independence*, ME Sharpe, Armonk NY, 1998, pp. 33-34.

<sup>21</sup> For example, direct subsidies from the centre amounted to as much as 20 per cent of the GDP of Uzbekistan and 13 per cent in the case of Kyrgyzstan. Indirect subsidies were also significant, amounting to an additional 6.5 per cent of GDP for Uzbekistan and an additional 1.5 per cent of GDP for Kyrgyzstan in the case of their trade with Russia in 1991. See Boris Rumer and Stanislaw Zhukov, 'Broader Parameters: Development in the Twentieth Century,' in Rumer and Zhukov (eds.), *Central Asia: The Challenges of Independence*, ME Sharpe, Armonk NY, 1998, p. 64.

<sup>22</sup> Kasenov, 'Post-Soviet Modernization,' p. 35.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., pp. 65-6. Indeed, the Central Asian economic catastrophe also had roots in local developments as early as the 1970s, which included low rates of rural-to-urban labour mobility,

Outside the Soviet command economy framework, these republics did not have viable economies that could produce the standard of living people had become accustomed to. The structural economic circumstances in which these countries found themselves outside the Soviet framework hastened their economic decline and continue to retard improvement.<sup>24</sup> The small size of the internal market in each country prevents the emergence of a diversified and efficient economy in the absence of new international economic partners.<sup>25</sup> But these partnerships will be hard to establish because of inadequate transportation links with the outside world. Moreover, the contiguity of Russia and China whose wealthier economies in principle might hold out some hope of new economic ties, is not much help because the parts of those two countries closest to Central Asia are among the poorest. In the case of Russia, this is Siberia and in China, Xinjiang. And these regions are served just as poorly with major transportation links as Central Asia. The countries to the south (Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan) have experienced such turmoil through the 1990s that they have not been able to offer any comfort as a source of long-term economic partnership.

### III. TAJIKISTAN: KEY TRENDS

Tajikistan declared its sovereignty on 9 September 1991, and within one year the struggle for power between a 'neo-Soviet' government and a coalition of opposition groups, including the Islamic Rebirth Party, resulted in civil war.<sup>26</sup> After several years of sporadic but large-scale and horrific violence and an estimated 50,000 to 100,000 deaths, a peace agreement between the government of President Emomali Rahmonov<sup>27</sup> and the United Tajik Opposition (UTO) was signed in June 1997. The agreement provided for a National Reconciliation Commission (NRC) which would oversee new power-sharing arrangements and integration of the opposition military personnel into the Tajikistan armed forces. The agreement also gave an expanded mandate to a UN observer force in the country since 1994 (UN Military Observers in Tajikistan or UNMOT) to monitor some of its military provisions. The Security Council terminated UNMOT with effect from 15 May 2000, but supported the Secretary-General's decision to set up a peace-building office which was opened in July. His assessment of the security situation was that the 'possibility of renewed instability could not be excluded, owing both to domestic factors and to the unstable situation in the region, notably in

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reduced labour recruitment, and declining rates of labour productivity. Significant outward migration of skilled labour (mainly Russian speakers) began by the mid-1980s.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 69.

<sup>25</sup> This applies particularly to Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. Uzbekistan, as the most populous country, has better prospects.

<sup>26</sup> The implementation of repressive policies by a 'flea-Soviet' regime that took power after the declaration of independence led to sustained demonstrations from January to May 1992. Towards the end of this time, the demonstrations assumed a violent character when the leader in power, Nabiev, armed his supporters, who had been brought in to conduct counter-demonstrations. It was this cycle of escalating violence that led immediately to the civil war. See Muriel Atkin, 'Thwarted Democratisation in Tajikistan,' in Dawisha and Parrott (eds.) op. cit., pp. 285-99 gives a good overview of these events.

<sup>27</sup> President Rahmonov, in power since 1994, is also Chairman of the Supreme Assembly, the legislative branch of government. Presidential elections held in November 1999 secured Rahmonov another seven years in office.



neighbouring Afghanistan'.<sup>28</sup> He called for the continued support of the international community in what he termed the 'post-conflict phase'. A division of Russian ground forces, in Tajikistan since the 1940s, has remained (at a strength of about 8,000) and provides border security, and some unwritten security guarantee for the government. These forces played an important role in the early stages of the civil war, backing the government forces, without direct orders from the Russian government to do so.

Six years of civil war exaggerated the effects of rapid economic decline brought about by the collapse of the USSR. Hundreds of thousands of people became refugees (either to other countries or within Tajikistan). Poverty has intensified especially in the more remote and war-affected areas, with as much as 85 per cent of the population in poverty.<sup>29</sup> The reconstruction of Tajikistan's social and physical infrastructure has been left largely to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) through refugee return programs, as well as various reintegration and rehabilitation projects such as reconstruction of schools, clinics and water resources, food security projects as well as support to private farmers. By the first half of 2000, Tajikistan was able to post more than 6 per cent GDP growth,<sup>30</sup> an achievement reflecting some of the country's underlying economic assets.<sup>31</sup>

Notwithstanding general condemnation of the civil war and an aversion to any return to fighting, the political system remains in crisis. There have been a string of assassinations of government officials and leading members of the ruling People's Democratic Party (PDP) through the first six months of this year.<sup>32</sup> Border incidents between armed drug traders operating from Afghanistan and border guards (Russian and Tajikistani) have been increasing in frequency.<sup>33</sup> The President has repudiated vital aspects of the power-sharing agreement that ended the civil war.<sup>34</sup> Government forces have arrested more than 50 people in the first four months of the year for membership of the Hizb ut-Tahrir movement<sup>35</sup> and executed increasing numbers of prisoners. And the government

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<sup>28</sup> See <http://www.un.org/Depts/DPKO/Missions/unmot/UnmotB.htm>.

<sup>29</sup> Information supplied by a World Bank official based on a joint survey with UNDP.

<sup>30</sup> According to official data cited on Tajikistan Television, 22 July 2000 and summarised in BBC, Summary of World Broadcasts, CAU 220700.

<sup>31</sup> The country is well endowed with water resources, a scarce commodity in Central Asia. This has resulted in the development of a hydroelectric industry — with Tajikistan exporting electricity to other Central Asian states. Plentiful water has also resulted in a specialisation in cotton and aluminium production. The agricultural sector — which includes production in silk, vegetables, grains and livestock accounts for about 50 per cent of employment and 28 per cent of GDP, while industrial production contributes to 20 per cent of GDP, of which one third is generated by an aluminium smelter. Tajikistan's mineral resources, in the form of gold, silver, and uranium, have recently begun to be exploited. With domestic production of natural gas and oil low, Tajikistan is heavily reliant on imports from neighbouring countries. Uzbekistan has a barter arrangement with Tajikistan's authorities under which gas is supplied in exchange for the use of a rail transport corridor across northern Tajikistan, whilst it also accounts for 70 per cent of oil imports to Tajikistan.

<sup>32</sup> Victims include the Deputy Security Minister, Shamsullo Jobirov (17 February 2000), the governor of Garm Province, Sirojiddin Davlatov (3 May 2000), the Chairman of the national Radio and Television Committee, Seifullo Rakhimov (20 May 2000).

<sup>33</sup> Itar-Tass, 28 May 2000, citing the Director of the Russian Border Guard Service, Konstantin Totskii.

<sup>34</sup> Speech to upper house of the parliament, 17 April 2000, Itar-Tass, 17 April 2000. The President, Emomali Rakhmonov is reported to have said: 'We have had enough of sharing out posts. We'll assess leaders' work according to the results'.

