



U.S. Military Has Important but Limited Long-Term Role in Central Asia

In fall 2001, the U.S. military arranged various degrees of access to facilities in the post-Soviet states of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan to support Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) in Afghanistan. Some U.S. forces remain in Central Asia to support ongoing operations. But what should the U.S. role be in the future?

Before OEF, Washington had not considered remote Central Asia to be of critical importance to the United States but promoted relations with regional governments because of the area's energy resources, its geostrategic location, the dangers posed by such transnational threats as drug smuggling and terrorism, and the weapons of mass destruction infrastructure that remained after the Soviet Union's breakup. The events of September 11, 2001, however, illustrated how instability in faraway states could threaten U.S. security and have brought Central Asia into a different focus.

RAND Project AIR FORCE researchers analyzed the implications for the U.S. Air Force of a variety of economic, political, and social trends in Central Asia. They concluded that while there appears to be no significant driver for a permanent U.S. military presence in Central Asia, the United States does have interests in the region and should continue to work with the countries of Central Asia and other interested parties—such as Russia, Turkey, China, India, and various European states—to enhance the region's economic development and political evolution. The military's role should be small but important, with three primary components.

Maintenance of a "Semi-Warm" Basing Infrastructure

Although the United States has no need for permanent facilities in Central Asia, OEF has shown the importance of flexible options. Thus, the U.S. military should maintain a bare-bones capability to reintroduce forces should it be necessary in the future. The Air Force should identify locations that might support security cooperation exercises, temporary rotational use, or sustained operations if circumstances should so demand and host nations agree. Prepositioning would be limited to the least expensive and hardest-to-deploy items. To the extent possible, materiel and services should be acquired from the local economy.

Military-to-Military Interactions

Helping reform Central Asia's militaries to enhance national unity and political moderation through carefully chosen interactions with U.S. military personnel can foster future security cooperation and help the local militaries improve relationships with their civilian leaders and societies. These interactions should focus on noncombat operations, such as disaster response. The United States could also assist with counterterrorism and combating narcotics trafficking, but only if care is taken to avoid becoming entangled in internal security matters of questionable provenance. Ideally, several Central Asia states and other interested parties should be included in each exercise.

Interoperability Between Local Militaries and the West

Although most militaries in Central Asia are years away from acquiring new major combat systems, some upgrades to their hardware—communications equipment, for example—are potentially affordable and important to enhance interoperability with the United States and others. Improved training in languages, modern logistics, and air traffic management could also prove valuable. ■

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