

The New Nomads? The American Military Presence in Central Asia

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*Comrades, before it is too late,
Sheathe the old sword, may brotherhood be blest
--Alexander Blok, The Scythians¹*

ABSTRACT

Much has been written on U.S. involvement in Central Asia, and specifically the military component of that involvement. This article presents a short history of this involvement since the breakup of the Soviet Union, the reasons behind this effort, and how it is perceived by the various regional actors. It concludes with future prospects, as well as the logic supporting regional cooperation.

Keywords • U.S. • Central Asia • U.S. Military Bases • Security Assistance

Introduction

Central Asia has long stood at the crossroads of East and West, and has both benefited from and suffered because of that location. On the positive side, the people there were able to derive and sustain a livelihood from the trade between Europe and the Orient, and received inputs from each of these cultures respectively. On the less than positive side, this location, combined with a lack of natural geographic features that might serve as barriers, led to wave upon wave of invaders transiting the territory and leaving their mark on the land. In this regard, Central Asia became the grounds for a clash of Empires, as the Russians, British, Persians, Turks and Chinese all sought to establish control or exert their influence on the region.

Of these attempts, probably the most familiar is the period known as “The Great Game”, a term coined by Arthur Connolly, an early British agent in the region, and popularized in Kipling’s story *Kim*. As expertly

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¹ Alexander Blok, *The Scythians*, as extracted in Orlando Figes *Natasha’s Dance*, (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2002), p. 419.

told by Peter Hopkirk in the book of the same name, the “Game” reflected the rivalry between the Russian and British Empires in Central Asia throughout the 19th Century.² Russian interest in the region was a natural outcome of their Empire’s expansion to the east, and was ironically spurred by the American Civil War and the Union blockade that stopped Southern cotton from reaching European mills.³ Britain’s concern was a reaction to Russia’s advances into the region, and fears that this would threaten British interests in India, the “Jewel” of the Empire. From the late 19th century throughout most of the 20th, the region remained under first Russian and then Soviet control, and isolated from the rest of the world.

All this radically changed with the breakup of the Soviet Union at the end of 1991. While independence was welcomed by many, at the same time there was recognition of the myriad of problems that the new states, in what was formally known as Soviet Central Asia, faced.⁴ In the words of Fiona Hill, a leading specialist on the region, “the stability and development of the states of Central Asia [were] threatened by their extreme domestic fragility.”⁵ The region also continued to be subject to outside influences, both traditional and non traditional. The former included Russia, which was tied to the region both by the legacies of the former Soviet system that were still in place, and by the energy infrastructure that governed the development and transport of the area’s major resource, whose exploitation had the potential to transform the region. China represented a major influence as well, because of its proximity and the potential for trade. Turkey and Iran both sought to expand their influence, based on their historical and cultural ties. Saudi Arabia desired to exert an influence through the revival of Islam in the region. India also sought to play a role, not as part of the British Empire as in the past, but as a player in its own right. Finally, a relative newcomer was making its appearance in the region--the United States.

Much has been written on U.S. involvement in Central Asia, and specifically the military component of that involvement. Officially, U.S. goals for its involvement have been summarized as “instituting sustainable policies to promote national and regional stability.”⁶ Unofficially, U.S. actions in the region have been described as “More ad

² Peter Hopkirk, *The Great Game*, (New York: Kodansha International, 1995).

³ Charles Manes, “America Discovers Central Asia,” *Foreign Affairs* 82, 2 (2003). Accessed via ProQuest, p. 1.

⁴ Debate continues for what constitutes Central Asia, and while arguments can be made for the inclusion of Afghanistan, parts of Pakistan and western China, for the purposes of this paper it will be considered to be the five former republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan.

⁵ Richard Giragosian, “The US Military Engagement in Central Asia and the South Caucasus: An Overview,” *Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 17 (2004), p. 74.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 74.

hoc than well reasoned in terms of future implications....”⁷ Overarching this range of views is the oft stated fear that the U.S. presence has ignited a “New Great Game”, and that the rivalry between the great powers for influence/control of the region and its resources will hinder, rather than help, in achieving the objectives of security and stability, which are key for economic and political development. The goal of this article is to examine the nature of the U.S. military involvement in Central Asia, as a way of gauging whether this is in fact the case, and whether the U.S. presence is a destabilizing, as opposed to a beneficial factor.

