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## Looking for Trouble: Sources of Violent Conflict in Central Asia

By Gavin Helf



Police wearing face masks to protect against coronavirus detain a protester during an unsanctioned protest in Almaty, Kazakhstan, on June 6, 2020. (Photo by Vladimir Tretyakov/AP)

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## Summary

- Central Asian states are multi-ethnic in their constitutions, yet a resurgence of nativism and nationalism are the most common drivers of large-scale violent conflict in the region.
- Similarly, although all Central Asian states are avowedly secular, the region is experiencing an Islamic religious revival, pitting local Islamic tradition against versions of Islam from other parts of the world.
- Resource scarcity and climate change are constant sources of regional conflict and promise to become more problematic as water and other resources become even more scarce.
- Labor migration, mostly to Russia, creates not only great economic opportunity but a new set of social problems. Central Asia could learn from other Asian countries that have decades of experience in protecting their migrant workers.
- The hand of criminal organizations is often visible in mobilization to violence. Organized crime and corruption in the region exploit all of these other cleavages and undermine good governance.
- Russia and China see Central Asia as a strategic region. Whether they, along with the United States, share a vision of stability and peace in the region and can find ways to collaborate will be important in the coming decades.



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## ABOUT THE REPORT

This report examines likely sources of violent conflict in contemporary Central Asia and how they interconnect. Its goal is to better understand how they might be exploited by disruptive forces inside and outside of the region in the coming years. It suggests that the policy goals of the United States, Russia, and China in the region may be more compatible than is often assumed.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gavin Helf is a senior expert on Central Asia for the United States Institute of Peace. Previously, he worked in the Asia and Middle East bureaus of the US Agency for International Development on democracy promotion and countering violent extremism. From 1984 through 2007, he studied, lived, and worked in the Soviet Union and its successor states, mostly in Central Asia and the Caucasus.

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### United States Institute of Peace

2301 Constitution Avenue, NW  
Washington, DC 20037

Phone: 202.457.1700

Fax: 202.429.6063

E-mail: [usip\\_requests@usip.org](mailto:usip_requests@usip.org)

Web: [www.usip.org](http://www.usip.org)

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Workers pick cotton in a field in the Tashkent region of Uzbekistan on October 18, 2018. Uzbekistan depends on upstream nations Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan for water during the summer for agriculture. (Photo by Timur Karpov/AP)

## Central Asia Today

Historically a crossroads between Asia and Europe, later part of the Russian Empire, and for seventy years a constituent part of the Soviet Union, the Central Asian region is bordered on the west by the Caspian Sea, on the north by Russia, on the east by China, and on the south by Iran and Afghanistan. Its five states—Kazakhstan (the largest land area by far), Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan—are home to a total population of some seventy-four million and encompass some four million square kilometers (approximately 1.5 million square miles).

Today's Central Asia is quite different from the orphaned administrative units that emerged as new states after the Soviet Union collapsed at the end of 1991. In fiction and comedy in the West, Central Asia is often used as a generic post-Soviet backdrop.<sup>1</sup> But the real Central Asia has evolved away from its former sister Soviet republics in many ways that make it look more like the rest of Asia—highly dependent on foreign labor remittances, struggling with integrating a global Islamic revival into modern secular political systems, struggling with nativist and nationalist politics, and increasingly focused on China and its role in the region. The opportunities and the threats Central Asia now faces are dramatically different from what they were upon gaining independence thirty years ago. Given new grievances, new regional relationships, and changes in long-standing drivers of conflict, it is imperative to examine what the likely sources of conflict in Central Asia are today.

During the Soviet era, Central Asia was an exotic part of “Russia”—what the *New York Times* in 1959 described as the Soviet Union’s “soft underbelly.”<sup>2</sup> It was the launchpad for the Soviet



Following the attacks on New York and Washington by al-Qaeda on September 11, 2001, analyses of Central Asia and its place in the world have been dominated by the region's proximity and access to the conflicts in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

invasion of Afghanistan and today still shares a 2,400-kilometer border with that country. In the decade after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Central Asia evolved as a prize rich in oil and gas and the object of a New Great Game involving Russia, the West, and China.<sup>3</sup> Following the attacks on New York and Washington, DC, by al-Qaeda on September 11, 2001, analyses of Central Asia and its place in the world have been dominated by the

region's proximity and access to the conflicts in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

After the September 11 attacks, the New Great Game was put on hold as the United States and NATO sought a secondary route for supply in the military intervention in Afghanistan through the so-called Northern Distribution Network. The countries of Central Asia became important partners in this effort. Questions about the political order in each of these countries, their use of counterextremism as a cover for cracking down on domestic opposition, and even their relationship to great power rivalry became secondary to the overriding operational needs of the conflict in Afghanistan.<sup>4</sup> The large number of Central Asians who joined extremist groups in the Middle East, particularly the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), only added to this tendency to see Central Asia through the lens of its role in the larger conflict between the West and "terrorism."<sup>5</sup> The region also became a major transit route for the movement of heroin from Afghanistan to Russia and Europe. More recently, it has become a focus of China's ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (echoing its historic locus along the Silk Road trade routes). Central Asia seems geographically predetermined to be an important arena for great power competition, Russia's postcolonial security interests overlapping China's expanding economic and resource interests. As a result, many outside the region tend to focus on how Central Asia fits into the larger regional and global picture.