<sup>35</sup> Interfax, 19 April 2000, citing a source in the Tajikistan Interior Ministry.

has failed to reassert control over territory in the Qarategin Valley.<sup>36</sup> Lack of control over this particular region remains particularly sensitive because it was the location of some of the worst fighting in the civil war, not to mention mass killing of civilians and mass rape.<sup>37</sup> A leading political analyst from Tajikistan told a conference in the region in late May that a balance of political forces was needed if Tajikistan was to stabilise and that such a balance did yet not exist.<sup>38</sup> A similar view was expressed in early May by a senior international official who said that the 'civil war is not over yet because the power sharing arrangements have not been satisfied.' The society is widely seen as lawless, evidenced in particular by the sale of positions in the police to benefit from the opportunities for corruption, by the impunity with which members of the power ministries perpetrate abuses of power, and by self-imposed curfews in the capital, Dushanbe.

In all of the above circumstances, the formal political structures of the country have proven almost irrelevant to the daily political processes. There are parallel structures of governance that owe little to the constitution, normal parliamentary practice, or the laws of the country. In parts of the country, administrative control is exercised by military commanders from both sides in the civil war, who operate to all intents and purposes as 'warlords', that is governors of their own piece of territory without subordination to the national government. The last decade has seen the collapse of key elements of social infrastructure, especially in education and health care. Médecins sans Frontières (MSF) now is the principal provider of primary health care in parts of Tajikistan. In other areas, primary health care is provided by other international agencies, in the near complete absence of remnants of the Soviet social support system.

Notwithstanding these massive problems, the declared intentions of many in the country to avoid a return to violence at all costs offer some foundation for gradual reconstruction of a law-based society. A common view put to ICG in May 2000 was that things seem to be improving after a period of gradually intensifying optimism through 1999. Sources of hope cited were the gradual reduction in armed clashes in Dushanbe,<sup>39</sup> the presence in the government of mid-level officials with a clear commitment to improvement and the necessary associated values, and the short time frame in which the Civil War came and went. One commentator observed that the sharp political differences, which created division between non-Muslims and Muslims and between various national groups during the Civil War, have now almost disappeared. But notwithstanding such optimism, the evidence cited above makes it plain that any sustained improvement in the political order of Tajikistan will take some years if it is to occur at all.

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<sup>36</sup> These areas are off-limits to UN personnel in Tajikistan for this reason, though some international NGOs, such as Médecins Sans Frontières, do operate there.

<sup>37</sup> Ignorance in the international community of these events and lack of attention to them has a powerful negative effect on how some people in Tajikistan view the morality of foreign governments 'assisting' Tajikistan today. According to a senior international official, the killing fell very heavily on two small minority groups which had been the targets of repressions for decades, and this could easily be seen as genocide.

<sup>38</sup> Conference on the Role of the Media in Post-Soviet Conflict Areas, Osh, Kyrgyzstan, 18-20 May 2000.

<sup>39</sup> An armed clash in Dushanbe in the first half of 1999, in which rocket-propelled grenades were fired, was the result of an effort by government forces to disarm an illegal military group, and has therefore been cited by some as a sign of return to normalcy and rule of law rather than a sign of a continuation of the war or of continued lawlessness.

#### IV. KYRGYZSTAN: KEY TRENDS

By comparison with Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan<sup>40</sup> is much better off, with many outward appearances of public order and rule of law. It has been one of the most progressive countries of the former USSR in carrying out market reforms. President Askar Akaev, since his re-election in 1996, has instituted a series of constitutional amendments and legislative changes which have given increasing power to the office of the President. Akaev is one of the least repressive leaders in the region, but recent developments, such as an electoral law which excluded many opposition parties from participating in parliamentary elections on a technicality, have done little to further his pro-democratic credentials. Standards of living for most people in Kyrgyzstan have fallen sharply over the past ten years.

From certain perspectives, civil strife looks remote. But commentators and even political leaders regularly refer to the state of crisis in the country. This sense of crisis for some, especially in the urban elite, is perceived in political terms and reflects an increasing rate of abuse of power and suppression of human rights. For others, especially in rural and peripheral communities, the sense of crisis is more comprehensive and relates to the collapse in living standards. In the last decade, the country experienced not simply economic decline but a 'de-modernisation' of its economy.<sup>41</sup> The population growth of 25 per cent in the last decade has aggravated the effects of this economic decline, especially in poorer areas. The country has gone from having little poverty to a situation where more than half the population now live beneath the poverty line, with some 20 per cent of the population living in extreme poverty.<sup>42</sup> The rate of tuberculosis infection — a key indicator of poverty — has doubled from 24 cases per 100 thousand people in 1993 to 46 cases in 1998.<sup>43</sup> The operation of the political system and its prospects for survival cannot be understood without reference to the continuing downward decline in quality of life for most people in politically sensitive parts of the country: especially the provinces of Batken, Osh and Jalalabad in the south. In these Ferghana Valley provinces, some 50 per cent of inhabitants are under 18 and will soon be entering the working-age population, which is already severely afflicted by unemployment.

The sense of crisis in Kyrgyzstan was aggravated sharply in August 1999 after an armed incursion by a group opposed to the government of Uzbekistan, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU). According to the US State Department, 'from 6 to 13 August, IMU militants from Tajikistan held four Kyrgyzstanis hostage in southern Kyrgyzstan before they released them without incident and retreated to Tajikistan. The militants returned in a larger force on 22 August and seized 13 hostages, including four Japanese geologists, their interpreter, an Interior Ministry general, and several Kyrgyzstani soldiers. IMU militants continued to arrive in subsequent weeks, numbering as many as 1,000 at the incursion's peak.' The

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<sup>40</sup> Agriculture is the dominant sector of the Kyrgyz economy accounting for about 45 per cent of GDP and for just under half of total employment. Cotton wool and meat are the main agricultural exports, while industrial exports include gold, mercury uranium and hydropower.

<sup>41</sup> Rumer and Zhukov, 'Broader Parameters,' p. 67.

<sup>42</sup> UNDP. See [www.undp.bishkek.su/english/country.html](http://www.undp.bishkek.su/english/country.html).

<sup>43</sup> According to the official data of Ministry for Health of Kyrgyzstan.

insurgents publicly declared a *jihad* against the Uzbekistan Government on 3 September. 'On 25 October the militants finally released all hostages except a Kyrgyzstani soldier they had executed. Kyrgyzstan released an IMU prisoner, but Kyrgyzstani and Japanese officials denied Japanese press reports that they paid a monetary ransom for the hostages' release.<sup>44</sup> In response to the incursion, Uzbekistan bombed targets in Kyrgyzstan (and Uzbekistan) without prior authorisation. (This is discussed later in the section on military threats.)

The main political divisions in Kyrgyzstan are regional rather than clan-based. The south of the country is regarded by many who live there as a poor cousin in centre-region relations, especially in regard to opportunities for wealth creation and in receipts of central government revenue. For many the southern region, centred on Osh city, is seen as linked more closely to Uzbekistan than to the rest of Kyrgyzstan. This stems from the fact that majority of transport firms and markets are dominated by ethnic Uzbeks, 80-90 per cent of market produce comes from Uzbekistan, and the south is cut off from the north by a large mountain range while it is reasonably proximate to the central national infrastructure of Uzbekistan. In the south of the country, the Communist Party is a more powerful force in politics than in the north.

Political perceptions about possible crisis in Kyrgyzstan are influenced by the demographic spread between different groups (mainly Kyrgyz, Uzbeks and Russians). For example, in the capital of Bishkek, as in national political life in general, Kyrgyz and Russians predominate. In the south, there are many fewer Russians and a much larger proportion of Uzbeks. In fact, in large areas of the south bordering on Uzbekistan there are more Uzbeks than Kyrgyz. Perceptions of cleavages dividing the country along nationality lines are as common inside the country as outside it. The focus on these 'national' groups in Kyrgyzstan has emerged for a number of reasons, most notably as a result of the outbreak in 1990 of violent nationality-based attacks in the city of Osh in which more than two hundred people were killed. But more recent tensions between the governments of Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan in 1999 and 2000 have aggravated concerns about possible inter-communal tensions in the country because such incidents have prompted a reaction in Kyrgyzstan identifying the perpetrators as Uzbeks rather than as the government of Uzbekistan. These pressures have been provoked particularly by the government of Uzbekistan through tightening restrictions on cross-border movements and through its air attack on the territory of Kyrgyzstan in late summer 1999 in reaction to Kyrgyzstan's failure to defeat quickly the incursion from Tajikistan of an armed group professing the goal of overthrowing the government of Uzbekistan.

