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## Central Asian Security: The New International Context

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## BOOK REVIEWS

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### THE CHANGING SECURITY POLICY CHALLENGES IN CENTRAL ASIA

Allison, Roy, and Lena Jonson, eds. *Central Asian Security: The New International Context*. Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2001. 279pp. \$18.95

To date, relatively few studies have appeared concerning the domestic and external security environments of the five new independent states of Central Asia or on relations with their neighbors to the north, south, east, and west. This volume, with contributions by some of the leading scholars in the field, seeks to fill in the lacunae in both areas. It does an admirable job.

The book begins by putting into context the impact of the collapse of the Soviet Union on these new independent states. Initially, the assumption within Russia, the West, and among the elites of the new republics was that the new Central Asian republics would maintain a close alignment with the Russian-led Commonwealth of Independent States. Russia had vast economic, security, and military interests in the region and clearly aspired to maintain a leading position in that area. Western observers were generally convinced that Russia would be able to maintain its position in the “stans.” As for the elites, their natural inclination was to maintain strong and tight links with the former ruler, a tendency reinforced by the “Soviet-era socialization”

and the looming presence of Russia in Central Asia, often in the form of military forces and bases. However, Russia failed to maintain its position there, because of its chronic domestic weaknesses, its inability to formulate a coherent national security policy, and its lack of resources.

By the mid-1990s it was recognized by all parties concerned that no tight strategic nexus would exist between Russia and the Central Asian republics. The elites also realized that their post-Soviet security environment was a complex one, with many issues that could not be addressed by simply maintaining a strong strategic relationship with the former Soviet Union. Indeed, there was a growing desire on the part of the elites to focus on their internal security problems, diversify their security policy relations away from Russia, and form new partnerships with other nations, both near and far. In light of this emerging strategic reconfiguration, the purpose of this work is to “analyse the changing security policy challenges in Central Asia since Russia became more disengaged from the region in the mid to late 1990s” and to “discuss

the security policy relevance of the expanding network of relationships between Central Asia and regional and international powers.”

Some of the contributors to this work address the cooperative and conflictual processes that are relevant for the security orientation of the region. There are numerous cooperative processes in Central Asia. The states have a common legacy and cultural and historical commonalities. The Soviet era provided them with a common interlocking transportation system, energy grids, and irrigation systems. On the face of it, such factors should enhance cooperative endeavors that could be formalized by institutional mechanisms. But processes born of ethnic rivalries and deteriorating social and economic conditions are also deep at work in the region, a topic analyzed extensively in Martha Brill Olcott’s essay. Also, the piece by Alexei Malashenko on the potential of Islam in Central Asia is particularly apposite in light of the impact of 11 September 2001 on the region. The Central Asian states are united by the common heritage of Islam, but the elites are fearful that Islam could become a source of conflict because of the use of religion by opposition parties and the hijacking of Islam by extremist movements that have a proclivity to terrorism. Not surprisingly, these states have worked with Russia to combat the growth of terrorist organizations using religion. In light of the increased American presence in Central Asia, one wonders whether the United States will supplant Russia in the republics’ struggle against terrorism. Another source of conflict within the region is the struggle over scarce water resources. The essay by Stuart Horsman

deals with this issue. Horsman concludes, however, that frictions over water are unlikely to lead to violent conflict.

The remaining essays address the important issue of how the involvement of external powers—both regional, such as Iran and Turkey, and great powers, such as Russia, China, and the United States—affect the security dynamics of the region. Some of these powers are involved in Central Asia because of historical and cultural affinities. This framework helps to explain Turkish and Iranian interests in the fate of peoples with shared religion and ethnic identities, and the Russian interest in the fate of the largest republic, Kazakhstan, with its sizable Russian population. Economic interests, in the shape of potentially lucrative trade, investments, and exploitation of vast oil and natural gas reserves, partly account for the involvement in Central Asia of all the powers addressed in this book. Security interests have much to do with the direct involvement in the region of Russia, China, and Iran. All three are concerned about the potential spillover of unrest from Central Asia across their borders. Finally, strategic interests explain the involvement of all the nations discussed here, in terms of their visions of their respective roles in Central Asia. Stephen Blank’s essay is especially pertinent.

This work is a welcome addition to the study of Central Asia. It is a critical addition to the understanding of security issues in the region, and it is required reading to understand better the war on terror and future U.S. relations with the Central Asia republics.

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