Leadership Succession, Great Power Ambitions, and the Future of Central Asia

Accepted version of an article published in *Central Asian Affairs*:
McGlinchey, Eric. " Leadership Succession, Great Power Ambitions, and the Future of Central Asia", *Central Asian Affairs* 3, 3 (2016): 209-225.

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Abstract

Two uncertainties will reshape inter- and intra-state governance in Eurasia over the next five to twenty years. First, the stabilizing anchors of Central Asia, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, will see their first leadership change since independence. Second, it is unclear if and how the region's two great powers, Russia and China, will accommodate one another's expanding interests. This paper explores these two uncertainties, their potential to reshape Central Asian politics, and scenarios that may emerge should the current, now quarter century status quo be disrupted.

Keywords

Central Asia – Leadership Succession – Great Powers

Two uncertainties will reshape inter- and intra-state governance in Eurasia over the next five to twenty years. First, the stabilizing anchors of Central Asia, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, will see their first leadership change since independence. There is no guarantee this change will be smooth. Should successions prove contentious, the stability of all of Central Asia will be at risk.

Second, it is unclear if and how the region's two great powers, Russia and China, will accommodate one another's expanding interests. Until recently, China's emphasis has been economic engagement, while Russia's has been political and military hegemony. Moscow, through the newly created Eurasian Economic Union, has signaled growing economic interest in Central Asia. And Beijing, through its Silk Road Economic Belt, has demonstrated a

doi 10.1163/22142290-00303001

new willingness to use politics to advance economic goals. These great pow- ers' interests now intersect. How this intersection is navigated will define the future of the region.

This article explores these two uncertainties, their potential to reshape Central Asian politics, and possible scenarios that may emerge should the current, now quarter-century status quo be disrupted. There is considerable upside potential that could accompany these two political and geopolitical uncertainties. Long-time autocracies may liberalize, and long-stagnant economies may revitalize. But these political and geopolitical uncertainties also pose risks. Should political instability emerge in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, this instability will ripple out and magnify across the Eurasian region. And should Moscow and Beijing move from accommodation to antagonism, all of Central Asia will be held hostage by great power conflict. The United States, ever more distant and distracted from the region, will have few levers with which to mitigate the causes and consequences of these conflicts.

(In)Stability and Succession in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan

Leadership change is imminent and inevitable in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. The president of Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nazarbayev, is 75. Islam Karimov, the president of Uzbekistan, is 78. Neither leader is in robust health. Both re-elected in sham votes in 2015, it is unlikely that either leader's rule will extend beyond 2020, the close date for their current presidential terms. As Nazarbayev and Karimov fade from power, so too may the forces that have long-preserved stability in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, leading to a new era of contentious politics.

Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, in contrast to the other Central Asian states, entered the post-Soviet period with a large and loyal political elite. This political elite has been a boon for presidential rule and political stability. Whereas elite fragmentation following the Soviet collapse precipitated civil war in Tajikistan and political chaos in Kyrgyzstan, docile political elites allowed for autocratic consolidation in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan.[1] Elite agency, particularly in the Kazakh case, has further added to political stability. Edward Schatz, for example, has written convincingly of President Nazarbayev's

1 For an extensive treatment of how autocrats backed by large presidential parties secure stable rule, see: Bruce Bueno De Mesquita et al., "Political Institutions, Policy Choice and the Survival of Leaders," *British Journal of Political Science*, 32, no. 4 (2002): 559–590.

impressive "soft authoritarian tool kit."2 Compared with less-skilled Eurasian autocrats, Nazarbayev is adept at "discursive preemption … the staging of political dramas that undermine opponents' efforts to gain popular support."3 The Kazakh president has faced challenges, for example, the Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan (DCK) 2001 opposition movement and the 2011 oil work- er protests in Zhanaozen. Nazarbayev, though, has repeatedly demonstrated an ability to diffuse these challenges. Opposition leaders, such as the 2001 oppositionists, were jailed on corruption charges and later granted clemency, all acts in a plausible spectacle that simultaneously casts suspicion on opponents and advances an image of beneficence for the Kazakh president.