The nationality differences in Kyrgyzstan do have the potential to become a serious point of cleavage in the country, but these are not close to being the foundation of organised violence against the government and there have been relatively few incidents of inter-communal violence since 1990. Instead, the points of difference have remained confined largely to discrete areas of policy such as the closure of schools teaching in Uzbek or Russian. An important milestone toward more harmonious inter-communal relations may have been achieved with the decision in 2000 by the government of Kyrgyzstan to introduce legislation to make Russian a second national language. This ended a long period

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<sup>44</sup> US Department of State, *Patterns of Global Terrorism 1999*, Eurasia Overview, 1 May 2000, [usinfo.state.gov/topical/pol/terror/00050208.htm](http://usinfo.state.gov/topical/pol/terror/00050208.htm).

of deference by President Akaev to those ethno-nationalists favouring the supremacy of the country's titular nationality.

The government of Kyrgyzstan has shown itself responsive to crisis and the potential for crisis. For example, as a consequence of the apparent indifference on the part of the local population to government efforts to defeat the IMU incursion in August 1999, the government decided to break off the western part of Osh Province around Batken to set up an additional province. The government has also responded to growing perceptions in the south of neglect by Bishkek by announcing plans to move several government ministries to the south. Unfortunately, the Kyrgyzstan government is not only poor, but it is constrained by fiscal discipline imposed by agreements with the IMF and the World Bank. The net welfare effects of these administrative measures are likely to be marginal even assuming they are fully implemented.

## V. UZBEKISTAN: KEY TRENDS

Uzbekistan, with 24 million people, is by far the richest<sup>45</sup> and most powerful of the three countries studied in this report, but it too faces growing political problems, increasing use of violence as a political instrument, and declining living standards in vulnerable groups.<sup>46</sup> The population has been largely passive and pro-government, but increasing poverty and repression give considerable cause for concern about more activist politics, which in some cases will involve recourse to violence. The deepening of the economic crisis in the late 1990s led to diminished confidence in the government and an increase in anti-Western sentiment, especially inasmuch as ineffective reforms and anti-Islamic policies are associated in the public imagination with Western support and influence.

Real GDP growth between 1996 and 1999 was estimated to be positive after several years of negative growth.<sup>47</sup> The annual rates for 1998 and 1999 have been estimated to be over 4 per cent.<sup>48</sup> But social indicators reflect a substantially

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<sup>45</sup> Uzbekistan is rich in natural resources such as coal, copper, gold, natural gas, oil, silver and uranium. Primary commodities account for about 75 per cent of merchandise export — with cotton alone accounting for 40 per cent. Despite the difficult terrain, agriculture accounts for 25 per cent of GDP and employs 40 per cent of the labour force.

<sup>46</sup> These groups can be identified either by occupation (such as civil servants, teachers, and soldiers) or locality (such as Karakalpakstan in the west of the country or Namangan in the Ferghana Valley in the east).

<sup>47</sup> The government has employed a step-by-step economic approach to macro-economic and market-orientated reforms, with a focus on attaining early self-sufficiency in food grains and energy. An economic reform program was put into place in 1994 that resulted in a series of loans from the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development. Recent economic difficulties have led the government to reverse this reform program and to impose more government control over the national currency. Restrictions in currency conversion, a difficult business environment, alongside piecemeal governmental reforms in the field of privatisation have slowed down the economic pace.

<sup>48</sup> See IMF, 'Republic of Uzbekistan: Recent Economic Developments,' Washington DC, March 2000, p. 38. This document reflects the views of the staff team which prepared it and has no endorsement either from the IMF or the government of Uzbekistan. According to specialists from international agencies and from within Uzbekistan, many of the component statistics on which national aggregates are based are not reliable. For example, the indices of inflation are calculated according to the official exchange rate, but this is two to three times lower than the rate on the thriving black market. Official estimates of inflation (around 30 per cent in 1999) are probably too low. This circumstance does not

different story. A senior UN official interviewed by ICG in May 2000 reported a steady decline in all key social indicators in spite of official statistics. But the scale of this decline is even reflected in some official measures. For example, the share of GDP being spent on health and education dropped by roughly one third between 1992 and 1998, even as GDP per capita increased marginally; the number of visits to medical clinics doubled; the number of hospital beds shrank by 75 per cent; public pre-schools (kindergartens) became almost non-existent; and there was a precipitous decline in birth rates throughout the country between 1993 and 1998, of the order of 25 per cent nationally and higher in some rural areas.<sup>49</sup>

Uzbekistan is staking its political future on a model of economic success that has grave limitations. Key elements of the government strategy include national self-sufficiency in food and energy, increased foreign investment, and sustained commodity prices. In addition, the framework of economic policy severely constrains the government's prospects for success. Factors cited in this connection by an IMF study include pervasive government intervention in the agriculture sector (including retention of Soviet style targets for production of strategic crops such as cotton and wheat to be sold compulsorily to the state at below-market prices), excessive bureaucracy in obtaining approvals for new economic activities, and low rates of privatisation. A senior economist specialising in Uzbekistan told ICG in May 2000 that the country faced the likelihood of a balance of payments crisis before the end of the year. Uncorroborated information obtained by ICG on classified government economic indicators for the first quarter of 2000 shows a sharp decline in foreign trade earnings and a similar decline in imports. If this information is accurate, then the country will only face a continuation of the problems provoked by the three shocks it experienced through 1998 and 1999: the Russian financial crisis, low international prices for key export commodities (cotton and gold), and a poor cotton harvest.<sup>50</sup>

One of the principal political foundations of the country's economic strategy is a conscious effort to maintain political order through careful control of the country's economy, subsidizing key goods as a form of social protection, and allowing profits made through state-controlled exports to be invested in projects which enhance the authority of the government, such as monumental architecture and high-profile infrastructure projects. Another important factor in resistance to moves away from the command economy and state ownership is that key political constituencies among the elite see it in their vital interest to maintain the status quo so as to ensure their continued access to wealth and power.

President Islam Karimov, in power since 1991, is set to enjoy a further five-year term in office after presidential elections held in January 2000. Several political parties have been formed but have yet to show ability to compete effectively with Karimov, in part though not exclusively because of his manipulation of the electoral process. The government still has a firm grip on power, and it shows no signs of relaxing its reliance on the coercive powers of the state. However, there are some challengers. President Karimov faces an incipient threat of ouster from

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allow an easy comparison of the macroeconomic indicators of Uzbekistan with other countries. At the same time, most specialists do credit the economy with GDP growth in recent years.

<sup>49</sup> UNDP, *Uzbekistan: Human Development Report 1999*, pp. 74, 79, 82.

<sup>50</sup> IMF, 'Republic of Uzbekistan,' p. 9.

within his own political circles. If this were to materialise, it would probably have a dramatic impact on the prospects for a broader crisis in the country. A series of bomb blasts in Tashkent in February 1998 may have been the work of people challenging Karimov from within the elite. Discontented elements in the elite could seek to improve their position by forming an alliance with grassroots Islamic movements, a move which could lead to more violence.

Karimov's government faces a challenge at its very roots by an organised underground campaign for the installation of an Islamic state in Central Asia, but this movement lacks cohesiveness, and most of the people involved in it have no association with terrorist actions. In addition, there is a well-known armed group, called the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and led by Juma Namangani, which has undertaken a small number of terrorist actions inside Uzbekistan, which may be receiving financial support from the drug trade and/or international sponsors of Islamic extremism, and has recruited some fighters from Afghanistan and Chechnya.

