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**CAUCASUS AND CENTRAL ASIA: SOME  
IMPLICATIONS FOR TURKEY AND THE WEST**

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## **1. Central Asia as a factor of international security**

The huge expanse of land from the Caucasus to Central Asia (CCA)<sup>1</sup> which comprises the Muslim republics of the former USSR (approx. three times the size of Western Europe) is emerging as an area of instability and is likely to remain so for the medium-long term. Repercussions will be felt in the CIS to the north and the Gulf-Middle Eastern regions to the south. Among the countries bordering the CCA, those most likely to be affected by developments there are Iran, Turkey and Russia. Consequently, CCA area instability is bound to have a significant impact on international security well beyond its regional framework.

This paper focuses on the interaction between the CCA area and the CIS. It will consider the influence of the CCA on the development of the CIS and Russia as democratic states which are cooperative international actors, engaged in international cooperation.

## **2. Factors of instability in Central Asia**

The principle factors accounting for CCA area instability are: (a) the inter-ethnic mix across boundaries both inside the area and in bordering states; (b) the existence of fundamental ecological and economic imbalances within the area; (c) the difficulties of the political transition from the Soviet polity in an environment of growing and disparate expectations ranging from nationalism to Islamism.

*Ethnic factors* - The boundaries of CCA republics within the USSR were often arbitrarily drawn, particularly under Stalin's leadership, and cut across ethnic groups. Also, several boundaries with contiguous countries that were not part of the Soviet Union (e.g. Iran, Afghanistan, Turkey, etc.) divide ethnic groups. Finally, early Russian colonization, followed by more than seventy years of Soviet rule, dispersed Russian and other Slav peoples almost all over the territory of the USSR (approx. 12 million), particularly in Northern Kazakhstan (43% of the entire Kazakh population). Table 2 shows the distribution of the major ethnic groups in former Soviet republics and their neighbouring countries.

The CCA states' ethnic structure may give rise to inter-ethnic and inter-state conflicts both within the CIS and in adjoining states. The Russian presence in different republics and the Uzbek-Tajik inter-ethnic/inter-cultural mix across their borders is already emerging as an element of tension.

*Ecological and economic factors* - Broadly speaking, the CCA countries are poor and underdeveloped. Turkmenistan may be an exception because of its small population and huge gas reserves. As a result of its expectations about developing faster than other CCA countries, Turkmenistan is essentially staying out of the mainstream of current regional relations. Kazakhstan is rich in hydrocarbons, which it has already begun to exploit.

A recent article in *The Economist*<sup>2</sup> points out the fundamental ecological and economic imbalance that seems to affect Central Asia proper. Water, already insufficient,

cannot be easily increased and is drying up under the strain of a quickly rising population. Population is increasing at around 3.5% a year (and is very young: two-fifths is under 18).

This trend is symbolized by the Aral Sea disaster. The basin has already lost 60% of its waters because the two main rivers of the region (Amu Darya and Syr Darya) are intensively used for irrigation. Nonetheless, water being drawn off from rivers is generally insufficient for farming and for sustaining the population. The ratio between farm output and population in Central Asia is 0.2 hectares, whereas in arid and semi-arid regions 0.3 is regarded as a minimum.

According to the same report: "Central Asia is a rare case of a region facing Malthusian disaster. Its population is rising. Its capacity to grow food is determined by the availability of water. And water supplies are fixed or falling".

These countries will be required to import increasing amounts of food; however, apart from those countries that will be able to export oil, import capacity will remain very low. In 1992, Soviet subsidies came to an end as a consequence of the end of the Union. In 1991, they accounted for between 20% and 45% of public spending in CCA countries. Even if they should receive international cooperation funds, the economic prospects of the CCA area are likely to be bleak, thus exacerbating a situation that is already politically and culturally tense.

*Political transition* - Three forces are shaping the political evolution in the CCA area: (a) nationalism; (b) the old communist ruling class and (c) Islamism. The communist parties of the various republics changed their names and became national or nationalist parties. New regime parties have also been established. Situations are very different from country to country, broadly reflecting different degrees of alignment with Mr. Gorbachev's reformist policy within the CPSU before the collapse of the Union and the CPSU in 1991. Turkmenistan appears to be the most conservative country, and Kyrgyzstan is credited as the most advanced towards democracy.

Almost invariably, leadership comes from the CPSU and the administration is in the hands of the old communist bureaucracy. With varying nationalist emphasis (more in Uzbekistan, less in the other countries) the policy of this leadership is intended to maintain the state inherited from the Soviet Union on the basis of secular and inter-ethnic societies. With the exception of Turkmenistan, the tendency within the CIS is towards maintaining a strong relations with the Slav republics, particularly with Russia. On the average, the leadership is conservative both on the domestic and on the international front because its main preoccupation is with maintaining power while beginning its transformation from a state based on communism to a state based on national principle. The search for stability is their main goal.