U.S. Involvement in the Region—From Independence to 9/11

Active western and U.S. involvement in Central Asia began in 1992, when the U.S. government made the decision to establish relations with, and open embassies in, all of the former Soviet Republics. Diplomatic representation was followed quickly by business interests, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and international institutions such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund. The newly independent states of Central Asia faced a panoply of challenges, ranging from dealing with a crumbling infrastructure inherited from the Soviet Union, to economic and political reform, border and security issues, and the need to create national identities where none had previously existed.⁸ Official U.S. policy priorities included “democratization” of the centrally controlled political systems, marketization of the centrally planned economies, and assisting in the establishment of regional security and a stable environment that would allow for the development of the area’s resources.⁹ Primary among these resources was energy, which was seen not only to benefit the West, but as a means of generating desperately needed development capital for the states of the region.¹⁰

Along with aid and assistance in the spheres of politics, the economy, and social programs, came military assistance. For those not familiar with such programs, military aid goes far beyond the realm of upgrading the receiving country’s military equipment and capabilities. Under the umbrella term “engagement”, exchange programs were initiated to expand the ties between the militaries of the United States and the Central Asian countries, with the goal of professionalizing and reforming

⁷ Rouben Azizian, “Central Asia and the United States 2004-2005: Moving Beyond Counter-Terrorism?” *Special Assessment: The Asia-Pacific and the United States* (2005), p. 5.

⁸ Manes, “America Discovers Central Asia,” p. 3.

⁹ Giragosian, “The US Military Engagement in Central Asia and the South Caucasus,” p. 47.

¹⁰ Strobe Talbot, “A Farewell to Flashman: American Policy in the Caucasus and Central Asia.” Address at Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, July 21 1997, US State Department Document, accessed at <www.state.gov/>.

militaries that were built on the Soviet model, and encouraging regional cooperation between these militaries and their respective states.¹¹ Through exposure to western militaries and their workings, it was hoped to plant the seeds for ideas, such as civilian control of the military, which are the hallmark of militaries in democratic societies. By increasing each country's capabilities in areas such as border control, it was also hoped to address problems, such as transnational crime, that were becoming a concern. Professionalization was also key to limiting some of the abuses that Soviet style militaries were known for. Overall, military exchanges and assistance programs were seen as complimenting political and economic programs, and were integral to a holistic approach toward addressing the challenges facing the region.

The natures of these exchanges were many and varied, with a good number falling under NATO's Partnership for Peace (PfP) program. Starting in 1993, military officers and civilian officials from Central Asia, as well as the rest of the Former Soviet Republics and countries of the former Warsaw Pact, were invited to attend courses at the George C. Marshall Center in Germany, where they studied topics such as civil-military relations.¹² In 1994, U.S. forces began advising Central Asian militaries in their own countries and participated in joint exercises designed to build mutual understanding and increase interoperability, should joint operations need to be undertaken at some point in the future.¹³ The largest of these was establishment and training of a Central Asian Peace Keeping Battalion (CENTRAZBAT), conceived to be a multinational unit that could be deployed to carry out peacekeeping missions throughout the world.¹⁴ Smaller exercises involving U.S. Special Forces units, whose mission is to train foreign militaries, were carried out with the goal of increasing the host nation's internal defense capabilities. At the same time, a select number of Central Asian officers and soldiers were given the opportunity to attend military and language schools in the United States, under the International Military Education and Training Program (IMET). These types of programs were also conducted by other countries, such as Britain and Germany, though on a somewhat smaller scale.¹⁵ It should also be noted that these efforts were

¹¹ Giragosian, "The US Military Engagement in Central Asia and the South Caucasus," p. 47.

¹² *Ibid.* p. 48-50.

¹³ Fred Lawson, "Political Economy, Geopolitics and Expanding US Military Presence in the Persian Gulf and Central Asia," *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies* 13, (Spring 2004), p. 11. This work contains a detailed listing of these exercises.

