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## NEWPORT PAPERS

A Series of Point Papers  
from the Naval War College and the  
Navy Warfare Development Command  
For Senior Leadership  
In Response to Critical Issues

Strategy / CONOPS / Doctrine / Decision

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United States Naval War College  
Navy Warfare Development Command  
Newport, Rhode Island

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**Newport Paper: 18**

**CENTRAL ASIA AND THE TERROR WAR**

**Purpose:** To explore the role of the newly independent states (NIS) of Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan) in the war on terror.

**Background:** The states of Central Asia have been enthusiastic supporters of the U.S. war on terror. Even before the 11 September attacks, these regimes were already extremely hostile to the spread of extremism in Central Asia generally and to the Taliban in particular. During the 1990's, NATO's Partnership for Peace (PfP) program created a basis for cooperation with the NIS of Central Asia. The developing relationship between the United States and the NIS has also been facilitated by positive developments in U.S.-Russian relations since 11 September.

**Discussion:** It is important to recognize what the NIS have brought to the war on terrorism and the advantages and disadvantages of close cooperation with these states.

*How have the NIS of Central Asia contributed to the anti-terror coalition?* Above all, these states have offered proximity. Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, the "frontline" states, share a border with Afghanistan of almost 850 miles. The basing options they have provided have been particularly welcome given political instability in Pakistan.

Indeed, the NIS offer a relatively stable environment from which to project power into the region over the long term. Although the NIS are all ruled by ex-Communist officials, the region has not witnessed large-scale political violence since the early 1990s, with the exception of Tajikistan. Of all the NIS, Tajikistan is most dependent on Moscow. Cooperation in this case depends entirely on positive relations with Russia. Tajikistan was the site of a vicious civil war during the early 1990s. A 1997 peace accord seems to be holding with the help of almost 20,000 Russian troops, who had also been guarding the border against the Taliban. U.S. special forces have been operating from bases along the border with Afghanistan, while C-17 transports have been making refueling stops at the airport outside of the capital of Dushanbe. In a significant sign of support for the U.S. war on terror, Tajikistan joined PfP in February 2002.

Uzbekistan has given timely and significant assistance to the United States. Less than a month after 11 September, U.S. combat forces were already deploying to the Uzbek base of Khanabad, which is located about 100 miles north of the border with Afghanistan. Three thousand U.S. troops have been deployed to Khanabad, including elements of the 10th Mountain Division, which played a leading role in *Operation Anaconda* during March 2002. Due to concerns about the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU),

American forces in Uzbekistan have kept a very low profile. However, preliminary reports suggest that the U.S. deployment has been well received by the Uzbek people.

Uzbekistan's President Islam Karimov has taken a very hard line against internal opposition. His harsh rule is justified in the name of preserving stability, which is perceived to be gravely threatened by Islamic militants. It is noteworthy that the State Department had pronounced the IMU to be an international terrorist group prior to the 11 September attacks, suggesting that Karimov's fears have some basis in reality. On the other hand, Uzbek forces easily repelled IMU incursions in both 1999 and 2000. By some accounts, the larger objective of the IMU is to bring the whole of Central Asia under strict Islamic rule. The IMU was so intertwined with the Taliban that its leader and many of his fighters appear to have been killed during the fighting for the north Afghan city of Kunduz in late 2001. The IMU may be vulnerable to financial pressure, since its success in recruiting has been attributed to salaries provided with funds from Saudi charities.

Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, which are both much more secular than the states to the south, could prove to be more reliable partners of the United States. As the most liberal state among the NIS of Central Asia, Kyrgyzstan has long been favored in U.S. aid policies to the region. The U.S. and its allies are in the process of erecting a significant base outside the Kyrgyz capital of Bishkek. The United States is likely to deploy F-18 and F-15 strike aircraft, as well as transport aircraft to Kyrgyzstan. Six French Mirage 2000s are already flying from the base. Indeed, French pilots flying out of the Kyrgyz base flew combat sorties during *Operation Anaconda* in March 2002. Kazakhstan is the wealthiest and most stable of the NIS. Although it has offered its airbases for use by American forces, the U.S. has at this time only accepted the offer of overflight rights. Both Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan remain closely linked with Russia. This is particularly true for Kazakhstan because of its lengthy border with Russia and large ethnic Russian population. As with Tajikistan, therefore, cooperation with Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan depends to a large extent on positive U.S.-Russian relations.

In contrast to the other NIS states, Turkmenistan has shown little enthusiasm for joining the anti-terrorism coalition. Early on in the crisis, Turkmenistan declared its neutrality in the conflict. This position reflected Turkmenistan's close ties with the Taliban, with Iran, and also a disinclination to align with the West. This country has contributed to the humanitarian aid effort, however, allowing USAF transports to land and off load cargo destined for displaced Afghans.