Challenges to this stability comes from many quarters. Chauvinistic tendencies, aimed at asserting ethnic and cultural domination within the individual republics, are not very strong. They seem to play a significant role only in Uzbekistan-Tajikistan relations, as developments in the ongoing Tajik crisis now suggest. Nor are democratic and liberal tendencies strong, though in many countries they are more influential than nationalist groups. Islamists are important in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. They are divided along a spectrum of extremism and moderation. Events in Tajikistan have probably contributed to radicalizing Islamists, lessening the influence of the moderate religious wing, and reinforcing links between Tajik Islamists and the most extreme Islamist factions in Afghanistan (Mr. Hekmatyar's). Islamist tendencies are increasingly perceived by the CCA countries and the CIS leadership as the main threat to stability.

The search for stability for CCA countries' entrenched leadership, supported by a Russian interest in backing this stability as a mainstay for CIS cohesion, creates a gap

between old and new forces and makes change towards more or less stable democracies very challenging and slow. Where change has occurred (as in Azerbaijan), or was attempted (as in Tajikistan) democracy has not been attained and serious crises have arisen. In Azerbaijan, power has been taken over by a definite nationalist Government, with pan-Azeri aspirations which threaten Iran and do not contribute to solving the Nagorno-Kharabakh crisis with Armenia. In Tajikistan, the coming to power of an Islamic-democratic front, to some extent willing to compromise with the old communist ruling class, has given way to a harsh civil war. Events in Tajikistan have probably destroyed the moderate basis for new political dynamics, thus blocking the way towards compromise and democracy. These developments are very similar to those preventing political normalization in North Africa and the Middle East, particularly in Algeria.

### 3. Challenges to transition

We have just seen the factors contributing to instability in the area. Let's now turn to the main issues associated with them.

First, the difficult economic perspective of this region risks contributing to the isolation of the regimes and the intensification of their opposition, i.e. to preventing dialogue and compromise. In light of what is happening in the Middle East and North Africa, there is no doubt that worsening socio-economic conditions play an important role in driving people, particularly young people, towards more or less radical forms of Islamism. This will be true for the CCA region as well. In addition to good economic management, good government and renewal of the ruling class are important to prevent people from being attracted to radical movements. As noted above, the transformation of the CCA societies is mainly relying on an entrenched bureaucracy that will not be interested in giving up its privileges unless the leadership enforces a gradual change and provide opportunities for new political leaders.

In a recent article, Menon and Barkley<sup>3</sup> have very aptly pointed out that "the transition from Soviet-style command economies to alternative [kinds of economies] plays a decisive role", and that for this reason the most important "frame of reference for viewing Central Asia should be the interplay between the political economy (managing the post-Soviet transition) and security". The main determinant of security will be the management of the transition. In this sense, international economic cooperation should play an important role, particularly since the Slav republics, which had been transferring funds to the CCA countries, are no longer able to continue.

A second issue regards broad international cooperation. As noted above, present regimes are generally committed to international cooperation, from both a political and an economic point of view. In particular, they support the CIS and have joined a number of regional schemes of cooperation (like the Economic Cooperation Organization--ECO, the Caspian Sea Cooperation Zone--CSCZ, etc.). The CCA regimes are fully aware of their difficult economic prospects and of their strict interdependence with the Slav republics. Furthermore, international cooperation is also a good policy for preventing or containing inter-ethnic clashes and other domestic and inter-state conflicts.

However, international cooperation --as usual in the post-communist world-- is somewhat paradoxically regarded as a means for strengthening a newly-started nation-building process. Also, it is regarded as an instrument for preserving the power of the old ruling classes. In the CCA republics there is a genuine cooperative mood. Nonetheless, national trends and nation-building policies tend to prevail over transnational ones.

The risk brought about by this contradiction is the same one that the Arab Maghreb

Union is running: i.e. using international cooperation agreements (in the event: the CIS) to conserve regimes rather than to integrate economies and polities. This tendency may be detrimental to the success of the regions's difficult political transition. It may also contribute to discrediting the CIS, an element otherwise crucial for this transition and for international security.

A third important issue is related to the relations between the CCA republics, on the one hand, and between the CIS and Russia, on the other. Azerbaijan almost immediately refused to become a member of the CIS, in keeping with the nationalist and then ultra-nationalist trends adopted by its leadership. The five republics of Central Asia are all members of the CIS, though they differ in the degree of their commitment to it: Kazakhstan is the most fervent supporter of the CIS and tends to look at its future in rather integrationist terms (though it is reluctant to put its nuclear legacy under Russia's control); in contrast, Turkmenistan in the last round of discussions about the future of the CIS at the Minsk summit (January 22-23, 1993) clearly stated that it sees the CIS as nothing more than a consultative body.