Although currently largely stable and mostly peaceful, Central Asia has seen a surprisingly broad spectrum of violence since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Immediate and dangerous sources of violence from within, though, threaten stability more than Islamic extremism does from the outside. Tajikistan endured a sustained civil war from 1992 to 1997. All five states have experienced significant use of security forces by their governments against the civilian population or nonstate armed groups.<sup>6</sup> Several bloody clashes—Uzbekistan in 1999, Turkmenistan in 2002, and Tajikistan in 2015—have since been characterized as attempted coups d'état, if under often-murky circumstances. Three political revolutions involved significant violence and loss of life in Kyrgyzstan. Localized violent clashes between civilians, often backed by border troops drawn in from either or both sides, have repeatedly taken place in the patchwork of exclaves and enclaves in the Ferghana Valley, which encompasses parts of Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan.<sup>7</sup>

The region has also seen outbreaks of large-scale targeted ethnic violence against minorities with loss of life and property and outflows of refugees, most recently in Kazakhstan in February 2020.<sup>8</sup> In March 2020 in Kyrgyzstan, masked men wearing traditional Kyrgyz headwear violently attacked an International Women's Day demonstration protesting domestic violence.<sup>9</sup> Sporadic violence has also been targeted at Chinese and other foreign economic interests in the region.

This report offers a road map for understanding the most likely sources of violent conflict in the new, real Central Asia—ethno-nationalism and nativism, Islam and secularism, water

resources and climate change, and labor migration and economic conflict. The analysis draws from emerging trends in the region and the ways in which Central Asia's geography and cultural place in the world interact with those internal trends. The fault lines and triggers that could lead to violent conflict in the coming decades can be addressed now, working with governmental, academic, and civil society actors in Central Asia itself. Understanding and dealing with these drivers and triggers in individual states and the region well before actual outbreaks of conflict could make these societies more resilient. Such resilience is particularly relevant as the countries of the region become more open to working together to address regional security issues.

## Ethno-Nationalism and Nativism

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, a slow but distinct evolution has been evident—from initial nostalgia for the lost superpower to awkward attempts to create new secular civic identities to the current phase, which is marked by the development of national identities that are organic and more inclusive of pre-Russian, pre-Soviet identities, such as Islam. The first and most obvious reason for this phenomenon is suggested in UN population estimates. As of 2019, only 18 percent of the population in Central Asia was older than twenty when the Soviet Union collapsed. In 2020, of the region's 74.3 million people, only 46 percent were born in what was then the Soviet Union. The vast majority have no living memory of it. Further, with the 2019 retirement of Nursultan Nazarbayev in Kazakhstan, the Soviet Politburo generation of political leadership in Central Asia has entirely left the stage. The population has also become much less Russian. Since independence, the number of ethnic Russians living in Kazakhstan has dropped dramatically, from roughly 40 percent to 25 percent. The other states now have only very small local Russian populations.<sup>10</sup>

This demographic trend challenges the multiethnic definition that these states adopted on independence from Soviet ideology and fixed in their constitutions. The Central Asian generation that has grown up after the fall of the Soviet Union speaks Russian only as a second or even third language.<sup>11</sup> What may have been artificial national identities in the mid-1990s are now much more organic among the younger generation, who are less likely to be influenced by Russian propaganda and are more critical of the Russian narrative about the Soviet past.<sup>12</sup> They are more confident and have opened new opportunities for cooperation and discovery of commonalities between the countries that go beyond a common Soviet past. Officials, scholars, and religious leaders from across Central Asia can gather to celebrate a shared regional religious legacy that does not build up one group identity at the expense of others, but instead builds on their common pre-Russian past.

On the other hand, new national identities have been known to slip into violent nativism, sometimes on a large scale. Democratic politics in Kyrgyzstan have often given rise to narratives that appeal to and elevate the majority ethnic Kyrgyz population at the expense of minorities, particularly Uzbeks. In 2010, a messy democratic political transition broke out into large-scale violence targeting the Uzbek population in Osh.<sup>13</sup> Most recently, in February 2020, targeted attacks on Dungans (ethnically Chinese Muslims) in southern Kazakhstan led to ten deaths, 170 injuries, the flight of several thousand people across the border to Kyrgyzstan, and selective destruction of Dungan property.<sup>14</sup> Kazakhstan's tightly controlled politics have increasingly

## Box 1.

# Islam and National Tradition

Emerging religious and ethnic identities can play off each other in various ways. In some cases, emergent national identities and traditional identities might overlap and reinforce each other as they do in Catholic Poland, Buddhist Sri Lanka, or Muslim Indonesia. How do the simultaneous revival of Islamic identity and

the creation of ethno-national identities interact in Central Asia? In Kyrgyzstan, for example, a new progressive Islamic women's organization, Mutakalim, was at the forefront of pushing against the reemergence of traditional bride kidnapping and underage marriage while pressing the government to allow

hijabs in passport photos and then schools, challenging both traditional local custom and the secular state. Sometimes Islam and tradition agree in contesting the rise of a secular liberal capitalist system. Both seem to have significant potential for mobilization alongside more Western-oriented civil society.

asserted the primacy of the Kazakh language and ethnic Kazakhs, most often at the expense of the non-Kazakh population.<sup>15</sup> Another concern is the revival of a few “traditional” practices, such as bride kidnapping and underage marriage, thought to have been mostly eliminated or at least well controlled in the Soviet era (see box 1).<sup>16</sup> Finally, nativist and xenophobic unrest—sometimes violent, often anti-Chinese—has combined with economic grievances in ways that test government capacity and break the surface calm in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan.<sup>17</sup>

A regional policy dialogue could address this sensitive topic to better understand both the extent to which this nativism was organized and by whom, and how communities can counter incipient nativism and xenophobia before they lead to violence.