A series of terrorist incidents inside Uzbekistan, the harbouring by Tajikistan of armed opponents of Karimov, and the incursion by the IMU into Kyrgyzstan in 1999, have led to changes by the government of Uzbekistan in its domestic and foreign policy. There has been a shift toward higher expenditures on the armed forces, application of draconian procedures for arrest and trial of suspected political opponents, and closer cooperation with the great powers — Russia and the US — which are able and inclined to provide support for counter-terrorist operations. While this might seem an appropriate response to a real threat, there is a widespread belief amongst educated people in Uzbekistan (and in neighbouring countries) that Karimov is using the terrorist threat as a rationale for implementation of the more authoritarian regime that he prefers anyway.

This trend toward authoritarianism in the name of security, particularly with an intensification of repression directed at political opponents of the government and at so-called religious extremists, foreshadows an emerging crisis of legitimacy for the government. In fact, some analysts believe that the crisis of legitimacy has already arrived and that the government's resort to repressive measures is proof of this. Whatever the reliability of these judgements, the increased repression will, in circumstances where political opposition is already mobilising at a grass roots level, inevitably have negative consequences for economic growth and therefore in a cyclical pattern further undermine the government's hold on power. This assessment becomes important when considered alongside a confidential assessment given to ICG by an international financial agency that Uzbekistan's economy is not viable in the medium term unless the government undertakes major reforms quickly.

## VI. EXTERNAL INFLUENCES

As mentioned above, a number of external influences are seen as having the potential to spark a new crisis or aggravate existing tensions in Central Asia. The sources of such a spark include Afghanistan (especially the drug trade), terrorist threats originating elsewhere, religious-based political activism, and conventional military threats.

### A. Afghanistan: Drugs, Guns and Terrorism

Afghanistan pervades discussion of crisis in Central Asia. Its regime pursues an ideology of domestic order that Central Asian governments<sup>51</sup> and the people there see as a threat. There is a fear that if the Taliban achieve control of all of Afghanistan's northern border (the southern borders of Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan), their insurgency and moral crusade will be carried by force of arms into Central Asia. The Taliban government also supports international terrorists. But of most pressing concern to the governments of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan is Afghanistan's role as the source of the trade in drugs and small arms across its northern border. And there are signs that this trade is set to expand.

According to the US government, through 1999 there was a 'sharp increase in Afghanistan in poppy cultivation, in refining of opium into heroin, and in trafficking of illicit opiates. Last year, Afghanistan cultivated a larger poppy crop and harvested more opium gum than any other country by a wide margin.'<sup>52</sup> In May 2000, the evidence from international agencies was that there is set to be an explosion of shipments across the northern border of Afghanistan. The US government has also reported that 'Increasing evidence supports the conclusion that the largest of Afghanistan's factions, the Taliban, is fully complicit in the illicit drug trade. Controlling 85-90 per cent of Afghanistan and 97 per cent of the opium cultivation area, the Taliban derives significant income from every phase of drug production and trafficking, through crop taxation and other means'.<sup>53</sup>

The drug trade from Afghanistan continues to corrode public order in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. The criminality and violence associated with it has had and will continue to have a destabilising effect on efforts to establish a functioning justice system. A corollary is also important. Those who profit from the drug trade have a strong interest in ensuring the failure of efforts to improve legal systems. This means that the drug trade is at the centre of a contest over the very essence of political order in at least Tajikistan and parts of Kyrgyzstan. The associated trade in guns in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan is also a serious threat to public order.

International efforts to suppress the export of drugs from Afghanistan through Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan have been a near total failure. For example, in 1998, the volume of opiates intercepted in Central Asia represented only 1.4 per cent of estimated total production in Afghanistan.<sup>54</sup> There are several reasons for this low

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<sup>51</sup> Turkmenistan is not as consistently critical of Afghanistan as the other four states of Central Asia. On 21 June 2000, at a meeting in Moscow, it did not join them in the creation of new CIS centre for combating terrorism.

<sup>52</sup> USIA, 1 March 2000.

<sup>53</sup> USIA, 1 March 2000.

<sup>54</sup> UN Office for Drug Control and Crime Prevention, Central Asia, Review — 2000.



interception rate. As senior military officers serving in Tajikistan told ICG in May 2000, the border is not just indefensible from the point of view of preventing terrorist incursions, it is 'unsurveillable' for the purposes of drug interdiction. Defects in the police and justice systems of both Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan make higher success rates unlikely.

But the more important cause for the lack of success against the drug trade from Afghanistan is that it has to be conducted behind the borders of contiguous countries. There will be no significant success until such time as there is a government in Afghanistan with which the international agencies can deal and which has full control of the country. More effective anti-drug operations in Central Asia depend on peace in Afghanistan and on a commitment from the government in Afghanistan to implement a long-term anti-drug strategy.

The most serious threat of terrorism from Afghanistan is that posed by the group led by Usama bin Laden. While this is targeted against US and Russian interests, rather than the governments and people of Central Asia, it provides important common ground between Central Asian governments on the one hand and Russia and the US on the other.<sup>55</sup> While terrorist operations by bin Laden out of Afghanistan are definitely a serious threat to security of individual Central Asian people, the suggestion that they are a threat to Central Asian stability in a region-wide sense is something of an exaggeration.

The continuing political crisis in Afghanistan, as long as it exists, will continue to have negative overflow effects on Central Asia. A recent political analysis from a Kyrgyz journalist observed correctly that 'for the young countries of Central Asia, the seemingly endless fighting has no benefits.'<sup>56</sup> He called for the Central Asian countries to develop a unified position on conflict resolution in Afghanistan and to bring it to the United Nations. This is unlikely to happen because of the differences in view among them over Afghanistan.

## **B. Other Terrorist Threats**

Terrorism has not been a large-scale or consistent threat to any of the governments in Central Asia. But as mentioned above, a number of 'terrorist' incidents occurred in 1999 and 2000 that served to destabilise relations between the governments of Central Asia and heighten their sense of insecurity. The most important incident was the incursion into Kyrgyzstan by the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) for over two and a half months in late 1999.

The motives of the IMU incursion remain unclear. Their demand for safe passage to Uzbekistan suggested that they wanted to go there to conduct operations but this would have been better achieved by a direct infiltration into Uzbekistan, which would be very easy since the country's borders are not fenced in any way for most of their length. Another view is that the group was attempting to seize

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<sup>55</sup> Representatives of the USA and Russia met as recently as May this year to reaffirm their common demand for the Taliban authorities to hand bin Laden over 'to justice' and to dismantle the terrorist infrastructure in the territory they control. In a joint statement after this meeting, the two sides identified this terrorist infrastructure as a 'threat to stability and security in Central Asia.' US Department of State, 'Support of Terrorism by the Taliban Cited in Joint Statement', Washington File, 30 May 2000, [www.usinfo.state.gov/topical/po/terror/inderfurth.htm](http://www.usinfo.state.gov/topical/po/terror/inderfurth.htm)

<sup>56</sup> Turat Akimov, 'Building Bridges with the Taliban', Institute for War and Peace Reporting, Central Asia, No. 8, 23 June 2000.

territory in Kyrgyzstan to use as a base for operations into Uzbekistan or as a base for the establishment of a new Islamic state of Central Asia. The insurgents were able to maintain their position in difficult mountainous terrain for some time in spite of operations by Kyrgyzstan's armed forces. The circumstances in which the incursion came to an end also remain unclear.

Inside Uzbekistan, the terrorist threat has been more diverse. On 16 February 1999, according to the US State Department, 'five coordinated car bombs targeted at Uzbekistani government facilities exploded within a two-hour period in downtown Tashkent, killing 16 persons and wounding more than 100 others.' Uzbekistan officials portrayed the attacks as aimed at assassinating President Islam Karimov and implicated the IMU. While it may be true that it was an assassination attempt, the second explanation has been questioned by a number of observers, including journalists in Uzbekistan. This view holds that the bombings were not the work of Islamic militants but part of an internal power struggle, and were aimed at restoring the influence of a certain clique in the governing elite.