¹⁴ The author was personally involved in this program when serving as US Defense Attaché to Kazakhstan.

¹⁵ Farkhad Tolipov and Roger McDermott, "Uzbekistan and the US: Partners Against Terrorism," *The Review of International Affairs* 2, 4 (Summer 2003), p. 11.

not unique to Central Asia, but mirrored efforts in other parts of the former Soviet space.

One area that came in for special attention on the part of the U.S. and the West was the nuclear legacy that the Soviets gave to the region. At the time of the breakup of the Soviet Union, nuclear weapons and delivery systems were deployed in three of the republics (Ukraine, Belarus and Kazakhstan) in addition to Russia, making them nuclear states with independence. Dealing with these weapons became a priority for U.S. policy. In addition to getting these states to sign on to agreements to observe the treaties already in place governing these systems, steps were taken to secure these weapons and either disarm them or have them returned to Russia. In the case of Kazakhstan, a Cooperative Threat Reduction (CTR) agreement was signed in December 1993, which provided for the safe disposition of these weapons and launch systems, and further securing of related materials and facilities.¹⁶ Throughout the 1990s, nuclear facilities such as the testing site at Degalin Mountain were closed, while other related industries were converted from their military purpose to civilian uses, in what was known as defense conversion. This program was also expanded to include facilities in other Central Asian states that, while not directly related to the Soviet nuclear program, still represented a significant threat, such as the Soviet biological testing facility on Vozrazhdeniya (Rebirth) Island in Uzbekistan.

In summary, the military programs that the U.S. and other nations pursued in Central Asia throughout the first ten years of independence represented a mix of bi-lateral and multi-lateral efforts. All of them were designed to assist these states in improving their defensive capabilities and, in conjunction with economic and other assistance programs, develop the secure and stable environments that would allow each country to flourish. All of these efforts were also transitory in nature, and aside from the Defense Attachés assigned to the Embassies and small assistance groups, there was no formal permanent military “footprint” in the region. In the words of one official: “Through engagement, the U.S. [was] trying to build the capabilities of the individual Central Asian States, not exert a force presence.”¹⁷ This, however, would change in the aftermath of the events of 9/11.

U.S. Involvement in the Region—Post 9/11

As a result of 9/11, the United States greatly expanded its presence in the post-Soviet space, and specifically in Central Asia. Initially, this was

¹⁶ Giragosian, “The US Military Engagement in Central Asia and the South Caucasus,” p. 46-47.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

because Central Asia found itself on “the Frontline of Operation Enduring Freedom” in Afghanistan.¹⁸ The logic for this was based in large on geography; just as during the Soviet war in Afghanistan, the region was a logical staging point for operations there.¹⁹ The increase in U.S. forces was coordinated, not only with the nations of the region, but with other interested nations and specifically Russia. As part of this process, the United States gave assurances that it would withdraw its military forces from the region, after the situation in Afghanistan had stabilized. As a result of these efforts, “by the official end of combat operation in Afghanistan on May 1, 2003, the United States had established forward bases housing a combined total of 3000 troops in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan...”,²⁰ and had engaged in close cooperation and intelligence sharing with all of the Central Asian states except Turkmenistan.

While this represented a significant change in the relationship between the United States and the Central Asian states, the change cannot be tied entirely to the events of 9/11. As part of the 2001 Quadrennial Defense Review conducted by the new leadership in the Pentagon after the 2000 U.S. presidential election, the need to transform both U.S. forces and the nature of U.S. relations with its allies and other partner nations had been highlighted.²¹ The new National Security Strategy released in September 2002 emphasized that “a military structure to deter massive Cold-War-era armies must be transformed to focus on how adversaries might fight, rather than where and when a war might occur.”²² Washington began to focus on what was referred to as an “Arc of Instability”, that ran from the Middle East to North Asia. To address the threat that was seen as emanating from this area, the Pentagon launched a global realignment of its defense posture, to gain strategic control of this arc through an expanded military presence in these theaters.²³ The result, with regard to Central Asia, was that the United States launched broad new diplomatic and military initiatives in the region. Where earlier efforts were more limited and focused, the new emphasis, based on the perceived needs for fighting the War on Terror, resulted in much more attention and activity.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

¹⁹ Svante Cornell, “The United States and Central Asia: In the Steppes to Stay?”, *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 17, 2 (July 2004), p. 240.