## Islam and Secularism

All five Central Asian countries, although historically Muslim, established secular political systems in their constitutions in the wake of the Soviet Union's collapse. This generally fit with the international norms on religious tolerance and freedom that the West was recommending to them. It also seemed like a great improvement over the intolerant Soviet legacy of “scientific atheism,” which viewed religion in all forms as a historical anachronism that would fade away over time.

Yet the revival of Islamic religiosity and culture is one of the most noticeable trends in Central Asia over the last three decades.<sup>18</sup> A vast increase in both religious practice and personal cultural identification with Islam is evident in homes as well as in shops, restaurants, and other public spaces all over Central Asia. This reflects not just a revival of local Islamic practice from before the Soviet era, but also the exposure of Central Asia to other, non-native forms of Islamic practice.<sup>19</sup> Civil society and community organizations formed around Islamic principles and identity have appeared and address social problems such as labor migration and women's rights from a self-consciously Islamic perspective. The governments of the region have had an uneven and ambiguous history with this phenomenon. They have at times reflexively cracked down on outward expressions of Islamic identity,

including banning hijabs in school or in passport photos, shaving the beards off men on the street, and preventing celebrations of Islamic holidays. On the other hand, all of these governments and their presidents have slowly become patrons of Islam. They have supported the construction of prestige mosques, paraded their personal devotion to Islam, and subsidized the creation of institutions that celebrate and perpetuate what they see as more indigenous and tolerant forms of Islam.

Some of this ambiguity comes as a reaction to a surprisingly high mobilization of foreign fighters from the region over the last decade. Broadly, the revival of Islam on a large scale in Central Asia has been largely about finding personal meaning and communal solutions to persistent social problems. For small groups of the disenfranchised or alienated, however, who might already have been seeking pathways to violent empowerment, the pull of Islamic extremism—ISIS in particular—provided an opportunity to act. Noah Tucker of George Washington University calls this phenomenon the “Islamification of radicalism.”<sup>20</sup>

In response, governments in the region simultaneously cracked down on extremism and encouraged safe forms of religious expression. However, upon the collapse of ISIS in Syria, Central Asian governments unexpectedly adopted policies based on repatriation of citizens caught up in the Middle East conflicts and a corresponding relaxation of the securitized response inside their countries. As a regional official remarked at a recent conference in Uzbekistan, “We realized that we cannot arrest our way out of this problem.” In Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, thousands of prisoners convicted on extremism charges were released from detention on amnesty. Tajikistan adopted a policy of allowing returning foreign fighters who admitted their mistake and repented to be pardoned. Most surprisingly, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan took the lead in identifying their citizens in refugee and detention camps in Iraq and Syria and, in 2019, began bringing them home on dedicated flights.<sup>21</sup> Central Asia turned out to be well ahead of the rest of the world, including Europe and the United States, in taking on this problem.

A regional policy dialogue between civil society and governments on religious tolerance in the context of preventing violent extremist radicalization launched in May 2018.<sup>22</sup> It is part of a now-urgent conversation on how the nominally secular character of these states is evolving to embrace what is becoming a more religious and specifically Muslim population.

## Water Resources and Climate Change

Long-term trends affect Central Asia in ways that could exacerbate or provoke violent conflict in the decades ahead, including competition for scarce resources. The region has water problems. The one that has played out since independence is that the mountainous upstream states, which have water but do not have hydrocarbon sources of energy (Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan), prefer to use water to generate electricity in the winter. The downstream states, which are rich in hydrocarbons (Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan), prefer to use the water during the summer for agriculture. Amid fits and starts and occasional misunderstandings, the downstream states agree to sell the upstream states natural gas in the winter for heating in exchange for releasing most water during the summer for irrigation. The Soviet practice of balancing water and electricity needs was complicated on independence by the privatization of electricity and

disagreements about the relative value of natural resource commodities. Water has been at the heart of many diplomatic disputes in the region. Agricultural overuse of water has stressed the region's supply and led to the precipitous shrinkage of the Aral Sea over the last few decades. Kazakhstan's decision to put state resources into saving the small North Aral Sea led to damming that body of water and accelerating the decline of the larger South Aral Sea.

Climate change further compounds the water resource challenge. The glaciers in Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan that supply Central Asia with water are now melting rapidly.<sup>23</sup> Water disputes are therefore taking place in an era with higher than average river flow. Although predictions about timing may differ, the likely scenario is that in the short term, glacial melt will increase available water for the next decade or two—until it is gone. The urban, agricultural, and energy infrastructure of the region is being built around an existing supply of water that will not be available in a generation. This situation is very likely to become a source of interstate and communal conflict.

