

# **CENTRAL ASIA'S NEW STATES**



# CENTRAL ASIA'S NEW STATES

Independence, Foreign Policy,  
and Regional Security

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*To Alison, Andrew, and Hillary*



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# FOREWORD

**I**n her analysis of the new states of Central Asia, Martha Brill Olcott has produced a seminal study of the foreign policies of three former Soviet republics during their first years of independence. In so doing, she has provided us with unique insights on a region that is blessed with tremendous economic resources and yet has come to be defined largely by its potential for ethnic and political instability.

The future of the post-Soviet political milieu is one of distinct regions defined by ethnic and religious identities. While the Baltic states and the western republics seek the familiar embrace of Europe, the republics lying along the southern rim of the former Soviet Union are situated on an unpredictable confluence of past empires, current geopolitical competition, the spreading influence of Islam, and the continuing influence and intervention of their past colonial and Soviet master, Russia. Such a political landscape is bound to present daunting challenges to stability, and we have already seen several outbreaks of violence in the wake of the USSR's demise. In the Caucasus, post-Soviet Georgia has been rent by two major secessionist battles. In neighboring Central Asia, while Tajikistan's civil war has lessened in its intensity, the potential for other such conflicts across the region has by no means exhausted itself.

Central Asia was the arena where England and Russia, in the nineteenth century, played the "Great Game" of geopolitical competition. Now other new players have entered the contest for influence and control of the region, especially Turkey, Iran, and China. That Professor Olcott is able to integrate the region's variegated history into a comprehensive

description of its contemporary political landscape shows her remarkable grasp of politics outside the realm of Russia's "near abroad."

At the same time, this book is no less an analysis of Russia than it is of the Central Asian states themselves. Indeed, Russia is a constant presence throughout the pages of this study, as its author plumbs the Russian leadership's views on a region that is exercising the rights and opportunities afforded by statehood but is still decidedly within Russia's sphere of influence. Besides the historical territorial buffer and the natural resource wealth, there is another essential element of Russia's national interest in the region: the millions of ethnic Russians who still reside in the Central Asian states. Their fate is of no less concern to Russian officialdom than it is to Russian nationalists, who view the increasing marginalization of ethnic Russians in lands their country once ruled as a national humiliation.

Most of Central Asia's leaders have thus far maintained the stability of their societies through a delicate balance of ethnic politics, catering to their Russian populations and assuaging Russia's concerns, particularly in Kazakhstan. Yet increasingly powerful nationalist forces among these countries' titular ethnic groups vie for the same economic and political resources. Russians are not the only ethnic minorities in these new states that concern their leaders. Many diaspora ethnic groups provide potential flashpoints for civil and political unrest.

Any serious discussion of Central Asia necessarily includes a detailed examination of Islam as a political force in the region. The present analysis is no exception. Yet Professor Olcott's analysis of political Islam departs from the more alarmist views of these former Soviet republics' "going Islamic," particularly in light of Iran's increasing influence in the region. While Islam is indeed heightening its influence throughout the region, Dr. Olcott puts this development into a relatively constructive context, arguing that Islam has been a force that has buoyed both the political fortunes of titular nationalist groups in the republics and the attractiveness of these new states as their leaders search for an identity—and for economic assistance from other predominantly Muslim states.

While Professor Olcott's investigation of this region provides us with a comprehensive look at the growing pains of these new independent countries' polities and economies, she goes one important step further by linking their domestic concerns to their foreign policies and their role in regional and international security. In particular, this book will provide context and insight to officials in the U.S. foreign policymaking

establishment as they attempt to establish guidelines for how far Russia can and should exert its influence among the new, independent states of Central Asia. For Western nations searching for new foreign policy principles in light of post-Soviet realities, Professor Olcott provides some crucial and timely advice in the book's final chapters.

Dr. Olcott's book is the product of a recent grant from the United States Institute of Peace. The Institute's work in this region spans many years and an equal number of forums, from seminars and congressional briefings on Tajikistan's ongoing civil war, to former Jennings Randolph Peace Fellow Nancy Lubin's assessment of the region's reform course in *Central Asians Take Stock: Reform, Corruption, and Identity* (Peaceworks no. 2, February 1995).

As part of the Institute's continuing examination of the sources and causes of regional conflict and their outward manifestation in the international arena, Martha Brill Olcott has indeed delivered a significant contribution to our understanding of a very complex part of the world.

Richard H. Solomon  
President  
United States Institute of Peace



# PREFACE

**T**he original focus of this book was the struggle by several mineral- and energy-rich Soviet republics in the Caucasus and Central Asia to profit at least in part from the development of their natural resources. The project was conceived with the assistance of three Soviet colleagues from Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan and was begun in 1990.