²⁰ Ilan Berman, “The New Battleground: Central Asia and the Caucasus,” *Provocations*, 28, 1 (Winter 2004). Accessed via LexisNexis Academic, p. 2.

²¹ For a summary of the discussions leading to this change, see Stephen Blank, *US Military Engagement with Transcaucasia and Central Asia*, a report prepared by the Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College, (2004).

²² Berman, “The New Battleground: Central Asia and the Caucasus,” p. 2.

²³ *Ibid.*

The earliest and most obvious result of this change in emphasis was the establishment of U.S. military bases in the region, to help prosecute the war in Afghanistan. "As early as 5 Oct 2001 the U.S. secured permission to establish a military base in Khanabad in southwest Uzbekistan" and by December of that year had established another base at Manas, just outside of the Kyrgyz capital of Bishkek.²⁴ Designed to serve as a refueling and transfer point for personnel and material going south, each of these bases would eventually house between 1000 and 3000 U.S. service members.²⁵ In addition to the facilities in these two countries, Kazakhstan offered the use of two air bases on its territory, at Shymkent and Lugovoy.²⁶ Facilities were also surveyed in Tajikistan, but were deemed to be in too bad a state of repair to be brought up to western standards, and instead were designated for use as emergency refueling points.²⁷ Even Turkmenistan, which under its policy of "positive neutrality" officially maintained a stance of non-involvement, unofficially allowed use of its facilities to assist in providing humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan.

Along with the increase in the physical American presence, came an increase in material assistance to the Central Asian states. In the case of Uzbekistan, US\$60 million in aid was to be given annually to Uzbekistan in return for the use of Khanabad, in addition to a one time payment of US\$100 million.²⁸ In Kyrgyzstan, while the assistance numbers were somewhat less, other payments were made, including a landing fee of US\$7,000.00 that was paid for each flight in and out of Manas.²⁹ Much of this assistance was designed to help deal with the newly perceived threat posed by terrorist elements, and focused on such areas as border security, counter proliferation, and anti-drug efforts.³⁰ Assistance was increased to states not directly involved in U.S. operations as well; in the case of Kazakhstan, the U.S. committed millions of dollars to purchase equipment and provide training for Kazakh security forces.³¹ These

²⁴ Cornell, "The United States and Central Asia: In the Steppes to Stay?", p. 240.

²⁵ Giragosian, "The US Military Engagement in Central Asia and the South Caucasus," p. 52.

²⁶ Doulatbek Khidirbekughli, "U.S. Geostrategy in Central Asia: A Kazakh Perspective," *Comparative Strategy* 22 (2002), p. 160.

²⁷ Giragosian, "The US Military Engagement in Central Asia and the South Caucasus," p. 51.

²⁸ Cornell, "The United States and Central Asia: In the Steppes to Stay?", p. 241.

²⁹ Lawson, "Political Economy, Geopolitics and Expanding US Military Presence in the Persian Gulf and Central Asia," p. 14. Rumors persist that much of this money ended up in the hands of then President Akayev's son.

³⁰ Berman, "The New Battleground: Central Asia and the Caucasus," p. 3. It should be noted that anti drug efforts were seen as closely tied with the War on Terror, and terrorist organizations obtained a large portion of their financial support through the drug trade.