Preventing conflict around resource issues, which often flare up in the context of the enclaves and exclaves that dot the region (see box 2), is a natural fit for a regional policy dialogue.

## Labor Migration and Economic Conflict

Central Asia also has a population problem. Unlike many of the European parts of the former Soviet Union, Central Asia has seen a population boom over the last three decades.<sup>24</sup>

The safety valve on this population expansion has been labor migration from Central Asia to Russia and, to a much lesser extent, Turkey. Upward of ten million labor migrants from Central Asia work abroad and send billions of dollars home, amounting to up to one-third of the gross domestic product of both Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, which are among the most remittance-dependent countries in the world.<sup>25</sup> On the plus side, this has allowed Central Asia to participate in the larger regional economy, which has in turn certainly contributed to economic stability and provided employment to growing Central Asian populations. On the negative side, some isolated and mistreated labor migrants have proven susceptible to extremist narratives, which fed the flow of foreign fighters from Central Asia to ISIS.<sup>26</sup> Perhaps even more consequential in the long term is the creation of millions of “social orphans” whose parents have moved to Russia and left them in the care of extended family in their home countries. Another manifestation of labor migration is the feminization of the countryside in areas where men are the primary migrants and women are left behind to raise the crops as well as rear the children. This creates opportunity for malign socialization, including into criminal and extremist communities, and generally lowers the resilience of communities. The grievances that led thousands of Central Asian labor migrants to radicalize remain.

Although the International Organization for Migration has done outstanding research on labor migration from the region, a great deal remains to be learned about how it affects families and communities positively and negatively, and how it varies by country and community.<sup>27</sup> Because labor migration is now a fact of life in Central Asia, a policy dialogue across the region on making it safer seems in order. One goal should be to learn from Asian countries that have decades of experience in protecting their workers abroad. Other important elements to include are the impact of labor migration on education and child welfare and promoting economic growth through focused investment of remittances.



## Box 2.

# The Odd Case of Enclaves and Exclaves

Resource conflict, state sovereignty, and ethnic identity clash in violent flare-ups in Central Asia around the eight Ferghana Valley enclaves and exclaves that are vestiges of the administrative breakup of the Soviet Union. Small pockets of one country completely surrounded by a neighboring

country are sprinkled throughout the Ferghana Valley. Local squabbles over access, land use, and resources have erupted into intercommunal violence and often then drawn in border guards from one or both sides and escalated to armed clashes that have to be controlled by intervention of the

central authorities from each side. Although the uncertain nature of the borders between the Central Asian countries lead to occasionally violent clashes, they have been particularly prevalent around the enclaves and exclaves.

### Note

For a good history of conflict around these areas, see T. Jack Rowe, "Problematic Puzzle Pieces: Enclaves and Conflict in the Ferghana Valley" in *Central Asia in the Era of Sovereignty: The Return of Tamerlane*, ed. Daniel L. Burghart and Theresa Sabonis-Helf (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2018), 341–65.



## CENTRAL ASIA AND ITS ENCLAVES AND EXCLAVES

**Source:** ArcGIS by the author (inset adapted from artwork by Rainer Lesniewski/Shutterstock).

Other kinds of economic conflict also intersect with the issues discussed. Economic conflict in Central Asia is typically driven by economic disparity, which appears both in the most economically vibrant and the most poverty-stricken areas. Income inequality between the regions and the capitals and between rich and poor have led to large-scale and sometimes violent strikes in Kazakhstan, primarily in the extractive industries. Labor unrest in the western Kazakh city of Zhanaozen erupted into violence between oil workers and state security forces in December 2011. More recently, forced expropriation of homes to accommodate economic development or road construction has led to protests in Uzbekistan.<sup>28</sup> Disgruntled pensioners, teachers, and other “have-nots” frequently voice their dissatisfaction in relatively open Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, but even in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan protests over a lack of government responsiveness to natural disaster or care for pensioners can flare up against a backdrop of a general decline in living standards.<sup>29</sup> These events are exploitable by nationalists, criminal actors, or others. Watching for popular unrest across the region is important in the wake of the economic impact of COVID-19. The potential decrease in labor migration to Russia that comes with the virus makes this an important and rising source of potential conflict.

## Triggers: Failed Transitions, Crime, and Revolution

If nationalism, Islamic revival, resource scarcity, population pressure, and economic inequity are each fault lines in Central Asian society that could be sources of violence, problems in governance and political transition have been and will continue to be triggers or accelerants for such violence.

Leadership transition across Central Asia has proven difficult because no rules for it are in place in any of the countries. Presidents contemplating retirement or an end of term face the dilemma of securing physical and material security for themselves and their families while also attempting to secure the longevity of their political arrangements and policies. This is no small problem; the political legacies of former presidents, whether autocratic or democratically elected, did not endure for long. Presidents Saparmurat Niyazov of Turkmenistan, Islam Karimov of Uzbekistan, and Askar Akayev, Kurmanbek Bakiyev, and Almazbek Atambayev of Kyrgyzstan all fell into disfavor after they left office; one remains in jail and two others live in exile. Their families and close associates have also fared poorly, either living in exile or under arrest.

