



Initiating Brief

Roundtable on “Central Asia’s Transformation: Geopolitics, Democracy and Security”

March 22, 2010
East-West Center, Honolulu, Hawaii

Sponsorship and Purpose

The Roundtable on "Central Asia's Transformation: Geopolitics, Democracy and Security" will take place on March 22, 2010 at the East-West Center, Honolulu, Hawaii. It will be jointly organized by the East-West Center, Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies and the Resource Center for American and Democratic Studies at al-Farabi Kazakh National University (Almaty, Kazakhstan). The purpose of the Roundtable is to discuss emerging trends and issues in the central Asian region specifically related to democratization and security in the new geopolitics of the region.

Context and Issues

The break up of the USSR triggered a significant transformation of the geopolitics, economics and political identity of the Central Asian states. Central Asia is usually defined as Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. The region has historically been a commercial and cultural bridge between Europe and the countries of Asia Pacific. The natural resources of Central Asia are increasingly attracting countries of the Asia-Pacific, such as China, South Korea, Japan and India. The uncertainties of the Central Asian states’ political transformation and continued rivalry for Central Asian resources challenge regional cooperation and institution-building.

The **geopolitical power** vacuum formed by the sudden independence of the five former Soviet Republics of Central Asia, as well as the fall of the communist regime in Afghanistan, led many scholars and political analysts to foresee the commencement of a new “Great Game”, but this time with more players and with fossil fuels playing a central role. The emergence of competition in Central Asia unraveled as China, Russia and the United States progressively increased their influence in the region. There are some other regional powers that have new interests in Central Asia, like Turkey, Iran, Pakistan and India, that are willing to transport their rivalry to new grounds.

The growing **American presence** following September 11 terrorist attack and the military action by the U.S. in Afghanistan, which was initially accepted by Russia, posed a direct challenge to

Moscow when the American objective of displacing Russian influence became obvious. As for China, it first welcomed opportunities in the multi-polar trends of competing interests of regional actors, but then saw the purpose of American involvement in Central Asia as to also contain Chinese presence. This shared perception of an American threat has contributed to bring Russia and China much closer and led them to join together in a strategic partnership aimed at countering American power projection in the region and beyond.

Democratic transition in Central Asian states is one of the most debated issues both in the West and Central Asian. The countries in the regions have established the main institutional structures of democracy – including electoral management bodies, parliaments, judiciary, decentralization and local governance, legal framework for civil society organizations, procedures for accountability and transparency and anti-corruption strategies and human rights institutions. Yet, the democratic institutions lack capacity to effectively perform their functions. Western leaders and scholars point out “insufficient promotion of democratic reforms” in the states of the region. The Central Asian political elites and most of the academic authors, on the other hand, emphasize the priority of stability and economic reform as a precondition for sustainable political democratization. While progress has been made in democratization, most observers continue to be concerned about the stability of democratic institutions and government accountability.

The states of Central Asia are rich in oil and natural gas. The **energy resources** are however not easily accessible due to the region’s landlocked position and limited export infrastructure. Russia controls the majority of oil export routes from reserves in Central Asia but China is steadily increasing its involvement in the energy sector. Central Asia’s heavy dependence on pipeline construction has also led to rivalry and competition between the external powers over preferred routes. In order to fully utilize the abundance of natural resources for sustainable development, the Central Asian Republics need to improve the management of their natural resources. This entails regional cooperation for natural resource use and protection, support to communities and the civil society to solve cross-border water, energy and environmental problems, and the development and the maintenance of cross-border energy pipelines and transmission networks. The countries also need to enhance their state capacities for effective natural resource management.

The complex domestic challenges, continued lack of trust between Central Asian states as well as rivalry for influence in the region between external powers has hampered **regional cooperation and institution-building in the region**. Formally, there are several organizations operating in Central Asia but they have a limited membership or spectrum of activities. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization and Collective Security Treaty Organization are perhaps the most viable regional organizations in the region today.

All five Central Asian countries are also participants in the **North Atlantic Cooperation Council** – a forum for dialogue established by the Alliance in December 1991 as a first step in reaching out beyond the East-West divide to former Warsaw Pact members. The NATO programs in Central Asia serve the purpose of supporting the security capacity of Central Asian states and enhancing civil-military relations.

AGENDA

Roundtable on “Central Asia’s Transformation: Geopolitics, Democracy and Security”

March 22, 2010

East-West Center
Honolulu, Hawaii

Burns Hall 3012

9:00 – 9:15 a.m.

OPENING STATEMENTS

Dr. Nancy Davis Lewis
Director, Research Program
East-West Center

Col. (retired) David Shanahan, Interim Dean, College for Security
Studies, Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies (APCSS)

Moderator

Dr. G. Shabbir Cheema
Senior Fellow, Research Program and Director of
Asia-Pacific Governance and Democracy Initiative (AGDI)
East-West Center

9:15 – 10:00 a.m.

Presentation and Discussion of Issues in Central Asian
States Perspective in the New System of International
Relations

Central Asia in the New Geopolity

Dr. Rouben Azizian, Asia Pacific Center for Security Studies
(APCSS), Program Manager)

10:00 – 10:45 a.m.

Presentation and Discussion of Issues in Central Asian
Democracy

Democracy Transition of Central Asian States

Dr. Fatima Kukeyeva, al-Farabi Kazakh National University,
Director of the Resource Center for American and
Democratic Studies

10:45 – 11:00 a.m.

Coffee Break