One unhappy consequence has been that the bombing incidents of February prompted the government to launch a crackdown on people assumed to be affiliated with underground political movements and Islamic organisations, including the Hizb ut-Tahrir, the IMU and members of the Wahhabi sect.<sup>57</sup> Eleven people were sentenced to death and more than 120 others received long prison terms. The pattern of arrest and execution or imprisonment in the name of protecting the state against terrorism has continued since and the conduct of the trials has had much in common with those of the Stalin era.

In November 1999, a group of forest rangers encountered a group of IMU members in a mountainous region approximately 80 km east of Tashkent. According to the US Department of State, the IMU insurgents killed four foresters and three Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) police. An extensive MVD search-and-destroy operation resulted in the death of fifteen suspected insurgents and three additional MVD special forces officers. During a press conference, the Minister of the Interior identified some of the insurgents as IMU members who had taken hostages in Kyrgyzstan in August. One of the most important aspects of IMU terrorism directed against Uzbekistan is that the perpetrators have enjoyed relatively undisturbed residence in Tajikistan for several years.

### **C. Religion-based Political Activism**

Governments of Central Asia have identified Islamic extremism as a threat to their security and this opinion is shared by a number of their citizens (about 20 per cent in one 1999 poll in Uzbekistan). Exactly what this threat constitutes is not always clear. There is a concrete element. In Uzbekistan, a number of violent terrorist incidents occurred, apparently at the hands of terrorists professing the goal of the creation of a radically conservative Islamic state. These have increased in frequency in 1999 and 2000 although still remain relatively rare events. The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) conducted an armed incursion into Kyrgyzstan in 1999 and captured four international hostages, provoking a prolonged standoff with Kyrgyzstan forces. Terrorist incidents aside, the identification of politicised Islam with violence also has a concrete foundation

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<sup>57</sup> Institute for War and Peace Reporting, 'Central Asia's Islamic Threat', 18 March 2000.

in the fact that an Islamic party was the main organising force on one side of Tajikistan's civil war.<sup>58</sup> A third concrete source of concern about politicised Islam arises from the mobilisation of opposition to some governments in power around the concept of the creation of an 'Islamic' state of some sort.

On the other hand, there are less concrete rhetorical elements about this threat that are not always clearly exposed. This rhetoric is based on several sources: an established international discourse about Islamic fundamentalism and radicalism, drawing on the model of the Iranian revolution in 1978; subsequent greater emphasis on traditional Islamic governance codes in a number of countries, especially Afghanistan; and a greater international assertiveness by radical Islamic groups, including those which have conducted a number of dramatic terrorist attacks. The international experience of Islamic fundamentalism allows politicians and observers in Central Asia to exaggerate the danger of political groups associated in any way with a programmatic emphasis on Islam.

The best specialist research indicates that the role of Islam in politics in Central Asia is much less threatening than the more extreme images suggest.<sup>59</sup> Since the collapse of Soviet power, there has been a gradual process of reassertion of Islam as a central part of the daily life of people in Central Asia. In fact, this process was initiated in the last years of Soviet rule. It is likely that this process will continue and intensify. In the next five to ten years, Islam will acquire greater influence in politics in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. These republics will introduce more schools studying Islam and state organisations will probably become more Islamicized than is the case in Turkey. Kyrgyzstan is likely to be less affected by these tendencies; however their southern provinces, with some delay, can be expected to follow Uzbekistan and Tajikistan.

If the governments of Central Asia genuinely fear an upsurge in Islamic extremism, they need to change their approach to unauthorised Islamic activities. They need to accept that Islam is a resurgent social force, relatively benign for the most part, but one which will be mobilised with increasing effectiveness as a means to counter state power if public resentment toward the governments continues to grow. How Islamic precepts and organisations continue to influence politics in Central Asia will depend more on the record of governments in economic and social policy than on any underlying characteristics of Islam as a religion or on any existing confessional dispositions within Islam.

#### **D. Military Threats and Regional Security**

One very important positive outcome of the few incidents of insurgency that have occurred in Central Asia is that they have served to provide a badly needed common foundation for security cooperation. The incidents have also provided a valuable boost to efforts by external powers, especially Russia, the USA and China, to move closer toward the regional governments on security affairs.

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<sup>58</sup> Though it must be pointed out that the resort to violence by the Islamic Rebirth Party was more the result of a spiral of escalating violence with government forces than of any original platform of violent overthrow of the state.

<sup>59</sup> For two commentaries on this, see Adeeb Khalid, 'Reform and Contention in Central Asian Islam', *Eurasia Insight*, 24 February 2000, [www.soros.org/cen\\_eurasia/eav022400.html](http://www.soros.org/cen_eurasia/eav022400.html); and Saodat Olimova, 'Political Islam and Conflict in Tajikistan', in Lena Johnson and Murad Esenov, *Political Islam and Conflicts in Russia and Central Asia*, Swedish Institute of International Affairs, Stockholm, 1999, pp. 124-134.



tacit approval, delivered in a disguised fashion in order to placate nationalist sentiment about reliance on big brother Karimov from Uzbekistan for the defence of the country from a small band of armed insurgents. The foreign policy style of Uzbekistan, characterised by some as chauvinistic, is of particular concern to a number of senior government officials in Central Asia and many in the general community. Some fear that in the event of a severe economic crisis at home, President Karimov will attempt a military adventure to recover flagging political support.

In this environment of imagined external threats and actual cross-border military operations, the intensified efforts by Uzbekistan through the first six months of this year to mark out its borders and to patrol them more aggressively has meant that when relatively minor incidents have occurred, they have been interpreted as possible harbingers of some greater threat. This perception is magnified because the border demarcation has already led to the dividing up of villages and collective farms, which during Soviet times grew to extend over what were merely internal administrative boundaries.

The perceptions of insecurity have also aggravated concerns about the dependence of Uzbekistan (as well as Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan) on water supply from Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.<sup>61</sup> Prosperity in Central Asia depends on two rivers — the Syr Darya and Amu Darya. The flow of the Syr Darya is regulated by the Toktagul and Naryn cascade of water reservoirs in Kyrgyzstan. The waters of the Amu Darya can be controlled by the Rogun (under construction) and Nurek reservoirs on the territory of Tajikistan. About half of the irrigated land in Uzbekistan and all the irrigated land in Turkmenistan rely on water from this river in Kyrgyzstan.

Apart from these obvious indicators of dependence, the water supply is particularly vulnerable in certain other respects. For example, there are 69,000 separate points for pumping or other forms of water control in Uzbekistan alone, almost all of which date from the 1960s. These are in a poor state of repair not only because their age but because of they were installed at a time when a rush mentality pervaded infrastructure construction and when the Soviet practice of 'cunning' economising in meeting construction targets was the norm. These two factors have meant that initial construction or installation was shoddy and not conducive to durability.

Unilateral water restrictions by Tajikistan, or simply a prolonged interruption due to civil strife would be a threat most of all to Uzbekistan but partially also to Turkmenistan. Uzbekistan is therefore more vulnerable from Tajikistan than from Kyrgyzstan. In circumstances where the Uzbekistan government is suspicious of and derisory toward Tajikistan, and less than comfortable with a continued Russian military presence there, this dependency is not a healthy condition.

Governments in Central Asia have moved to defuse some of these concerns. Apart from the series of meetings at ministerial level, the leaders have held a number of summit meetings. They have made quite plain their expectation that the problems over borders and water supply can and should be addressed at a technical level and not be elevated to be the status of some sort of inter-state

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<sup>61</sup> For example, some 95 per cent of Uzbekistan's arable land is subject to irrigation. UNDP, *Uzbekistan: Human Development Report 1999*, p. 77.

crisis. This expectation is belied somewhat by the involvement of the leaders, but the sense of crisis or vulnerability associated with borders and waters should begin to abate provided there is progress on the technical level.