Leaders’ attempts to handpick successors or orchestrate comfortable arrangements for their families have also failed.<sup>30</sup> Nursultan Nazarbayev’s recent retirement in Kazakhstan, handing power to a chosen successor but retaining certain institutional safety powers for himself, is showing signs of strain.<sup>31</sup> Atambayev in Kyrgyzstan, insisting on his constitutional immunity for life, was arrested after a pitched battle with security forces in which he is alleged to have been a sniper and killed a security officer. Also in Kyrgyzstan, Akayev in 2005, Bakiyev in 2010, and most recently Sooronbai Jeenbekov, in October 2020, were overthrown in popular revolts, which in one case spun off into ethnic violence that involved organized crime. (For a discussion of the crime-violence nexus, see box 3.)

Although most of the violence associated with leadership transitions has been in relatively democratic Kyrgyzstan, leadership purges (described as failed coups d’état) in Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan were violent and bloody. The uncertainty about succession creates

### Box 3.

## The Crime-Violence Nexus

Organized crime, largely fueled by the movement of heroin and poppy from Afghanistan to Russia and Europe through Central Asia, has played a supporting role in much of the violence (and political corruption) in Central Asia. The echo of organized criminal groups resolving turf battles can be seen in what have been labeled failed coups d'état, in

provoking the ethnic violence in southern Kyrgyzstan, and in clashes with Islamist insurgents in Tajikistan. Criminal actors take advantage of (and corrupt) democratic politics in Kyrgyzstan as well as the more authoritarian systems in the other Central Asian countries. The ethnic clashes in southern Kyrgyzstan in 2010 were simultaneously a

clash between political agendas (democrats versus authoritarians), between ethnic groups (Kyrgyz versus Uzbeks), and between criminal groups for control over territory and economic activity. Criminal influence in Central Asia is usually slow and corrosive but has proven ready to exploit opportunities to use violence on any scale to its own ends.

opportunities for intrigue and violence and provides motivation for malign actors. It also creates uncertainty for groups with informal power, such as organized crime.

The first step for governments, civil society, and researchers in the region is to better understand criminal actors. Such insight would help efforts to prevent these actors both from taking advantage of groups such as returnees and ethnic minorities and from corroding or coopting governance in the region. Although the region is home to varying political arrangements, from authoritarian and closed to relatively democratic and open, corruption and criminal influence are universal.

## Local Pushback Against Great Power

Central Asia's problems do not exist in a vacuum. The influence of both Russia and China (as well as the United States) in the region is evolving, as are the responses of Central Asian governments and people. The emergence of stronger national identities and Islamic identities play into these responses, as do concerns over control of natural resources. Although in general great power competition does not pose a threat of interstate, intrastate, or local violence, Russian and Chinese actions can trigger or stress existing fault lines in the region.

### RUSSIA

Russia, which once could rely on its status as the former colonial power and on the dominance of the Russian language in the region, now has to try. It actively supports a range of soft power instruments, including assistance to Russian ethnic and cultural groups, that help promote its interests and its version of the history of the twentieth century against local nationalist narratives that portray the Soviet Union very differently. As noted, Central Asians, especially younger ones, are less likely to speak Russian even as a second language and less likely than their parents or grandparents to accept the Russian version of reality presented in media. The governments of the region have

#### Box 4.

### Whose Past Is It Anyway?

The iconography of World War II in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan was unsettled by the reassessment of the role of Major General Ivan Panfilov and his Central Asian troops on the eve of the Soviet counteroffensive outside Moscow in 1941. The underequipped Central Asian troops were thrown into the teeth of the German Wehrmacht advance to buy time for the Soviet counterattack to assemble. They famously held off the tank assaults but all perished in the struggle, becoming major heroes in the iconography of Soviet Central Asia.

Even as Russia issued a big-budget feature film in 2016, *Panfilov's 28*, celebrating the achievements and sacrifice of Panfilov's troops, Central Asians began to tell a different story, not so much questioning the memory of their contribution in World War II as claiming an equal share in the victory, especially when Russia began expropriating Soviet World War II symbols during the annexation of the Crimea. The controversy over the St. George's ribbons is a good example. The black-and-orange-striped ribbon has a long pre-Soviet history but

served most prominently as the campaign ribbon for most Soviet veterans of the Eastern Front in World War II. It was ubiquitous at commemorations of that war throughout the former Soviet Union until adopted as a symbol of support for Putin and of Russian irredentism more broadly in the 2010s. Central Asian countries modified the ribbon by replacing one or both colors with colors from their respective national flags, asserting their equal ownership of victory in World War II, but without the contemporary chauvinistic pro-Russian implications.

been inconsistent in their attitudes about the Soviet past, often in ways that reflect their relationship with Russia today. In some cases, the past is portrayed as Russian colonialism (see box 4). In this narrative, the occupation of Central Asia under the tsars; the consolidation of Soviet Russian control after the Bolshevik Revolution; the subsequent eras of famine, purges, gulags, and misuse of Central Asian troops during World War II; and even the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan are portrayed as severe injuries to the culture and peoples of the region.