There is a limit, however, to elite agency and discursive preemption. As Rico Isaacs notes, Nazarbayev's concomitant unwillingness to step down and the growing likelihood of some exogenous shock—the Kazakh leader's suddenly falling ill, for example—"make the routinisation of charisma into institutional office a challenging and difficult process which has limited chances of success."4 Political regimes long-ruled by a single leader often experience "a massive out- break of long-suppressed political demands" following the leader's death or incapacitation.5 Instability can be mitigated if succession mechanisms are in place. Neither Nazarbayev nor Karimov, however, have articulated clear succession mechanisms. The constitutions of both states do provide guidance for who *should* assume the presidency were Nazarbayev or Karimov to die in office (the chairman of the Senate, in both cases). Given the extreme personalization of rule under both presidents, though, it is unclear if and for how long political elites would abide by constitutional directives.

Leadership succession in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan need not be chaotic. The Turkmenistan case demonstrates that, even in the most autocratic environments and even in the absence of institutionalized succession mechanisms, new leaders can, with little or no political instability, replace departed predecessors. While the mechanisms by which Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov ascended to power following President Saparmurat Niyazov's death in 2006 remain opaque, the Turkmen experience is a reminder that presidential

2 Edward Schatz, "The Soft Authoritarian Tool Kit: Agenda-Setting Power in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan," *Comparative Politics*, 41, no. 2 (January 2009): 203–222.

3 Ibid., 207.

4 Rico Isaacs, "Charismatic Routinization and Problems of Post-Charisma Succession in Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan," *Studies of Transition States and Societies*, 7, no. 1 (2015): 70.

5 Richard K. Betts and Samuel P. Huntington, "Dead Dictators and Rioting Mobs: Does the Demise of Authoritarian Rulers Lead to Political Instability?," *International Security*, 10, no. 3 (December 1985): 119.

change in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan could be uneventful and autocratic rule could continue little changed under new leaders.

Pathways to Kazakh and Uzbek Instability

There are compelling reasons to anticipate, however, that potential exists for political change and political instability in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. In Kazakhstan a robust, wealthy, and independent economic elite has strong incentives to push for political reform. Property rights are tenuous in autocratic states. There is no guarantee that Nazarbayev's successor will respect the fortunes of the current economic elite. As such, it is in this elite's interest to push for rule of law, for political liberalization, so as to protect their assets.

Past precedent suggests Kazakh business elites might join forces with political liberalizers. In November 2001 Kazakh billionaire Nurzhan Subkhanberdin bankrolled the formation of Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan (DCK), a reformist movement led by two erstwhile Nazarbayev insiders, Mukhtar Abliazov and Galymzhan Zhakiyanov. The impulse for the formation of the 2001 DCK movement, as Barbara Junisbai and Azamat Junisbai demonstrate, was property rights: "The DCK's founders understood that the greatest threat to their economic well-being was the power of the ruling family to arbitrarily decide the fate of entrepreneurs and political players alike."6

DCK was short-lived. Abliazov and Zhakiyanov were quickly stripped of their government positions—Abliazov was finance minister and Zhakiyanov was governor of Pavlodar Oblast—and jailed. The creation of DCK, it is clear in retrospect, was poorly timed. Nazarbayev was 61 in 2001. Leadership succession was not the pressing topic that it is in today's Kazakhstan. That said, the DCK movement is instructive. Many among Kazakhstan's entrepreneurs have made their fortunes independent of the state. Critically however, as Junisbai and Junisbai demonstrate, entrepreneurial wealth is nevertheless subject to the mercurial whims of an autocrat. It is this fear, this recognition of tenuous property rights, I suggest, that provides an impulse for substantive political reform in Kazakhstan.

A reformist movement will elicit considerably greater enthusiasm in the coming Kazakh leadership succession than DCK did in the early 2000s. Enthusiasm, critically though, cannot guarantee a quick or successful transition. Now a quarter century into the study of post-Soviet regime change, analysts have come to accept that transitions are often protracted and uncertain. Thus,

6 Barbara Junisbai and Azamat Junisbai, "The Democratic Choice of Kazakhstan: A Case Study in Economic Liberalization, Intraelite Cleavage, and Political Opposition," *Demokratizatsiya*, 13, no. 3 (Summer 2005): 382.

although scholars like Joel Migdal are correct to note well-healed economic elites may challenge the autocratic status quo, so too is Adam Przeworski correct in his sober observation that "even if the objective conditions are conducive to establishing a democracy, the proto-democratic forces may fail in agreeing to an institutional framework under which they would peacefully process their conflicts."7 Kazakhstan's economic elites and democratic-leaning political elites may push for reform, but the end result may be protracted instability.

