



# Asian Countries Are Divided About U.S. Security Intentions in Central Asia

The Asian states neighboring Central Asia have historic links and strong interests in that region. China, Iran, Afghanistan, India, and Pakistan are critical players in the security and economic issues that will determine the future of Central Asia and affect U.S. interests in the area. Each of these states is of importance to the United States, whether because of the war on terrorism, economic ties, arms control, nonproliferation, or other reasons. Regional states are concerned about the situation in Afghanistan, which they fear might lead to a spillover of conflict onto their soil. They also fear the possibility of Pakistani activity and influence, which has led them to keep that state at arm's length.

A RAND Project AIR FORCE (PAF) study of neighboring Asian states' interests in and ties with Central Asia identifies the following trends:

- China has indicated that security in the region is a primary interest by establishing the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) with Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Russia. Concerns regarding China's Muslim Uighur separatists, as well as concerns of U.S. encirclement, underpin China's efforts to promote regional security cooperation. China has also expanded its economic interests in Central Asia through commodity trade and agreements to import oil via pipeline from Kazakhstan.
- Iran has a similar perspective toward its Central Asian neighbors. Stability in Afghanistan lies at the heart of Iran's concerns, as the Taliban has historically been anathema to Iran. Iran maintains that an international, United Nations–led military presence should remain in Afghanistan to prevent a deterioration of the security situation. However, U.S. presence there and in Central Asia creates the concern that U.S. intentions are to surround and isolate Iran rather than to enhance regional security.
- India shares Iran's concerns regarding the threat of militants based in Afghanistan. However, India welcomes U.S. presence in the region as a stabilizing influence. India's economic ties with Central Asia are growing, and India is developing transport and energy links to the region via Iran and Afghanistan.
- Pakistan's relations with Central Asia suffer from lingering memories of Pakistan's support of the Taliban and Islamic militancy. Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan remain suspicious of Pakistan's regional intentions, resulting in weakened trade. The establishment of the Karzai government in Kabul has been a blow to Pakistan's regional security strategy because the current government is more open to ties with India.
- Afghanistan remains critical to the future of Central Asia and its neighbors, as instability in Afghanistan has the potential to destabilize the region. A potent combination of drugs, weapons, and militants traverse Afghanistan and cross into Central Asia and beyond. Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan fear that Islamic militants trained in Afghanistan may slip back across their borders. Iran remains apprehensive that hostile, anti-Shia elements may take control of Afghanistan. India and Pakistan have been competing to ensure that the Afghan regime in power is friendly to their interests.

U.S. intentions in Central Asia have been interpreted in various ways. China and Iran fear that U.S. military presence and security interests in the area have the dual purpose of containment. Conversely, Afghanistan would like to see a continued strong role for the United States in combating militancy and fostering stability, and Pakistan and India see the potential for security cooperation in the region with the United States. Despite the divergent perspectives of their Asian neighbors, the Central Asian states continue to see a role for the United States in promoting stability in the region. ■

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