Because of its unique economic and political circumstances, Turkmenistan can afford to remain rather indifferent to the CIS. This is not true for the other CCA countries. Their leaderships have a more or less important stake in maintaining a form of cooperation among themselves and most of all with Russia, for either economic or security reasons. On the other hand, opposition parties and movements perceive Russia as a danger or as an enemy. Nationalists and Islamists see Russia as their former colonial power and, what is most important, as the supporter of the old communist leaderships that, as they would sometimes aptly argue, barely changed the name of their parties and illegitimately hinder the ascendancy of the new political democratic forces.

The position of the CCA countries' opposition groups with respect to Russia is very similar to the more widespread feeling in the Slav members of the CIS. The position of the CCA leadership is different because they realize that Russia remains the most important factor for their stability, security and economies. As already noted, this important relationship with Russia is a major irritant for the opposition and probably contributes to radicalizing it. In this sense, it is also a factor of insecurity and instability. On balance, however, the leadership perceives it as a positive factor. In the case of Kazakhstan, the ethnic balance (almost half the population is Slav) is an ineludible reason for pursuing a relationship with Russia.

To the extent that Russia is interested in convincing the other member states, particularly the Ukraine, to develop the CIS, it is also interested in the support of CCA countries. Moreover, Russian interest in Central Asia, while more moderate immediately following independence, changed and increased over time. Russia has realized that the presence of so many Russians in the CCA countries has an impact on its international security and domestic stability; furthermore, as always in its history, it is rightly or wrongly worried by the threat to its security by the instability in its southern approaches; finally, it is worried by the rise of Islamism and radical religious trends because they are a threat to its neighbours' stability and to its own domestic stability. Many Muslim communities are still included in Russia and in other parts of the CIS.

This Russian attitude is consonant with the mood and the preoccupations of the CCA leaderships. As the crisis in Tajikistan developed in recent months--since the Islamic-democratic coalition took over in Dushanbe by overthrowing the old communist regime of Mr. Nabyev--the collaboration between Russia and the other CCA leaderships has been intense. This cooperation has added to difficult government-opposition relationship discussed in the foregoing, and may possibly have contributed to hindering the political

transition in Central Asia.

This is not to put the blame Russia's policy. On the contrary, Russia cannot but help manage crises in this Asian segment of the "new arc of crisis". On the periphery of the former Soviet Union, Russia is confronting problems similar to those that are arising elsewhere in the NATO "out-of-area". The question is that there are ambiguities in Russian peacekeeping and peace-enforcing operations. During the last disturbances in Tajikistan, there was evidence that when dealing with a complex reality, the Russian and CIS policy of peace-oriented intervention follows different courses--from defense, to diplomacy to latent imperialism<sup>4</sup>. Since the legitimacy of the CIS is not yet well established, interventions are not fully legitimated either. It is not clear whether they are interventions by the CIS or by Russia. In any case, in the eyes of the opposition groups, these interventions are basically devoted to preserving the old regimes. During recent events in Tajikistan, an attempt at sending in Kyrgyz troops failed. The Islamic-democratic coalition overthrown by the old regime supporters maintains that Russian troops failed to act as peacekeepers, acting instead as allies of the old regime.

As a conclusion, one can note that, with all its ambiguities, the relationship between the CCA countries and Russia remains particularly important and absorbing, perhaps more so than was thought when the Union collapsed.

#### **4. Western security and the role of Turkey in the CCA area**

What Russia is defending in CCA area is not still very clear. The defence and rescue of Russian nationals is a goal that from time to time takes up nationalist overtones. Many in Russia perceive the CIS as an extended security space. At times, the present leadership (Mr. Kozyrev) has construed intervention within the CIS as a contribution to a wider challenge to stability and order concerning the whole of the international community.

Russian action and cooperation in relation to the CCA countries is essential, and the form it takes will be crucial not only to the political future of the CCA countries, but also to that of Russia and the CIS. If Russian policy is motivated by nationalistic considerations or misperceptions of risks to national security, as is currently the case today, it may contribute to the failure or delay of political transition in the CCA countries. This would accentuate the instability in the CCA area which, in turn, would fuel Russian nationalism.

A nationalistic Russia would be a detriment to Western security. The view put forth in this paper is that the CCA area is bound to influence the development of the CIS and Russia as democratic states which have cooperative international policies. It is thus extremely important for both Western and international security. The West should consider this area as an integral part of policies designed to strengthen the stability and democratization of Russia and to reinforce the cohesion and vitality of the security of the CIS. Hence, Western involvement in the developments in this area must not be merely indirect.