Other elements of the Soviet legacy in Central Asia also have been criticized or reassessed. The space program (still run out of the Baikonur Cosmodrome in Kazakhstan) has seen protests against Russia's continuing "extraterritorial" use of the facility and a history of rocket debris and failed launch damage. The tragic legacy of atmospheric nuclear testing and the use of soldiers and Kazakh villagers as guinea pigs in the 1950s at the Semipalatinsk nuclear testing site in Kazakhstan continues to be a source of tension and grievance. Brezhnev-era Soviet leaders in Uzbekistan (Sharof Rashidov) and Kazakhstan (Dinmukhamed Kunayev) have been memorialized in the modern states as defenders of their peoples against Russia and the worst offenses of the Soviet Union. The ugly manner in which perestroika came to Central Asia—arrests and executions in Uzbekistan and riots and suppression in Kazakhstan—is clearly memorialized in the naming of streets and squares for protestors who died. All of this points to a growing backlash against Russia as a friendly big brother.

But perhaps Russia's largest impact on the region today is that it allows millions of Central Asians to work in Russia, addressing its own population shortfall and labor shortage. This has

added an impressive 30 percent to the gross domestic products of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan through money transfers from migrant laborers in Russia, greatly easing the nations' economic distress. At the same time, it has also exposed millions of Central Asians, as foreign workers in Russia, to the abusive conditions and racism prevalent there.

## CHINA

China is increasingly an important economic and political player in Central Asia. Its Belt and Road Initiative runs through the Xinjian Uighur Autonomous Region, Central Asia, and on to Europe. As part of the initiative, Beijing has robustly invested in the region's transportation and energy infrastructure, both to capture energy resources close to home and to cut a trade path to Europe. China has even surpassed Russia as the region's largest trading partner.<sup>32</sup> Yet partly because of historic ethnic animosity and its increasingly brutal behavior toward the Uighur Muslim minority in China, familiarity has mostly bred Central Asian contempt. That COVID-19 originated in China and that China has made meaningful efforts to assist Central Asian countries in fighting the pandemic will affect this dynamic, but how it will is uncertain.

Chinese investment over the last decade or so has followed a pattern known from other parts of the world.<sup>33</sup> The appearance of large numbers of Chinese workers, largely keeping to themselves rather than interacting with the locals, has both led to suspicion and fueled resentment and fear across the region. These feelings have led to protests in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan against economic concessions and Chinese purchases of land and resources. One famously corrupt and poorly implemented project, the main power station for Kyrgyzstan's capital city Bishkek, led to the collapse of a government and the arrest of a prime minister (Sapar Isakov) and, indirectly, a former president (Atambayev). China's investment in Turkmenistan's natural gas sector has been a catastrophe for the country, turning the golden goose of hydrocarbon wealth into more or less a sharecropper obligation to feed natural gas to China.<sup>34</sup> This is a cautionary tale for the rest of the region on accepting Chinese investment without thinking through its long-term impact. Turkmenistan, which relies on the sale of natural gas for some 70 percent of its state revenue, now largely has replaced exports to Russia with exports to China. A large portion of those revenues now services the debt owed to China for building the pipeline that connects the two countries.

Within the Central Asian economic and power elites who benefit from Chinese investment and the sale of exports to China, oligarchical groups appear to have formed into something of a China lobby, which is reflected in the China-friendly positions of the governments of the region.<sup>35</sup> But Sinophobia is growing in the region, which has led to attacks on Chinese economic interests in the region and protests against Chinese influence.<sup>36</sup> Major protests across Kazakhstan erupted in March 2016 when a draft land reform law was erroneously interpreted as allowing Chinese to purchase and own land, leading then President Nazarbayev to announce a moratorium on land reform in order to calm the population.<sup>37</sup> Most recently, street protests in the East Kazakhstan Region forced authorities to relocate a COVID-19 quarantine facility for Chinese crossing the border after demonstrators rushed the local hospital and removed all the beds.<sup>38</sup> In recent years, China has stepped up its soft power game in the region to compensate, opening Confucius Institutes (education partnerships between institutions in China and those in other countries), sponsoring cultural events, and starting large-scale educational scholarship programs for study in China.<sup>39</sup>



The United States should facilitate a dialogue on the impact Chinese investment is having on governance (for good or ill) in the region at the national and local levels.

One other growing tension sets governments interested in Chinese investment against public sentiment. China's policies in the Uighur Autonomous Region have started to bleed into Central Asian politics as co-ethnics and even Kazakh and Kyrgyz citizens are caught up in the related creeping ethnic cleansing. Popular opinion in Central Asia

is slowly growing against China's treatment of the Uighurs. Governments in the region have made some concessions to this opinion but are reluctant to antagonize China. These sentiments are clearly exploitable both by nationalist-ethnic and Islamic political actors across the spectrum.

## UNITED STATES

The United States recently adopted a new strategy for Central Asia that makes “support[ing] and strengthen[ing] the sovereignty and independence of the Central Asian States, individually and as a group” the top US policy priority. This strategy reflects the Trump administration's policy of pushing back against Russia and China and positions the United States as a powerful if distant friend. The region welcomes the continued engagement of the United States through the C5+1 (the five nations of Central Asia plus the United States), a process begun under the Obama administration and still a centerpiece of the new strategy.<sup>40</sup> This is reinforced by the gradual disengagement of the United States from Afghanistan and the resulting reduced need to subordinate the relationship with Central Asia to the centrality of the Afghanistan conflict.

