
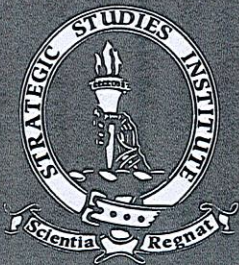


Strategic Studies Institute 



CENTRAL ASIA:  
A New Great Game?

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Central Asia does not become a “game gone bad” that draws the great Asian powers into conflict. Her survey concludes with policy recommendations toward that end.



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## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH OF THE AUTHOR

LIEUTENANT COLONEL DIANNE L. SMITH joined the Strategic Studies Institute in August 1995. Prior to that she was Team Chief for Central Asia, National Military Intelligence Collection Center, Defense Intelligence Agency. A Military Intelligence officer and Russian Foreign Area Officer, her previous assignments include U.S. Army Exchange Officer to the United Kingdom Defense Intelligence and Security School, Ashford, Kent, United Kingdom; Chief of Strategic Intelligence Branch, Intelligence Division, Allied Forces Central Europe, Brunssum, Netherlands; Counterintelligence Officer, Combined Field Army (ROK-US), Uijongbu, Korea; and Assistant Professor of Russian History at the U.S. Military Academy. Her recent works include “Muscovite Logistics, 1475-1598” and “From Chattanooga to Durham Station, the Influence of Logistics Upon Sherman’s Strategy.” She holds a B.A. in history and international relations from the University of Nebraska and an M.A. and Ph.D. in Russian history from the University of California at Davis. She is a graduate of the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College and the U.S. Army War College.

## SUMMARY

A new "Great Game" is being played out in Central Asia, one in which powers on the periphery compete for influence, but also one in which the Central Asian states themselves are active players. Their own struggle for power can influence immediate neighbors Russia, China, and Iran, and even beyond into the Indian subcontinent.

Serious political, economic, ethnic, religious, and social challenges confront the five Central Asian states. How each state is able to resolve these problems will determine its ability to emerge as a viable force in the regional struggle for influence.

Instability might seem to provide opportunities for states such as Iran or China, but the risks that such instability would ricochet back on them are too great. Thus, Iran, Pakistan, India, Russia, and China each seek, in their own way, to promote stability within Central Asia while expanding their own regional influence.

### **Threats to Central Asia.**

The greatest threats to Central Asia are internal. The painstaking process of nation building, the legitimacy crisis, rapid social and economic transformation, environmental degradation, decolonization, ethnic diversity, and border disputes are among the sources of instability. The core issues are the ethnic composition of each state and the ability of each republic to mold a "nation" within the artificial boundaries inherited from the Soviet empire. Democracy has been sacrificed at the altar of stability in all five republics. The continuing civil war in Tajikistan remains the most crucial inter-regional security threat, while the civil war in Afghanistan remains the most immediate extra-regional threat.

## **Iran.**

Iran has vital interests in the maintenance of peace and stability within the region, but its international isolation and pariah status prevent direct action in support of its genuine security concerns. As a contiguous state with shared ethnic minorities, Iran has the most to lose if domestic instability should cause the implosion of Central Asia, but it also has the least ability to shape events.

## **Pakistan.**

Pakistan's security policy, long dominated by a fear of India and the search for a superpower patron to counter that threat, now must confront threatened spillover from civil wars in Tajikistan and Afghanistan. Islamabad's hopes that the new states of Central Asia would provide it with strategic depth, Islamic allies, and collective security partners in its struggle with India have been dashed. Geographical constraints and concerted efforts by non-Islamic neighbors, especially Russia and China, have stymied her efforts to become a major player in Central Asia. But, through bilateral ties and agencies such as the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO), Pakistan can still provide technical and economic assistance to the Central Asian states' efforts to resolve the issues threatening their domestic stability.

## **India.**

The breakup of the Soviet Union and the loss of its superpower patron have created serious security concerns for India. India fears that Central Asian border realignment, ethnic disputes, and resurgent Islam or civil war would directly affect the territorial integrity of Afghanistan, which, in domino effect, would influence Pakistan, Iran, and Kashmir. To promote stability in Central Asia, India has focused its efforts on bilateral technical assistance and economic programs, building upon existing links dating back to the Soviet era. The fact that India does not border Central Asia (Pakistan and

Afghanistan lie between) has hampered development, as has a shortage of investment capital. India must rely on a non-Islamic proxy, Russia or China, to provide regional security.

## **Russia.**

Having earlier dismissed Central Asia as a burden gotten rid of, Moscow then sought to bring Central Asia, if not back into the empire, then, at the very least, back into the fold. Russia seeks to prevent other states from achieving regional hegemony, protect and expand its own economic interests, protect ethnic Russians living in the region, and stop the spread of Islamic fundamentalism. The region remains militarily tied to Russia through the Commonwealth of Independent States and the 1992 Tashkent Treaty, which created a formal collective security agreement. Russia supplies around 25,000 peacekeeping forces in Tajikistan and provides border troops along the CIS' external borders. More recently Moscow has pushed harder for closer economic and political integration and a greater share of the profit from developing energy deals. The Central Asian states are landlocked; almost all transportation and pipeline routes abroad must pass through Russia. But, Russia is hampered by a lack of funds to execute many of the bilateral agreements signed, and calls by ultra-nationalists for a return to the Soviet Union cause fear in Central Asia and drive the republics to seek alternatives to renewed Russian hegemony.

## **China.**

China's security position in Asia has improved with the fall of its superpower rival, the Soviet Union, but the advent of five unstable, nominally-Islamic neighbors, the war in Tajikistan, and growing unrest in the Fergana valley (which leads into China's ethnically Muslim province, Xinjiang) all support a nightmare scenario in which unrest in Central Asia spills over into China. Yet, China also hopes to use Central Asian markets as a catalyst to fuel a new prosperity

zone in Xinjiang, revive the Silk Route for international trade, and gain access to Central Asian energy resources.

### **Implications for U.S. Policy.**

America has no vital interests in, nor will it assume responsibility for, Central Asia's security. The primary focus will be damage control—to prevent existing problems from escalating into crises that might engage the other Asian powers. This is best achieved through development of free market democracies in Central Asia, for economic dislocation breeds ethnic, religious, and political extremism. A strong, vibrant economy is a prerequisite for political stability.