As a broader response to a range of security problems, leaders of Central Asia have become more interested in coordinated regional strategies in economic affairs. Their emerging hope appears to be to that this will not only aid them economically but contribute to better mutual relations in the security sphere. The main vehicle for this is likely to become the Central Asia Economic Union (CAEU), a treaty relationship tying together Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. The CAEU was established in 1994 between three of these four countries, with Tajikistan becoming an observer in 1996 and a full signatory in 1998. The attendance of the presidents of all four countries at the CAEU Council meeting on 14 June 2000, the first to be held in Tajikistan, marked a new level of commitment to this relationship.<sup>62</sup> Intra-regional trade remains at relatively low volumes and the prospects for rapid movement on economic cooperation are low, but the atmospherics at and around the June meeting hold out considerable prospect that the four countries have abandoned what had been for some at least quite strong reservations about the virtue of regionalism.<sup>63</sup> The CAEU framework is also being used for cooperation in drug control and security affairs.<sup>64</sup> These four countries are tied together in a number of other regional groupings, such as the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and the Shanghai Five. Uzbekistan is also a member of an economic cooperation agreement bringing together Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan and Moldova. But the CAEU will over time probably be the most important vehicle for resolving common Central Asian differences and advancing common Central Asian issues. The CAEU is the only regional grouping in the CIS which has its own bank, the Central Asian Development Bank, to which every state has made a contribution.

The next few years will nonetheless provide new testing incidents in security relations between these countries. For example, the border demarcation process will continue, but it will create a series of local incidents that will detract from more positive trends in security relations and have the potential to escalate tensions. As far as water issues are concerned, the cycle of wet and dry years is not favourable to an amelioration of the tension. The region is just at the start point of a new cycle of dry years that can be expected to have an impact on agricultural production in localities already severely tested by poverty. Moreover, while Uzbekistan depends on Kyrgyzstan's water, Kyrgyzstan is anxious to regulate the flow for purposes of power generation in ways that are not conducive to optimal water use for agriculture by Uzbekistan. Add to this the prospect of recurring terrorism and unresolved security arrangements, and the situation will remain volatile. For these reasons, the need for new regional security arrangements that can help to solidify mutual confidence and devise practical measures of cooperation is urgent.

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<sup>62</sup> For one report on the meeting, see BBC Monitoring, 'Tajikistan: Central Asian Economic Union heads sign cooperation deals in Tajik capital', 16 June 2000.

<sup>63</sup> See BBC Monitoring, 'Tajikistan: Central Asian Economic Union heads sign cooperation deals in Tajik capital', 15 June 2000.

<sup>64</sup> See Kunduz Sydygalieva, 'Lessons of Batken: Regional Integration Key to Central Asian Security', *Central Asia Caucasus Analyst*, 7 June 2000 ([www.cacianalyst.org](http://www.cacianalyst.org)); and BBC Monitoring, 'Tajikistan: Central Asian Economic Union anti-drug commission opens in Kyrgyz capital', 6 July 2000.

## VII. INTERNATIONAL ACTORS

International organisations, foreign governments and NGOs are actively engaged in Central Asia through a wide variety of mechanisms, and this involvement has clearly had a positive impact both on underlying attitudes and in the confidence of large sections of the population in Central Asia that there is some prospect of overcoming the massive problems they face. Some particular success stories include the work of UNMOT, the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and some leading international NGOs (such as MSF and the Open Society Institute). But even some of those organisations with considerable achievements now face powerful constraints on further successes. For example, according to the testimony of some OSCE officials, that organisation's work on human rights and civil society development may have reached a plateau in trying to extend participation rates. A number of important international actors are now reviewing or have recently reviewed their policies toward Central Asia. The list is long: Russia, USA, UK, Canada, EU, NATO, Japan, UNHCR, and OSCE, among others.

There is some tension between the interests of the governments of Central Asia in international assistance and underlying negative attitudes toward it. While in general the support of the international community in the social and economic spheres is highly appreciated, there is a common perception in Central Asia that it is 'too little, too late,' and that it is often misguided in its application because of ignorance of local conditions. There is a nearly universal political allergy among Central Asian governments to being seen to be dependent on the international community. The tensions that arise in dealing with international agencies are fostered by the insecurity and sense of isolation of these countries.

For most international actors, this involvement in Central Asia is relatively recent (of five or six years duration); their engagement remains relatively superficial; and it has been characterised by contradictions, inconsistencies and lack of strategic direction. Sample observations about Western involvement made in a June 1999 report by Neil McFarlane for the Royal Institute for International Affairs highlight some of the problems. For example:

- Conditionality and incentive-based strategies in the economic sphere appear to have had greater effect than persuasive strategies to spread Western norms concerning governance. The main reason is that economic reforms are less threatening to conservative and authoritarian elites than political reforms, and economic reforms give power-holders opportunity for personal profit.<sup>65</sup>
- There has been remarkable progress with the cultural and political agenda of the West given the inherent resistance in these regions to Western values. But this has not gone nearly as far as most had expected, and expectations still remain too high. Change on the scale hoped for by Western governments in the areas of social values will not come under the current political systems, and will require generational turn-over before it takes root.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Neil MacFarlane, *Western Engagement in the Caucasus and Central Asia*, Royal Institute for International Affairs, London 1999, p. 71.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.* p. 72.

- Political Islam is not a powerful force in these two regions but it is one which raises greater fears in local elites than the involvement of Western powers.<sup>67</sup>
- Western involvement is premised in part on the containment of Russian influence but the problem of Russian involvement has become less serious with time.<sup>68</sup>

These judgements raise a number of important issues about Western policy but they are also relevant to the work of other governments and international agencies: balance between various elements of policy; the issue of leverage; and the intrusion of stereotypical (quasi-ideological) assumptions about some imagined Great Power game conflicting with declared policy intentions. ICG's analysis confirms the conclusion that too little attention has been given to the interaction between economic involvement in Central Asia by the outside world and broader security issues there.

ICG does not share MacFarlane's views of the need to contain Russian influence. On the contrary, Russia must be seen as a foundation of crisis prevention in the region, as must other major powers, like China and Japan. But MacFarlane's argument demonstrates how perceptions from an altogether different sphere of national policy and from another time have intruded into contemporary policy toward Central Asia. Unless there are significant readjustments in policy by key actors in the international community, it is apparent that they will be far less consequential in conflict prevention in the region than their formidable resources and diplomatic potential suggest.

From the point of view of conflict prevention or amelioration, it is fairly clear that generalised promotion in these countries of concepts of non-violent resolution of disputes, or of a more democratic and just social order, will not have a major effect in the medium term. A policy which identifies the particular localities most at risk of social disruption (at a more micro level than the 'Ferghana Valley') may be more effective in the short term. The conflicts in Central Asia are quite different from those in the former Yugoslavia where there was an identified villain actively pursuing a visible program of violence against large communities. The conflicts in Central Asia will be about daily bread. The uprisings and subsequent crackdowns will be able to be charted according to the micro-economies, the micro-societies and the real distribution of local power.

The international community should not be oblivious to the fact that the repressive or anti-democratic activities of the three governments are increasing and that in the longer term, this repression will provoke greater civil unrest. The evidence however is that the level of violence and its scope in both Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan is still relatively limited. Tajikistan is an exception to this but the prospects for resumption of fighting there do not relate to the level of 'democratisation'. In fact, no matter what democratic structures may have been put in place in any country of Central Asia, these are regularly abused by those in power, and any significant opposition groups in these countries can be expected to do the same if they gain power. (This point has been made by several interlocutors.) The suggestion is that most of the viable political oppositions are simply using the rhetoric of democratisation to manipulate international support.

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid. p. 71.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid. pp. 52–53.



The security policies of Central Asian states, like those of the major powers toward the region, remain locked in a time-warp. States of the region and the major powers must be pushed to reflect in their policies more elements of comprehensive security and cooperative security. This report has concluded that there is very little foundation, except fear itself, for avoiding much deeper security cooperation among the Central Asian states. In normal circumstances, they do not pose a threat to each other and none are likely to threaten vital interests of the major powers. Nor do major powers, except perhaps China, have vital interests at stake in Central Asia. In institutional terms this means breaking down barriers between programs in different spheres of policy. It also means breaking down barriers between agencies with a narrow functional brief, either at the national level (say Ministry of Interior and Ministry of Education) or the international level (UNDP, World Bank and OSCE). As far as the international agencies are concerned, their current fragmented approach to commissioning research could be replaced with a jointly funded program of research. Dedicated international researchers in a regionally based facility could do better for less cost than most of the drop-in consultants paid high fees by international agencies for ad hoc forays.