In Uzbekistan, in contrast to Kazakhstan, the economic elite is beholden to the state. Those who are wealthy in Uzbekistan owe their wealth to their positions in government. For a handful of Uzbeks, most notably presidential daughter Gulnora Karimova prior to her spectacular fall from grace, this wealth accrued from insider acquisition of the country's most lucrative assets— telecoms, cement factories, gold mines. The more frequent pathway to wealth in Uzbekistan, however, is the extraction of rents using one's government of- fice.8 In Uzbekistan, the wealthy class is the political class. Larry Markowitz succinctly captures this Uzbek reality:

> Densely concentrated resources, access to patrons, and open rent-seeking opportunities promote the co-optation of local elites to the regime. … When promoted across localities, as in Uzbekistan, these activities pro- duce the macropolitical outcome of a coercive rent-seeking state, whose security institutions continue to apply coercion to extract resources as long as it receives a steady inflow of rents.9

The Uzbek ruling class, this interdependent triangle of security services, local elites, and central elites, has a strong incentive to maintain the autocratic regime that is the wellspring of financial wealth. Pressures for regime liberalization, as a result, will remain low in Uzbekistan. This does not mean that Uzbekistan is assured a smooth succession process and continued political stability. Because the state is the source of wealth in the country, Uzbekistan's political elite will be susceptible to infighting if no clear succession mechanism is established prior to Karimov's departure. Karimov has managed the

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7 Joel S. Migdal, *Strong Societies and Weak States: State-Society Relations and State Capabilities in the Third World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), 235; Adam Przeworski, "Democracy and Economic Development," in Edward D. Mansfield and Richard Sisson (eds), *The Evolution of Political Knowledge* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2004), 300–324.

8 Lawrence P. Markowitz, *State Erosion: Unlootable Resources and Unruly Elites in Central Asia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013), 68.

9 Ibid., 6.

Uzbek political elite by distributing rents and offices among the country's regional powerbrokers.10 Karimov's successor may not be as adept at managing Uzbekistan's regional powerbrokers. In sum, while Uzbek political elites have an incentive to maintain Karimov's patronage- and rent-based autocracy, competition along regional lines for control over rents may precipitate a breakdown of Uzbek political stability.

Consequences of Kazakh and Uzbek Political Instability

Likely pathways to political instability differ in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. In Kazakhstan instability, were it to emerge, would result from failed or protracted efforts at political reform. In Uzbekistan there is little impetus for regime liberalization, at least among the current political elite. There is in Uzbekistan, however, the possibility that leadership change will unleash fierce competition among regional strongmen for control over the most lucrative offices of state rule.

Regardless the driver of Kazakh and Uzbek instability, the potential consequences for Central Asia are profound. However distasteful the Kazakh and Uzbek autocracies have been, Nazarbayev's and Karimov's autocratic regimes have acted as bulwarks against intra- and inter-state conflict. Unlike neigh- boring Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have avoided civil war and deadly ethnic conflict. Moreover, the Kazakh and Uzbek governments have guarded against deadly ethnic violence spilling over state borders. Were the strains of leadership succession to result in a new period of political instability, Kazakhstan's and Uzbekistan's ability to defend against intra- and inter-state conflict will be compromised.

Intra-State Consequences of Instability: Economic, Ethnic, and Sub-Ethnic Protest

Stable autocratic rule has dampened internal conflict in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. Neither country, though, has fully escaped conflict, protest, and unrest. Kazakhstan has seen multiple episodes of protest and mobilization. In March 2007 clashes between ethnic Kazakhs and Chechens in the neighboring southern towns of Malovodnoye and Kazatkom left five Chechens dead and one Kazakh with a gunshot wound.11 In December 2011 striking oil workers and

10 Roger D. Kangas, "Uzbekistan: The Karimov Presidency," in Sally Cummings (ed.), *Power and Change in Central Asia* (London: Routledge, 2002), 138.

11 "Kazakhstan: Deadly Melee Leaves Unanswered Questions," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, April 2, 2007.

police clashed in the Zhanaozen, in western Kazakhstan. Seventeen protestors died in the fighting, and a further 100 were injured.12 What is notable about the Zhanaoen unrest is that it was not a case of ethnic conflict, but rather, of sub-ethnic conflict, of Kazakhs fighting Kazakhs. The striking oil workers were almost all from the local Aldai "clan." Management—the workers were striking against the management of three oil companies, Ersai Caspian LLC, KarazhanbasMunai JSC, and OzenMunaiGas—were urban elites from other cities.13 Although the violence ended quickly, the Zhanaozen protest suggests that significant economic and sub-ethnic grievances exist in Kazakhstan. Were political instability to accompany leadership succession, these grievances could emerge and further challenge a weakened Kazakh state.