³¹ *Ibid.*

efforts where in addition to existing programs, such as the Central Asian Border Security Initiative (CASI), which had already given “millions in security assistance to each of the five Central Asian states.”³²

It should again be noted that this shift in programs and emphasis was not unique to Central Asia, and can be found to have parallels in other parts of the former Soviet Union, as well as other regions of the world. One of the better known of these initiatives was in the South Caucasus state of Georgia. In response to the threat posed by Chechen rebels who were seeking sanctuary in the Pankisi Gorge in Georgia, the United States initiated a train and equip program (GTEP), to increase the ability of the Georgian forces to deal with the threat posed by these terrorists.³³ While nothing of this scale was done in Central Asia, a number of smaller programs along the same lines were undertaken. In one example, in July 2002 U.S. specialists did a two week training course in Uzbekistan to train Uzbek forces in detecting and dealing with incidents involving WMD; at the end of this training, US\$270,000 worth of material was left with the Uzbeks to help them deal with the results of chemical, biological or nuclear incidents.³⁴ In another, training was provided to the naval forces of Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan, to improve security on the Caspian Sea.³⁵

What can be seen from these examples is a difference in the nature of the programs between the pre and post 9/11 eras. Whereas earlier efforts were smaller and concentrated on general goals, such as professionalization of the military and education about Civil Military relations, post 9/11 military assistance tended to be more extensive and concentrated on developing capabilities deemed desirable in dealing with the new threats identified after the attacks on the U.S.. While this is understandable given the nature of the post 9/11 world, it none the less gave a different tone and perspective to these efforts, and one whose consequences may not have been that well thought out and fully understood.

The View from Other Perspectives

With regard to the Central Asian states, the most obvious reason for this shift in the nature of the military commitment to Central Asia was the identification of a concrete threat, against which such efforts could be directed. The threat posed by terrorist groups, as embodied by Al Qaeda

³² Giragosian, “The US Military Engagement in Central Asia and the South Caucasus,” p. 45.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 60. See Giragosian for a summary of this program. The author was also involved in evaluating this effort.

³⁴ Tolipov and McDermott, “Uzbekistan and the US: Partners Against Terrorism,” p. 14.

³⁵ Known as Operation Caspian Guard, this program has also been cited by some observers as helping to ensure the security of the flow of energy in the Caspian region.

and the Taliban which gave them sanctuary in Afghanistan, was real, as opposed to the general statements about “stability and security” in the pre 9/11 era. The Central Asian states had talked about the existence of such threats before 9/11, and some had actually suffered because of them, as in the bomb attacks against President Karimov in 1999 by the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU).³⁶ Now, however, there was recognition of this threat by the U.S., and with that recognition came support. Probably the most obvious example of this shift, were the military attacks conducted by the United States against elements of the IMU operating in Afghanistan, which reportedly killed the IMU’s field commander Namangani and disrupted the organization to the point that it became ineffective.³⁷ Terrorist groups, often associated with Radical Islamic movements, became a target for intelligence collection and in some cases security operations, depending upon the circumstances.

Yet at the same time that this was taking place, there was also recognition in the West that the rulers in Central Asia had often “hyped” the threat posed by these groups, as a means of justifying the repressive measures they employed in maintaining their own rule. Islamic fundamentalism had always existed in some regions of Central Asia, such as the Fergana Valley, but fundamentalism did not automatically equate to Radical Islam and terrorism.³⁸ The failure of the Central Asian states to allow dissenting views, and the harsh actions they took against anyone criticizing their regimes, drove opposition groups either into exile or underground, where Islamic networks often afforded them a means of maintaining contact and communication with their followers. To counter this trend, the United States and other western nations continued to push the states of Central Asia for political reforms that would allow pluralism, and provide opponents a means to express their grievances. The irony was that at the same time, the aid being provided often helped to bolster the ability of the security services in these countries to continue to repress opponents of the regimes. From the point of view of the regimes themselves, there was often disappointment that, while they were receiving more assistance from the U.S. and other western states, the one thing that they craved for most--formal security guarantees from the West--eluded them. And when the West continued to critique them on their human rights records and repressive measures at home, as in the case of Uzbekistan after the events in Andijan, the reaction could be

³⁶ The author was in Tashkent two weeks after this attack. Literally every street corner in the downtown area had an armed military presence.

³⁷ Cornell, “The United States and Central Asia: In the Steppes to Stay?”, p. 242.