The current goals of the US strategy in Central Asia are consistent with those dating to the collapse of the Soviet Union: support and strengthen the sovereignty and independence of the Central Asian states individually and as a group, reduce terrorist threats in Central Asia, expand and maintain support for stability in Afghanistan, encourage connectivity between Central Asia and Afghanistan, promote rule-of-law reform and respect for human rights, and promote US investment in and development of Central Asia.

These goals are framed within the context of great power competition with Russia and China, but are not inherently different from those of Russia and China for the region. Pursuing them need not be a unilateral effort, creating an opportunity for policy engagement that would help define how to manage the collaborative and competitive trends in the region's relationship with its powerful neighbors while asking how to mitigate the potential for violent confrontation and exploitation of the relationships. One strategic approach would be to look at how Russia and China are perceived in different areas, across ethnic groups, and especially across generations and how those perceptions could be misused. It also will be important to watch how attitudes toward labor migration and the plight of the Uighurs in the Uighur Autonomous Region develop. Most important, the United States should facilitate a dialogue on the impact Chinese investment is having on governance (for good or ill) in the region at the national and local levels. China's model of technological control has begun to make inroads, and how it affects Central Asian governance is critical to maintaining the region's sovereignty and independence.<sup>41</sup> In the more multipolar world likely to arise from the COVID-19 crisis, the United States should engage not only the Central Asians on these issues but also the Russians and the Chinese to determine how to work together to achieve them (see box 5). Although having

the same approach is not always likely, certainly parts of this agenda can benefit from putting the C5+3 in the same room.

## A Comprehensive Approach

Although many of the potential sources of trouble laid out in this report are sensitive topics, addressing them in regional forums such as the C5+1 could make room for progress. The experience of engagement under C5+1 on preventing violent extremism and reintegrating returnees from the Middle East has provided grounds for some optimism in this regard, for example. US policymakers and Western researchers can engage the countries of the region (along with, perhaps, Russia and China) in policy dialogues as well as help unwrap some of the issues raised here.

**Understand nativism and nationalism.** What does a multiethnic state look like when identity is increasingly based on nationality? What actors exploit these identities and how can communities contest these narratives? Do the region's pervasive criminal interests or political entrepreneurs try to mobilize antiminority or antiforeign sentiment to violence? To what extent are outbreaks of ethnic violence indeed just "mass hooliganism," as the Kazakh authorities claimed in the recent attacks on Dungans? How can the healthier manifestations of a positive national identity counteract the darker side? What is the role of a reformist Uzbekistan in engaging the substantial ethnic Uzbek minorities in the Ferghana Valley? How can the governments of the region balance economic growth with growing anti-Chinese activism in the region? Progressive, Islamic, nongovernmental organizations such as Mutakalim can help counter the more negative aspects of nativism and offer alternatives to it.

**Examine secularism and religious tolerance in the context of Islamic religious revival.** Although preventing violent extremism is integral, the larger conversation is about the role of the state. What is the role of the state in relation to religion? Should the state oversee the curriculum in nonstate religious schools? How do new community and civic groups with a more overtly Islamic orientation engage or avoid the state in trying to resolve problems on the local level? How does a more tolerant embrace of Islam by these states affect politics? How can the state, civic organizations, and communities use moderate religious activism to prevent a repeat of Islam being used to mobilize to violence? Efforts by organizations such as the Imam al-Bukhari Center in Samarkand, with help from international organizations from around the world, to recapture a pre-Soviet, pre-Russian tolerant vision of Islam in the region would help determine a viable mix.

**Seek to prevent conflict around resource scarcity and climate change.** A discussion of enclaves in the region could be the start of a dialogue on borders and access to scarce resources. How might climate change and especially the retreat of the glaciers affect Central Asia in the coming decades? How dependent are the five countries on the water resources from these glaciers? How dependent are economic growth and investment on them? A good place to start would be a combination of grassroots, cross-border programming efforts on the community level and renewed efforts to support cooperation on resources across the region. Helping the countries of the region more transparently negotiate with China on resource use would be an important step as well.

## Box 5.

# COVID-19 and Revolution: How It All Comes Together

Many of the drivers and accelerators outlined in this report reveal themselves in the recent popular revolt and overthrow of President Jeenbekov in Kyrgyzstan in October 2020. What began as an urban youth revolt against election fraud was quickly exploited by both organized crime and ethnic Kyrgyz

nationalists to grab power in yet another irregular political transition. Popular dissatisfaction was fueled by a poor government response to the COVID-19 pandemic, which left labor migrants stuck at home or stranded and unemployed in Russia unable to send remittances home to support their families.

Russian media blamed active American “democracy promotion” and American observers speculated that Russia intervened to cut off another “people power” revolution at a time when they were already juggling another one in Belarus, a proxy war in Ukraine, and a hot war in the South Caucasus.