Uzbekistan, like Kazakhstan, has also experienced significant societal un- rest. Much of this unrest, like the Zhanaozen protests, has its roots in economic grievances and local identities. The May 2005 Andijan uprising, in which 700 protesters were shot and killed by government troops, is the most visible but by no means the only case of local populations taking to the streets to ex- press their frustrations with Tashkent. Although the Karimov government has attempted to portray the Andijan uprising as the work of militant Islamists, scholars and human rights groups have documented the economic foundations of the uprising.14 Andijan's protestors took to the streets not because they were religious followers of the 23 prominent Muslim businessmen the state had imprisoned, but because they worked in the businessmen's factories, bak- eries, and construction companies. In addition to the economically motivated Andijan uprising, traders staged protests across Uzbekistan in July 2002 when Tashkent imposed new taxes on imports.15 Similarly, traders took to the streets in Nukus and Andijan in February 2007 when police attempted to shut down local bazaars.16

12 Bureau of Public Affairs, Department of State. Office of Website Management, "2012 Human Rights Reports: Kazakhstan," Report, April 19, 2013, http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/2012/sca/204402.htm.

13 Elena Kostyuchenko, "Zhanaozen," *Novaya gazeta*, December 20, 2011.

14 *Bullets Were Flying Like Rain: The Andijan Massacre, May 13, 2005*, Human Rights Watch, 2005; Eric McGlinchey, *Chaos, Violence, Dynasty: Politics and Islam in Central Asia* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2011), 121–123.

15 Galima Bukharbaeva, "Uzbekistan: Traders Protest Over Tax," Institute for War and Peace Reporting, July 30, 2002, https://iwpr.net/global-voices/uzbekistan-traders-protest-over-tax.

16 Nathan Hamm, "The Plight of Uzbekistan's Merchants," Registan.net, February 26, 2007, http://registan.net/2007/02/26/the-plight-of-uzbekistans-merchants/ (accessed June 10, 2015).

Uzbekistan has also seen considerable religious-based protest. The Kari- mov government routinely jails popular imams, justifying their imprisonment with charges of religious extremism. Research suggests that these charges are instrumental, and that what the Karimov government most fears is the widespread support popular imams enjoy in the regions.17 In most cases, the citizen response to these imprisonments has been peaceful but sustained; supporters of imprisoned imams picket procurator offices for weeks in the hope—rarely realized—that their local imams will be granted fair trials and freed.

A botched leadership succession in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan would have complicated effects on intra-state conflict. Some have argued, for example, that Karimov's steady autocratic rule has prevented what otherwise would be widespread Islamist militancy.18 Others suggest the opposite, that Karimov's repression stokes the very militant Islam he purports to be fighting.19 It is likely, however, that protracted and contested leadership succession would activate economic, regional, ethnic, and sub-ethnic fault lines that, to the extent that they have existed at all, have been locally contained throughout the post- Soviet period. As Daniel Posner illustrates in the case of African transitions from one party to competitive rule, the nature of contestation markedly changes when autocratic presidential parties collapse. To be a politician in one party is to be a member of the presidential party. The autocrat defines national politics and, as such, to the extent political elites attempt to differentiate them- selves, they "focus on local cleavages and issues."20

Contested political systems, in contrast, generate national-level identity affiliations. Political elites competing for executive power attempt to activate "broader cleavages."21 Thus, following Posner's logic, we can anticipate that botched leadership successions in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan may activate "regional, linguistic, or in some cases religious cleavages" as elites attempt to rally broad coalitions to secure the post-Karimov and post-Nazarbayev presidencies.22

17 Eric McGlinchey, "Islamic Leaders in Uzbekistan," *Asia Policy*, 1 (January 2006): 123–144.

18 S. Frederick Starr, "Making Eurasia Stable," *Foreign Affairs*, 74, no. 1 (January/February 1996): 80–92, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russia-fsu/1996-01-01/making- eurasia-stable.

19 Eric McGlinchey, "The Making of Militants: The State and Political Islam in Central Asia," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East*, 25, no. 3 (2005): 554–566.

20 Daniel N. Posner, "Regime Change and Ethnic Cleavages in Africa," *Comparative Political Studies*, 40, no. 11 (November 2007): 1308.

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid.