³⁸ Alec Rasizade, “Washington and the ‘Great Game’ in Central Asia,” *Contemporary Review* 280, 1636 (May 2002), p. 259.

extreme; in this instance, leading to the request by Uzbekistan for the United States to withdraw from the base in Kanhabad.³⁹

To the surprise of many observers, Russia initially did not object strongly to U.S. deployments to what, only a few years previously, had been in their sphere of influence. Part of the reason may have been that Russia was only too happy to see the destruction of the Taliban, in that they viewed Radical Islam as a threat to their own security interests.⁴⁰ Part of the reason may also have been the nature of the personal relationship between Presidents Putin and Bush. Whatever the reasons, there is evidence that there was reluctance on the part of the Russian military to allow the U.S. to establish bases on what had formerly been Soviet territory, and was still considered to be Russia's sphere of influence, captured in the term "the Near Abroad."⁴¹ This opposition was somewhat blunted by the argument that these bases were temporary, and would be removed once their usefulness for prosecuting the War on Terror was finished. That this opposition was still a factor in Russian politics is reflected in the words of Russian State Duma Speaker Gennadiy Seleznyov: "Russia will not endorse the emergence of permanent U.S. Bases in Central Asia."⁴²

While grudgingly accepting U.S. bases on a temporary basis, Russia also took actions to mitigate this presence, by establishing bases of their own in Central Asia. "In Oct 2003, Russia established its first new regional military base since the Cold War at Kant, Kyrgyzstan, which lies 30 kilometers from the U.S. Base at [Manas]."⁴³ The rationale for the base was to serve as the marshaling point for multi-national Collective Rapid Deployment Force (CRDF) established under the Collective Security Treaty (CST) signed by Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan in late 2002, though most observers saw it as a way of answering and countering the American presence.⁴⁴ In October 2004, Russia established a permanent base in Dushanbe, Tajikistan, for its 201st Motorized Rifle Division, which had remained in the country after the breakup of the Soviet Union to help with border security.⁴⁵ Also in 2004, Russia and Uzbekistan signed a Treaty on Strategic Cooperation, and in

³⁹ Richard Weitz, "Averting a New Great Game in Central Asia," *The Washington Quarterly* 29, 3(Summer 2006), p. 165.

⁴⁰ Alec Rasizade, "The Specter of a New "Great Game" in Central Asia," *Foreign Service Journal* (November 2002),p. 49-50 .

⁴¹ Members of the Russian Military had strong objections to any American presence in the region, but these were reportedly overruled by President Putin.

⁴² Rasizade, "The Specter of a New "Great Game" in Central Asia," p. 50. (Emphasis added by author).

⁴³ Giragosian, "The US Military Engagement in Central Asia and the South Caucasus," p. 50.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* p. 52.

⁴⁵ Weitz, "Averting a New Great Game in Central Asia," p. 157.

2005 Russian and Uzbek forces conducted their first joint military exercises.⁴⁶ This last case represents perhaps the most prominent shift in allegiances in Central Asia in the post Soviet period. Since independence, Uzbekistan had sought to distance itself from Russia; however, the break with the United States over Andijan opened a door that had been all but closed to Russia, resulting in a budding Russian-Uzbek relationship.

Iran, while no great fan of the United States, accepted the U.S. bases in Central Asia in the same way that the Russians did. Since these bases were to be used for attacks against the Taliban, whose regime was opposed to Iranian interests, they could be tolerated as long as they were temporary.⁴⁷ The Chinese view was somewhat more complex. China saw an advantage to a U.S. presence in the region that was designed to counter terrorism, and had agreed to support the U.S. War on Terror in return for the United States classifying elements of the Uighar insurgency in western China as a terrorist movement.⁴⁸ At the same time, however, there was Chinese apprehension about U.S. bases on China's border being part of a U.S. attempt to gain a strategic advantage over China, and some even saw this as an attempt at encirclement.⁴⁹ For their part, the Chinese continued building relations throughout the region, including strongly backing Uzbek actions in Andijan as being in line with fighting the struggle against the "three great evils" of separatism, terrorism and extremism.⁵⁰

Opposing Views

As the war in Afghanistan continued, and was joined by the war in Iraq, opposition to the continued U.S. presence in Central Asia began to coalesce in a number of fora. The most visible of these was the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Originally formed as the Shanghai Five in 1996 as a way of resolving border issues, it has grown both in membership and stature to become involved in a number of regional issues, including security.⁵¹ At its meeting in March of 2005, the SCO members issued a joint declaration calling for the removal of U.S. bases from the region as soon as practicable.⁵² While essentially not calling for any action that the United States hadn't already agreed to do, the

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, p. 157-158.