The United Nations system does have some capacity in each country of Central Asia for coordinated approaches in respect of implementation of agreed policy but almost none in respect of coordinated development of fresh policy. The Security Council could broaden the mandate of the six plus two framework<sup>69</sup> for Afghanistan to include the holding of seminars and conferences and the commissioning of research on cooperative security, preventive diplomacy and regional development. The current activities of UNDP, even its Ferghana Valley Preventive Development Program, while important, are not having an impact at the strategic level in a quick enough time frame. The mandates of the Secretary-General's Special Representative for Afghanistan and Tajikistan could perhaps be rolled into one SR for Inner Asia. UNHCR offices have been playing an important role in early warning of conflict in Central Asia but dimensions of this role are beyond their functional responsibility and the competence of UNHCR staff.

The work of OSCE in Central Asia in respect of security affairs has been effective to a degree. It is highly appreciated by national governments there and by informed public opinion. It is currently serving an important early warning function and is expanding its capacities in this regard with inspired leadership in the headquarters and in the field. But the financial resources and therefore the personnel resources available to the field offices are deficient according to several sources, as are some of the recruitment and posting practices which result in reported average posting times in-country of only ten months. For understandable bureaucratic and political reasons, the work of the OSCE field offices becomes preoccupied with day to day humanitarian issues, political rights or human development when the longer-term goals of protecting individual human rights, promoting democratisation and fostering human development might be more quickly achieved or at least promoted by far greater concentration on the big issues of regional and internal security and economic development.

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<sup>69</sup> In 1998, the Special Representative for Afghanistan convened the 'six plus two forum' involving six countries bordering on Afghanistan (Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Iran, Pakistan, China) and the USA and Russia. The Taliban has sent a representative to at least one meeting.

The lack of coordination between some key actors (the USA and Russia, the USA and Iran, the USA and Afghanistan, the UN and the World Bank or the IMF) has been in marked contrast to an emerging pattern of cooperation between Russia, China and three of the Central Asian states through the Shanghai Five mechanism. The visit to China, including Xinjiang, by the President of Iran in June this year is a sign that Chinese and Iranian diplomacy in this respect might achieve more through reliance on basic pragmatism than some of the Western powers more disposed to 'ideological diplomacy'. The six plus two framework, though designed by the UN for dealing with Afghanistan, does provide a ready forum for better coordination on Central Asia though this potential has not yet been seized.

There are powerful arguments in favour of a new conception of the geopolitical region in which Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan find themselves. The new conceptualisation must acknowledge the strategic realities that have been evident as early as the start of the 1990s but which have been consolidated since. For example, China is a rising power while Russia readily admits that it disposes of few assets to influence events in Central Asia. Central Asia is not a self-contained strategic sub-system even though the governments of the five countries like to see it this way. It is intimately connected with Iran and Afghanistan. Moreover, it is not really a part of the European strategic system. It is tied to Europe by a rather artificial process that owes more to its colonisation by Russia than to contemporary or prospective strategic relationships. The countries of Central Asia do not see themselves as linked strategically in a regional sense to China, Pakistan, or India. But if they are to have a prosperous and peaceful future and to overcome their substantial problems, an important step forward would be to begin working with a regional conceptualisation that recognised what constitute their most powerful regional inter-relationships, for better or for worse.

Equally, the international community must adjust to the almost decade-old change in the regional relationships of these states. It may still be appropriate for Russia to deal with these countries through a CIS lens, but it makes no sense for any other major power or international agencies to do so. Yet more than eight years after their independence from Moscow, the Central Asian countries are handled in most foreign ministries by the same division that handles Russia, Belarus, Ukraine and the Caucasus. Not only does such an approach ensure that Central Asia remains a low priority relative to those other CIS countries, but it means that policy analysis takes place largely independently of a full accounting of the power or influence over the Central Asian states of China, Japan, Iran and Afghanistan—not to mention possibly Pakistan and India.

A more useful regional conception may be that of 'Inner Asia' which sees countries like Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan as having much in common with Mongolia and Afghanistan, and which recognises that in the future, the economic and political status of China's western regions (Xinjiang and Tibet), and possibly even of the territory of Kashmir, will probably be closely tied to that of the Central Asian states. Each of these territories are likely to have a looser, more autonomous status in the longer term, and a number of powerful factors will dictate closer relations between them and Central Asian states. They all share poor access to the outside world and bear the economic consequences of that.

There is no need to be rigid about such conceptualisations but existing structural arrangements in foreign ministries and the dominant regional conceptualisations do no justice either to the goals of the external powers or to remedies by the countries themselves to a number of the very serious problems they face. It is not without some justification that the US Department of Defence has already made this shift by dealing with Central Asia for operational purposes as part of its Central Military Command which is responsible for US military operations in the Persian Gulf, Pakistan and Afghanistan.

For a region of the world which has evoked such interest from the great powers in recent years as Central Asia, the knowledge base remains weak and ineffective. Official statistical indicators remain very unreliable, and sociological studies are 'rare and fragmentary'.<sup>70</sup> The bulk of existing economic and social research on the countries of Central Asia concentrates on the national level. Economic studies which look at much smaller localities are very few and are usually restricted to a narrow set of indicators. There is a lack of repeat studies of key issues below the national level. The knowledge base is also fractured between different language domains. For example, while Russia remains an important source of good research on Central Asia, most of this work remains unknown outside a narrow circle of people.

The scope of the public domain scholarly research can only be described as narrow and its impact can only be described as low. It is true that at a strategic level, research on the region has served important alert functions in terms of getting the international community involved. The majority of titles are either about the region of Central Asia as a whole rather than countries. There are very few sub-regional studies. The report of the US-based Council on Foreign Relations (*Calming the Ferghana Valley*)<sup>71</sup> has served important purposes of informing and mobilising opinion. World Bank and UNDP studies have probably had more direct impact as precursors or prompts for more specific international action.

Classified government analyses have probably been more comprehensive and more detailed still. Nevertheless, the research effort in government agencies in the UK and USA is still constrained by the limited resources devoted to this region. In the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) for example, the section dealing with Central Asia also deals with the Caucasus. In the UK's Foreign and Commonwealth Office research department, there is only one analyst specialising in Central Asia, and he does other things from time to time, such as monitoring elections in Russia. Experience suggests a similar pattern in US agencies, though there are probably more analysts in more agencies working on these subjects. Importantly for ICG, the research effort in the US government on Central Asia is more diverse (security, human rights, economic, proliferation, drugs, terrorism). According to officials of OSCE, that organisation does not have a consistent mechanism for circulating to member states its regular working reports on security in Central Asia that are submitted by field offices. Detailed socio-economic studies would be the most appreciated and used by the international community; but studies of international relations giving integrated, detailed assessments of security and economic issues would also fill an important gap.

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<sup>70</sup> Rumer and Zhukov, 'Broader Parameters', p. 67.

<sup>71</sup> See footnote 13.

But the international actors are not the only ones that are less than well-informed on the detail of social, political and economic trends in key localities of Central Asia and their interactions with other parts of the region. Key decision-makers in Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan face a similar problem. The USSR had organised inter-republic relations on a vertical basis, where each republic had better links with Moscow than with other republics. Since independence, the development of more intense inter-state relationships among the newly independent states, including in the intellectual and policy spheres, has been severely constrained by lack of resources. Information flows among these countries have historically been poor and are now even weaker, though this is beginning to change through a number of programs sponsored by foreign governments and NGOs, local as well as international.