In addition to providing proximate bases in an environment of relative stability, the NIS have provided diplomatic and intelligence resources in the war on terror. Having the vocal support of a bloc of regional states enhances the coalition's legitimacy. This support has remained important as the U.S. tries to secure the peace. The United States has been wooing Turkey as the possible overall leader of peacekeeping operations in Afghanistan—no doubt because it is hoped that Turkish troops will less offend the sensibilities of the local population. The participation of local NIS forces in peacekeeping operations might also assuage Afghan cultural concerns. Indeed, NIS

militaries have been trained for precisely this mission in the exercises of the Central Asian Battalion that have been conducted yearly under PfP auspices since 1997. The use of Uzbek or Tajik peacekeepers in the southern Pashtun areas of Afghanistan may be inadvisable, but Kazakh and Kyrgyz troops would be appropriate. Ethnic ties between the frontline states and groups inside Afghanistan have also yielded certain diplomatic and intelligence benefits. For example, Northern Alliance Gen. Abdurrashid Dostum, an ethnic Uzbek, is apparently a close personal friend of the President of Uzbekistan. Maintaining such relationships are integral to the success of the new regime in Kabul. Finally, the NIS are crucial to the successful flow of humanitarian aid into Afghanistan. Humanitarian contributions should not be denigrated. The stability of the government in Kabul may ultimately depend on the ability of the international community to improve the lives of most Afghans.

***What are the risks and costs of NIS involvement in the war on terror?*** The strong commitment of the NIS to combating radicalism unfortunately brings with it a concomitant reputation for suppressing human rights. Uzbekistan, potentially America's most important ally among the NIS, is one of the very worst offenders. There, thousands of activists have been imprisoned and torture is widely practiced. Additionally, the state suppresses information with tight controls over the media. The current leadership's repressive policies could conceivably fuel a rebellion that eventually brings a virulently anti-American government into power, on the model of the Iranian revolution. However, this development remains a very remote possibility primarily because local culture and traditions (Sufism, Hanafi Sunnism) are opposed to radicalism and to political violence in general. The situation in Tajikistan is slightly less oppressive, but also more unstable, at least in the short term. Even Kyrgyzstan, briefly known as Central Asia's "island of democracy," has seen growing encroachments on civil liberties. Rioting recently broke out in a southern Kyrgyz town over the detention of an opposition leader. This incident is an exception to what has been relatively stable governance in Kyrgyzstan. Indeed, the countries of the northern tier (Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan), which emerged from nomadic civilizations, are much more secular. Their cooperation with the United States could be less problematic than that of the more religious NIS states of the southern tier. All of the NIS populations are relatively well educated and absorbed a large dose of secular culture during the Soviet period, but widespread poverty suggests that stable democracy will remain a remote aspiration for the foreseeable future. In cooperating closely with these regimes, the United States runs some risk of guilt by association. Steady policies of political and economic engagement could, however, plant the seeds for long-term liberalization.

NIS leaders have expected and received economic compensation for their cooperation. Aid, investment, debt forgiveness, and trade concessions are priorities for these poverty-stricken states. Indeed, financial assistance has been the most salient motive for Kyrgyzstan, which is reportedly getting \$40 million for services rendered. Aid to Uzbekistan has been tripled to \$160 million. There, economic reform has proceeded very slowly. Both the IMF and World Bank closed their offices in Tashkent over the last few years because of the leadership's unresponsive and lackluster economic policies. This situation creates the potential for American assistance to be derailed by corrupt elements

and increasing inequality, potentially leading to an anti-American backlash. Aid should be targeted and configured for sustainable development.

A possibly more complex issue concerns the extension of security guarantees. In defining the content of future commitments, a number of factors must be considered. First, there is a danger of antagonizing Russia by playing the "Uzbek card"—exploiting Uzbek-Russian antagonism to develop stronger U.S. relations with Uzbekistan. An open and multilateral approach that recognizes Russian interests in the region and includes those states more closely aligned with Moscow, for example Tajikistan, is least likely to raise suspicions about a new "great game." Second, Uzbekistan has been accused of fanning ethnic tensions in Tajikistan (where about one quarter of the population are ethnic Uzbeks) throughout the 1990s. Thus, there are some grounds for concern that a blanket extension of security guarantees could embroil the United States in the region's ethnic conflicts. Finally, the human rights abuses of these regimes create an obvious tension among U.S. foreign policy goals: strategic imperatives generated by the war *versus* fostering democracy abroad.

Substantially upgrading the PfP program—increasing military assistance and the frequency and scale of joint exercises—and developing closer economic ties could enhance U.S. relationships with the NIS of Central Asia and persuade them of the desirability of a continuing U.S. military presence in the region. In addition to ensuring that Afghanistan does not lapse once again into a haven for terrorists, linking the NIS of Central Asia closely with the West would have a number of additional benefits: securing access to the region's energy supplies, bringing additional pressure to bear on potentially hostile regimes such as Iran and China, and expanding the group of moderate, pro-American Muslim states.

**Recommendations/Actions:** Policymakers must be aware of what the NIS of Central Asia bring to the continuing war on terror and the advantages and disadvantages of their involvement in the war.