⁴⁷ Cornell, "The United States and Central Asia: In the Steppes to Stay?", p. 241.

⁴⁸ Weitz, "Averting a New Great Game in Central Asia," p. 159.

⁴⁹ Maynes, "America Discovers Central Asia," p. 5.

⁵⁰ Weitz, "Averting a New Great Game in Central Asia," p. 159.

⁵¹ The original members of the Shanghai Five were Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. It became the Shanghai Cooperation Organization with the addition of Uzbekistan. India, Pakistan, Mongolia and Iran presently have observer status, and discussions continue about these states becoming full members.

⁵² Weitz, "Averting a New Great Game in Central Asia," p. 155.

declaration was seen as significant step by these countries in asserting their right to determine the nature of the security situation in the regions. It also marked a change in the nature of the SCO, which until that time had functioned primarily as a forum for internal discussion on issues relating to the member states, rather than a means of representing unified positions of its members to the outside world.⁵³

The SCO declaration also reinforced a draft military concept put forward earlier by the Russian Defense Minister, the so called Ivanov Doctrine, which stated in part that “the introduction of foreign troops (without the agreement of the Russian Federation and the authority of the UN Security Council) onto territories of states which are adjacent to states friendly toward the Russian Federation” was unacceptable.⁵⁴ Elements in Russia had long been concerned about encroachments on what had traditionally been viewed as their sphere of influence, such as the expansion of NATO into the Baltic States and Central Europe. The SCO, as the most prominent and seemingly most effective security organization in the region, lent legitimacy to Russian attempts to limit outside influences, by claiming to speak for a majority of the Central Asian nations.

Finally, opposition to an increased U.S./Western presence seemed to reflect the growing concern among the Central Asian States over the “colored revolutions” that had occurred in other parts of the former Soviet space. These had been brought about, it was viewed, by the liberal reforms that had been supported by the West in general, and specifically the U.S.. Increasing restrictions on western sponsored NGOs and other organizations that were supporting democratic reforms, signaled a shift from earlier attitudes that welcomed any outside assistance. If the cost of continued U.S. support was implementation of reforms that would ultimately serve to undermine their continued rule, then the benefits these regimes were receiving hardly seemed worth that cost.⁵⁵

Conclusions—The Future of U.S. Military Involvement in Central Asia

Just as nomadic tribe after nomadic tribe swept across the steppe throughout Central Asia’s history, some have viewed the U.S. presence there as temporary, and that at some point the Americans will “pack up

⁵³ The role of the SCO is evolving and a fascinating topic, but unfortunately is beyond the scope of this paper.

⁵⁴ Berman, “The New Battleground: Central Asia and the Caucasus,” p. 4-5.

⁵⁵ Azizian, “Central Asia and the United States 2004-2005: Moving Beyond Counter-Terrorism?”, p. 1.

and go home”.⁵⁶ Others have argued that, even after the conflict in Afghanistan is over, there will be the need for the U.S. to maintain a strategic presence there.⁵⁷ It has been envisioned by some that, as the United States realigns its forces to meet the post Cold War realities, it will try to maintain smaller bases or “lily pads” throughout the arc of instability.⁵⁸ Others see this as a pretext for the U.S. to keep forces stationed in the area, and just like any imperialist power, once they are in a region it will be difficult to get them to leave. The key questions then become, how long will the United States maintain its presence, and what form will that presence take?

The answer, succinctly stated, is “it depends”. The latest U.S. National Security Strategy states that Central Asia is an “enduring priority”.⁵⁹ Others have characterized the region as a unique combination of “weak states, proven energy resources, radical Islamist movements and important geopolitical location...”⁶⁰ The United States originally went into the region in the 1990s with the idea of helping the countries develop, and though the events of 9/11 have caused a temporary shift in the nature of the involvement, this should not be viewed in any way as permanent. The U.S. is in the region to establish stability and security; once established, there is no need to maintain an active force presence.⁶¹ Just as the nomads of previous times, the U.S. may leave their mark, in terms of encouraging development and open access to the region for all, but that does not mean that that it has to “settle” in order to do this.