The attitudes of even some of the most democratic-minded people in the region are characterised by strong stereotypical thinking about the world at large. The majority of decision-makers remain seriously ill-informed about neighbouring countries and are stuck in Soviet-era conceptions of international affairs and social philosophy. Unless this knowledge gap is repaired, there will be important negative consequences for international engagement in tension reduction and conflict prevention.

## **VIII. CONCLUSIONS**

Our conclusions and recommendations are necessarily broad and some are tentative at this stage, but hopefully they will be of use to policy makers in mapping general directions. They will be supplemented in more narrowly focused later reports.

The years of independence after 1991 have not brought prosperity or pluralism to Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan or Uzbekistan. The economic welfare of many of their people has been deteriorating for almost fifteen years. Even recent improvements in national GDP growth have been accompanied by declining per capita GDP levels because of rapid population growth. The countries of Central Asia are yearning for social cohesion but their economic systems are not delivering the required foundations. Extreme poverty is increasing in key localities, and sections of the community are turning to new, occasionally violent forms of opposition to the installed governments. These domestic risk factors for crisis are being aggravated by the trade in drugs and guns from Afghanistan and by uncertainty and insecurities in the relations between Central Asian states.

### **General Perspective**

Major powers and international agencies should stop treating policies toward Central Asian states as a sub-set of policy toward Russia. Japan and China, together with the World Bank and IMF, are potentially greater determiners of regional order, and the activities, interests or capacities of Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran and India are also significant factors.

A more helpful perspective from which to view the Central Asian states may be as part of a larger 'Inner Asia' region. Such a concept would see countries like Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan as having much in common with Mongolia and Afghanistan. It would recognise that in the next decade or two, the economic and political status of China's western regions (Xinjiang and Tibet) and possibly

even of the territory of Kashmir will come to be closely tied to that of the Central Asian states. These territories will probably have a looser, more autonomous status in the longer term relative to their national governments, and a number of powerful factors will dictate closer relations between them and the Central Asian states.

For most international agencies and all external powers except Russia, direct involvement in Central Asia dates from 1992 at the earliest. This relatively short period of time has not allowed them to develop the expertise they need in their policy development for Central Asia. The continuing low priority attached by most international actors to Central Asia has had an obvious effect here. But as limited as the emerging interests of external powers in the region remain, they are still running ahead of existing processes for regular information collection, comprehensive analysis and informed policy development. There is an urgent need for commitment of resources to a more comprehensive and sustained policy analysis effort on Central Asia. As with existing World Bank and UNDP studies on Central Asia, the new research efforts of major external powers will almost certainly have a feedback effect into public policy debates in the region and eventually into policy-making by the governments concerned.

### **Poverty and Economic Development**

International economic and development assistance must take more account of the risk of crisis inherent in the serious poverty in the region and in its localised manifestations. This does not mean classic poverty alleviation project work but strategic intervention in an all-of-government approach across many issues, including an expansion of direct financial support to the poor, stabilising education and employment creation. The UNDP's Preventive Development program in Kyrgyzstan is a small step in this direction but it is simply a drop in the ocean in terms of impact on the problems even in the medium to long term.

Japan and China must be encouraged to give more attention to the development needs of Central Asia countries. For each the stakes are quite important but neither is engaged in the development assistance field in the region to anywhere near the extent that its interests dictate and its resources, fiscal or human, would allow.

As a matter of priority, donors and international agencies should extend support for a regional system of education and research at a number of levels (university, technical schools, and civil service development schools). Existing endeavours in this regard, such as the Marshall Center's informal forums held each year or the Regional Media Centre in Osh, should receive significant boosts in funding. But such activities could also usefully be widened to include participants or events related to other regional countries, especially Iran and Afghanistan. It would appear that the Peace and Governance Program of the United Nations University, which has run a series of workshops and conducted other initiatives in the area of conflict resolution, could play a significantly enhanced role in this regard were its funding base enhanced appropriately.

There is a general need to evaluate existing and projected development assistance and financial support strategies, and bilateral, multilateral and NGO donors should convene an early meeting for Central Asia, Afghanistan and Mongolia.

National and local governments must work more vigorously to restore or newly develop commercial, technical and social links across their borders. The most recent meeting of the Central Asian Economic Union held in June 2000 is one of the first signs since 1992 that all countries of Central Asia are prepared to deal consensually with issues of regional economic development. The international community must swing its weight behind consolidation of this grouping, especially through technical cooperation and exchanges with more highly developed regional organisations.

### **Security**

The OSCE is currently serving an important early warning function, is respected by the Central Asian governments and informed public opinion, and is likely to expand its role. But if it is to have much more positive impact, the member countries of OSCE must make a bigger political and resource commitment to rational and effective staffing of the organisation's field offices in Central Asia.

Counter-terrorism strategies and border controls will need to remain an important element of the security planning of the governments of Central Asia and assistance policies of external powers, but their impact on political and economic life of the countries concerned should be evaluated more closely. These measures will be counter-productive if they continue to seriously restrict cross-border trade or begin to threaten other economic development.

In the interest of Central Asia as well as the long-suffering people of Afghanistan, major powers should step up their efforts to bring about an end to the civil war in Afghanistan: the longer the fighting continues, the longer the drug trade and the gun trade will be corroding security and social order in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, and the cumulative effect will be to heighten the risk of conflict in Central Asia.

### **Governance**

National and local governments in the three countries urgently need to give greater weight to public opinion and genuine popular consultation in framing their policies. Soviet era elitism and authoritarianism will not carry them through their current or prospective domestic crises. The growing cynicism of the citizenry toward abuse of power by the elites and the resulting anger will be channelled into progressively more violent forms of opposition unless the political leaders of the three countries give their citizens significantly greater share in government.

The judicial system in each country needs urgent rehabilitation. The use of the police investigations and the courts to harass political opponents and the abuse of power for personal enrichment must become the target of vigorous assessment and diplomacy by donor countries, otherwise the money spent on economic development will largely be wasted. Benchmarks for performance that are more than formalistic must be found as a precondition for continuing receipt of grants or loans from donor agencies, particularly the World Bank and the IMF. A

particular target of expanded international training must be legal education and the procurator system.

Issues of fundamental political order at the structural level may need to be a less immediate priority for the international community. An ideal political system may be more than the sum of its parts, but it is at least the sum of its parts. Until the defective parts of Central Asia's political systems (such as the justice system) are repaired, and until there is a wider consensus in support of pluralism, over-emphasis by external powers on particular Western structures of political order, such as an elected national parliament, may be counter-productive. Traditional or community-based organisations, even if somewhat authoritarian or not subject to electoral democracy, might need to be the mechanisms of community consultation and the foundation of strategies for civic rebirth. It is certainly clear that the national parliaments in each of the three countries presently provide little by way of representative democracy or review of executive action.

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**About the International Crisis Group**

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The International Crisis Group (ICG) is a private, multinational organisation committed to strengthening the capacity of the international community to anticipate, understand and act to prevent and contain conflict.

ICG's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts, based on the ground in countries at risk of conflict, gather information from a wide range of sources, assess local conditions and produce regular analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international decision-takers.

ICG's reports are distributed widely to officials in foreign ministries and international organisations and made generally available at the same time via the organisation's internet site, [www.crisisweb.org](http://www.crisisweb.org). ICG works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analysis and to generate support for its policy prescriptions. The ICG Board - which includes prominent figures from the fields of politics, diplomacy, business and the media - is directly involved in helping to bring ICG reports and recommendations to the attention of senior policy-makers around the world. ICG is chaired by former Finnish President Martti Ahtisaari; former Australian Foreign Minister Gareth Evans has been President and Chief Executive since January 2000.

ICG's international headquarters are at Brussels, with advocacy offices in Washington DC, New York and Paris. The organisation currently operates field projects in eighteen crisis-affected countries and regions across three continents: Albania, Bosnia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia in Europe; Algeria, Burundi, Rwanda, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Sierra Leone and Zimbabwe in Africa; and Burma/Myanmar, Cambodia, Indonesia, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan in Asia.

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