Given these considerations, a greater Turkish role is important and desirable, provided that it supports Western solidarity and not that of others (i.e. Muslim, pan-Turkish, etc.) If it leans toward the latter, Turkey will become an element of competition and conflict in the region, which will complicate the management of what is already a difficult situation. Furthermore, such leanings may compromise its own political balance.

Thus the West is once again faced with the problem of achieving a greater integration of Turkey into its institutional framework, and must be careful not to assume that by giving Turkey an international "Turkish" role it will necessarily be compatible with

Western interests and Turkey's Western identity.

Today, Mr. Demirel is managing to steer a middle course between drives for pan-Turkism, Islamic resurgence and Turkey's strong ties to Western secular and democratic political culture. This middle course will not be easy to maintain with respect to the medium-long term instability of the CCA area. Western encouragement to Turkey to play a role in the CCA area (as well as in the Gulf and the Middle East) may prove to be a destabilizing factor for the Turkish democracy, unless this role is not played within a wider and stronger Western cooperation towards these Eastern area. The "big game" remains big, too much so for the West to delegate roles in the area concerned, or for Turkey to take them up alone.

## Notes

(1) Includes Azerbaijan, beyond the Caucasus, and the five Central Asian republics, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan: hereafter referred to as CCA. From a more geopolitical than an historical perspective, Central Asia also includes Afghanistan. For general background, see: Alexandre Bennigsen, "Soviet Muslims and the World of Islam", *Problems of Communism*, March-April 1980, pp. 38-51; M. Brill Olcott, "Central Asia's Catapult to Independence", *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 71. n. 3, Summer 1992, pp. 109-130; A. Gresh, "Lendemain indécis en Asie Centrale", *Le Monde Diplomatique*, Janvier 1992, p. 6; L. Hajda, M. Beissinger, *The Nationalities Factor in Soviet Politics and Society*, Westview Press, 1990; Uwe Halbach, "World Politics and indigenous Development in Central Asia", *Aussenpolitik*, 43, 4, 1992, pp. 381-391; Shireen T. Hunter, "The Muslim Republics of the Former Soviet Union: Policy Challenges for the United States", *The Washington Quarterly*, Summer 1992, pp. 57-71; Elisabeth Moreau, "Les nouveaux Etats d'Asie Centrale", *Défense Nationale*, oct. 1992, pp. 33-39; Olivier Roy, "Frontières et ethnies en Asie centrale", *Hérodote*, n. 64, 1992, pp. 169-182; J. Rupert, "Dateline Tashkent: Post-Soviet Central Asia", *Foreign Policy*, n. 87, Summer 1992, pp. 175-195.

(2) "The Silk Road catches fire", *The Economist*, December 26, 1992.

(3) Rajan Menon and Henri J. Barkey, "The transformation of Central Asia: implications for regional and international security", *Survival*, vol. 34, no.4, 1992-93.

(4) See Suzanne Crow, "Russian Peacekeeping: Defense, Diplomacy, or Imperialism?", *RFE/RL REsearch Report*, vol. 1, no. 37, 18 Sept. 1992, pp. 37-40.



*Tab. 1 - CCA Republics: area and population*

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<u>Republics</u>	<u>area</u> <u>('000 sq. km.)</u>	<u>population</u> <u>(1989-million)</u>
Azerbaijan	86.60	7.0
Kazakhstan	2,717.30	16.5
Kyrgyzstan	198.50	4.3
Tajikistan	143.10	5.1
Turkmenistan	488.10	3.5
Uzbekistan	447.40	19.8

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Sources: The Europa Yearbook 1991, A World Survey, Europa Publications Ltd., London, 1990; Lubomyr Hajda, Mark Beissinger, *The Nationalities Factor in Soviet Politics and Society*, Westview Press, 1990

*Tab. 2 - Ethnic groups across international boundaries (million - highlighted figures indicate main overlappings)*

	<u>Slavs</u>	<u>Kazakhs</u>	<u>Kyrgyzs</u>	<u>Tajiks</u>	<u>Uzbeks</u>	<u>Turkmens</u>	<u>Azeris</u>	<u>Armenians</u>
China		0.4	0.1					
Kyrgyzstan	0.9		2.3		0.6			
Kazakhstan	8.0 <sup>1</sup>	6.5			0.3			
Tajikistan	0.4		0.07	3.2	1.2			
Afghanistan				4.0	1.5			
Uzbekistan	1.6			0.9	14.1			
Turkmenistan	0.3				0.3	2.5		
Iran								4.5
Azerbaijan	0.4						5.8	0.4
Armenia	0.05						0.08	3.1

(1) Including 1.8 Germans and Ukrainians

Sources: Lubomyr Hajda, Mark Beissinger, op. cit.; Alexandre Bennigsen, "Soviet Muslims and the World of Islam", Problems of Communism, March-April 1980, pp. 38-51.