This does not mean, however, that the United States will no longer have reasons to remain engaged with the region, or maintain a presence that is not tied to force structure. Central Asia is on path that will hopefully lead to peace, prosperity, and active participation as a member of the world community. It could also, however, be diverted from this path to one that could lead it to becoming a center for crime, terrorism, and instability. In his “Farewell to Flashman” speech made in 1997, Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbot emphasized that the United States must take a long-term approach to the region, unlike the adventurers of the 19th century, personified by the character made famous by George McDonald Frasier.⁶² In line with its policies in other parts of

⁵⁶ In a private discussion with a Russian in Central Asia, this sentiment was expressed to the author. “The US will become tired, pack up, and go home, and leave Central Asia to us and the Chinese.”

⁵⁷ Cornell, “The United States and Central Asia: In the Steppes to Stay?”, p. 240.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 242.

⁵⁹ *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (March 2006), p. 40.

⁶⁰ Cornell, “The United States and Central Asia: In the Steppes to Stay?”, p. 243.

⁶¹ Giragosian, “The US Military Engagement in Central Asia and the South Caucasus,” p. 56.

⁶² Talbot, “A Farewell to Flashman: American Policy in the Caucasus and Central Asia.” Flashman is humorously portrayed by Frasier as a bit of a buffoon, who stumbles his way

the world, the United States is committed to working with all of the countries in the region, to ensure the path they take is the former, and not the latter.

This means that it also must be realized by the other countries engaged in Central Asia, specifically Russia and China, that the United States does not have long term ambitions in the region, other than peaceful development that will benefit all. Too many times the situation in Central Asia is cast as a Cold War “zero sum game”, and that the region is something to be won or lost. Instead, an effort must be made to get all the participants to understand that there is far more to be gained through cooperation than through confrontation. There are already some signs of this cooperation in place. Russia and China have worked together on issues relating to the region through the auspices of the SCO, which has proved to be the most successful of a number of regional security organizations in the region. The U.S. and Russian bases in Kyrgyzstan peacefully coexist, separated by only a few kilometers.⁶³ The United States needs to ensure that both Russia and China clearly understand U.S. intentions, so they are not misunderstood and/or used to bolster domestic opposition to U.S. efforts in the region. In the words of one analyst, “Washington should make the U.S. presence [in Central Asia] more transparent, as well as look for ways to work with the Russian and Chinese militaries to address some of the local security threats.”⁶⁴ Multilateral initiatives, as well as bipolar agreements, would go a long way to eliminating suspicions and building trust.

Finally, all of the outside actors need to recognize the sovereignty of the Central Asian states, and that the actions and fates of these states are ultimately in their own hands, and not the hands of others. “Although Russia, China and the United States substantially affect regional security issues, they cannot dictate outcomes the way imperial governments did year[s] ago.”⁶⁵ For the United States, “U.S. involvement in the region depends on the willingness of the host states to participate”⁶⁶, and should be tailored to the individual needs and desires of each state. Thus, U.S. military involvement in the region is, and will continue to be, a symbiotic relationship designed to benefit all. The process of change in Central Asia will be long, and patience must be had by all of the parties,

through most of the major historical events in the British Empire throughout the 19th century.

⁶³ Weitz, “Averting a New Great Game in Central Asia,” 162. Quoted in the same source, Russian Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov was reported by Interfax to have commented, “Russian and US Military Bases in Kyrgyzstan are not bothering each other.”

⁶⁴ Maynes, “America Discovers Central Asia,” p. 5.

⁶⁵ Weitz, “Averting a New Great Game in Central Asia,” p. 155-156.

⁶⁶ Giragosian, “The US Military Engagement in Central Asia and the South Caucasus,” p. 75.

but the potential for positive results from this process should more than justify the time and efforts needed to achieve them.