The world has changed a great deal in the past five years, and following the independence of their republics, these three men no longer had time for such a project, as each became deeply involved in helping his respective nation weather the transition to independence. New opportunities opened for me as well, including a brief stint of part-time consulting for Acting Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleberger.

Travel to the region became much easier, and with the introduction of international business and financial institutions there, my expertise became more valuable to a number of international organizations and Western firms doing business in these countries. These contacts and opportunities did a great deal to broaden my understanding of the nature of the changes that the various Central Asian states were undergoing.

My observations during that period led me to shift my focus somewhat and broaden my perspective from what I set out to do in the original project. What fascinated me at the time was the birth of new, independent states that I had devoted my academic and professional life to researching and writing about as pliant yet troubled Soviet republics. Not only were the Soviet Central Asian republics becoming republics in

their own right, but they were setting about the soul-searching and somewhat arduous task of defining new roles for themselves as independent actors in a volatile region and in the international community at large. Yet their leaders had few guidelines that would enable them to craft urgently needed foreign policies.

This book is the result of my assessment of these enormous changes and the equally enormous challenges these new states have addressed—and continue to address—in making their transition to statehood. The creation of any new state poses special challenges, but the new, independent states emerging from Soviet Central Asia seemed to have some unique problems and promises on both the domestic and international fronts that warranted further investigation.

I have devoted my academic career to studying this region, but in this book I focus on three of the five Central Asian states—Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan. My choice of these three does not reflect my lack of interest in the other two states in this distinct region. For largely pragmatic reasons, I have confined my discussion of Tajikistan and Turkmenistan to related sections within separate chapters. The challenge of doing research in Turkmenistan is truly daunting, and one of the impetuses for writing this book stemmed from the fact that most of the countries of Central Asia were considerably more hospitable places to do research than they had been prior to independence. Turkmenistan, though rich in natural resources, simply did not offer the same opportunities of access to and open exchange with policymakers that existed in Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan. Nevertheless, I have devoted a portion of chapter 7 to Turkmenistan's place in the region. I did not devote a separate chapter to Tajikistan because, although the conditions are now somewhat more stable there, it is still a country at war with itself. Even today, the legitimacy of the Rahmonov government is still in question, and because of this it is still not possible to write meaningfully about Tajikistan's state policies. The civil war in Tajikistan, though, is an event that has had an enormous impact on political and economic developments throughout Central Asia. As such, it is an event that requires discussion in this volume, and I have provided in a section of chapter 6 what I hope will suffice as a thorough analysis of the war's origins and its political developments up to the present.

Let me add a special note here on usage. Two of the three states I selected for this study—Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan—have just very recently added some significant nuances to their official state names.

Nevertheless, I have chosen to stay with the names with which these countries arrived in the international community as sovereign, independent actors since they are still familiar and widely used among specialists and nonspecialists alike, and are also still widely used in the two countries themselves.

Regarding the adjectival forms of these republics' names, I have decided to rely on the terminology currently used by the U.S. Department of State, numerous media outlets, and various research institutes across the country. In this system, the common adjectival ending of "-stani" is appended to the titular ethnic group's name to denote state policies and institutions that pertain to the particular republic's entire citizenry, including its ethnic Russians and other diaspora minority ethnic communities. Without this ending, the adjective is meant to apply solely, in most cases, to the republic's titular ethnic group.

This book would never have come about without the financial support and professional guidance that I received from so many people. Key among them is the United States Institute of Peace, and especially David Smock and the Grant Program. Without their support, the research upon which this book depends could never have been done.

I am also grateful to the wise counsel of my colleagues at the Foreign Policy Research Institute in Philadelphia. Of particular benefit was the work on Central Asia that we did in concert for the Office of Net Assessment of the U.S. Department of Defense. Finally, I should thank the Dean's Office at Colgate University for their ongoing financial support of my research, which has served as the glue to hold the various larger bits together.

In addition, parts of the manuscript were presented in a number of scholarly forums and the project benefited from the comments received. I am particularly grateful to Professor Robert Legvold for including me in the November 1993 meeting of the Japanese-American Working Group on CIS affairs, and to Professor Michael Mandelbaum for my invitation to participate in the Council on Foreign Relations' June 1993 conference on Central Asia. The comments of the colleagues assembled on both these occasions proved especially valuable.

Finally, I would like to thank my husband, Anthony. As always, I am indebted to his advice and editorial assistance, as well as grateful for his willingness to put up with the disruption that my research trips inevitably brought.



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