### Note

For more information, see two articles by Gavin Helf on the United States Institute of Peace website: “Central Asia and Coronavirus: When Being Nomadic Isn’t Enough,” April 3, 2020; and “In Kyrgyzstan, It’s Easier to Start a Revolution than to Finish It.”

**Promote safe labor migration.** Some South Asian and East Asian countries have decades of experience in protecting their workers abroad from which the Central Asian countries could learn. Mitigating the negative impacts of labor migration on education and child welfare, and exploring ways to promote growth through focused investment of remittance resources are examples. The work of the International Organization for Migration on understanding migration patterns and building a consensus on what safe labor migration could look like has been an important contribution.

**Understand the role of organized crime and corruption in exploiting and provoking violence in the region.** Although political arrangements across the region vary from authoritarian and closed to relatively democratic and open, corruption and criminal influence are to a greater or lesser extent universal, and the hand of criminal organizations is visible in most mobilizations to violence. The role of organized crime in exploiting and triggering communal violence, though, needs to be better understood to be addressed effectively. Will more openly competitive democratic politics over time potentially give more opportunity to organized crime? How would competing authoritarian models from Russia and China potentially affect the problem?

**Manage the collaborative and competitive trends in the region’s relationship with Russia and China.** These relationships are an opportunity to engage the Central Asians, the Russians, and the Chinese to help define a future for Central Asia that is more peaceful and prosperous and does not leave Central Asia in the passive role of an object of great power competition or just a place “between” more important international issues. Where can Russia, China and the United States collaborate, or at least work in parallel, in promoting peace and prosperity in the region? How do visions of stability and success in the region agree, and how do they differ? Where visions do not agree, how can dialogue help mitigate the consequences to the region? On a range of issues—promoting safe labor migration, preventing violent extremism, avoiding being drawn into murky political transitions—discussion will help mitigate rather than exacerbate these problems.

# Notes

1. Examples include the very un–Central Asian “Kazakhstan” portrayed in Sacha Baron Cohen’s 2006 *Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan* (and the 2020 sequel), John Oliver’s mocking of Turkmenistan’s leader Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov on HBO’s *Last Week Tonight*, and the portrayal of the overthrow of a character based on Berdymukhamedov in the movie *6 Underground*.
2. C. L. Sulzberger, “Along the Soft Underbelly of the USSR,” *New York Times*, December 12, 1959.
3. The New Great Game expression is of course a 1990s play on the Great Game between the Russian Empire and Great Britain in the nineteenth century in Central Asia and Afghanistan.
4. The emphasis on Afghanistan shifted explicitly in a 2020 US government strategy document: “Central Asia is a geostrategic region important to United States national security interests, regardless of the level of United States involvement in Afghanistan” (Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs, “United States Strategy for Central Asia 2019–2025,” February 5, 2020, [www.state.gov/united-states-strategy-for-central-asia-2019-2025-advancing-sovereignty-and-economic-prosperity](http://www.state.gov/united-states-strategy-for-central-asia-2019-2025-advancing-sovereignty-and-economic-prosperity)).
5. For a comprehensive tally of foreign fighters, see Richard Barrett, “Beyond the Caliphate: Foreign Fighters and the Threat of Returnees,” Soufan Center, October 2017, [www.thesoufancenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Beyond-the-Caliphate-Foreign-Fighters-and-the-Threat-of-Returnees-TSC-Report-October-2017-v3.pdf](http://www.thesoufancenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Beyond-the-Caliphate-Foreign-Fighters-and-the-Threat-of-Returnees-TSC-Report-October-2017-v3.pdf). The report shows that the largest contingent of foreign fighters came not from the Middle East, but instead from the former Soviet Union (8,717), of which some 5,300 were from Central Asia.
6. Examples of the state using force against civilians include Kyrgyzstan in Aksy in 2002, Uzbekistan in Andijan in 2005, and Kazakhstan in Zhanaozen in 2011. Examples of clashes with armed groups are Turkmenistan in Ashgabat in 2008 and Tajikistan (most notably) in the Rasht Valley in 2010.
7. The latest outbreak in the Fergana Valley is in the exclave of Sokh, a part of Uzbekistan completely surrounded by Kyrgyzstan and populated by ethnic Tajiks. See Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), “Dozens Injured as Fresh Clashes Erupt Along Kyrgyz-Uzbek Border,” June 1, 2020, [www.rferl.org/a/dozens-injured-as-fresh-clashes-erupt-along-kyrgyz-uzbek-border/30646065.html](http://www.rferl.org/a/dozens-injured-as-fresh-clashes-erupt-along-kyrgyz-uzbek-border/30646065.html).
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10. According to the CIA’s World Factbook, the percentage of Russians are as follows: Kyrgyzstan 5.5 percent (2019 estimate), Turkmenistan 4 percent (2003), Uzbekistan 2.3 percent (2017 estimate), and Tajikistan less than 1 percent (2014 estimate).
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12. See Hannah S. Chapman and Theodore P. Gerber, “Russian Propaganda Isn’t As Effective As You May Think,” *Washington Post*, September 5, 2019, [www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2019/09/05/russian-propaganda-isnt-effective-you-may-think](http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2019/09/05/russian-propaganda-isnt-effective-you-may-think).
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