Inter-State Consequences of Instability: Irredentism and Uzbek Islamic Revival

The potential for intra-state conflict, though real, pales in comparison to the inter-state conflict that might emerge as a result of political instability in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. Nazarbayev and Karimov have dampened, of- ten through heavy-handed tactics, irredentist tendencies in their countries. In November 2000, 22 Russians were jailed in Ust-Kamenogorsk and charged with planning to incite an uprising among co-ethnics. Ust-Kamenogorsk lies 50 miles south of the Russian border. The ultimate objective of the uprising was, allegedly, the creation of an independent state, "Rusland."23

The scheme, while improbable in 2000, is less improbable today. Nazarbayev has remained unwaveringly loyal to Moscow throughout the post-Soviet period. Kazakhstan's next leader might not prove as loyal. Elsewhere, most notably in Ukraine, we have seen that political instability and questioning Moscow's influence provides an opening for irredentist movements. Moscow has capitalized on this opening and is actively supporting pro-Russian separatists in Eastern Ukraine. Although unimaginable a few years ago, Moscow- supported Russian irredentism in northern Kazakhstan is conceivable should Nazarbayev's successor prove weak and disinclined toward Moscow.

Even more likely than Moscow-supported irredentism in northern Kazakh- stan is the potential for ethnic Uzbek irredentism in southern Kyrgyzstan. Twice in the past 25 years ethnic Uzbeks and Kyrgyz have clashed in deadly ethnic violence. In June 1990 riots in Osh and Uzgen resulted in 247 fatalities and extensive property loss. A second wave of rioting in June 2010 left 400 people, mostly Uzbeks, dead, and thousands displaced in Osh and Jalal-Abad. In neither 1990 nor 2010, notably, did ethnic violence spill across the nearby Uzbek border. In 1990 Soviet troops contained the violence to Osh and Uzgen. In 2010 Uzbek forces secured the Uzbek—Kyrgyz border.

Kyrgyz state elites have often wondered what would have happened had Karimov not been in power in 2010?24 During the 2010 riots ethnic Uzbeks in Osh and Jalal Abad had hoped that co-ethnics from across the border would intervene to stop the bloodletting. Uzbeks in southern Kyrgyzstan drew SOS signs on rooftops and roads in an effort to alert Uzbek state air patrols to the violence that was unfolding below. The air patrols, though, never emerged; Uzbekistan did not intervene to quell the Osh and Jalal-Abad riots.

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23 "Kazakh Prosecutor Says Law Will Be Observed in Alleged 'Uprising' Case," Khabar tv, November 24, 1999.

24 Author's interviews with Kyrgyz politicians, June 2010, June 2014, June 2015.

Karimov had reason not to intervene. Uzbeks living in southern Kyrgyzstan are considerably more open in their political and their religious practices. Uzbek imams, most notably imams from the Kamalov family—Sadykzhan Kamalov, Rashot Kamalov, and Rashot Kamalov's deceased father, Muhammadrafiq Kamalov—enjoy widespread popular support and authority among the local Uzbek population and, no doubt, are viewed as threats in Tashkent. Uzbek journalists, such as Shohruh Saipov, write about Karimov's abuse of power from the comparative safety of southern Kyrgyzstan.25 In short, southern Kyrgyzstan is home to an Uzbek population that is viewed as suspect in the eyes of the current Uzbek leadership.

Would Karimov's successor, though, be similarly disinclined to intervene on behalf of Kyrgyzstan's southern Uzbeks? Were political instability to emerge in the coming leadership succession would Uzbekistan's next president be able to prevent Uzbeks from crossing the border to defend their besieged co-ethnics in Osh, Jalal-Abad, and Uzgen? Might ethnic Uzbeks in southern Kyrgyzstan be more inclined toward irredentism if Karimov's successor signaled his willing- ness to defend Uzbeks living abroad?

These questions weigh heavily on the Kyrgyz ruling elite. Fewer than four kilometers separate Osh's city center from the Uzbek border. Rashot Kamalov's mosque is directly on the border, separated from Uzbekistan by the narrow Kara-Suu river. A prominent Kyrgyz politician, in a June 2015 meeting, re- marked that Uzbek forces could take Osh in a matter of hours—Kara-Suu in a matter of minutes. Kyrgyz authorities, aware that Karimov's days in office are numbered, are alarmed by what they perceive as the increasing potential for Uzbek irredentism.

Political instability in Uzbekistan poses threats beyond irredentism for neighboring states. Karimov has maintained secure command and control over Uzbek security services, including the Uzbek border guards. Despite this command and control, disputes, sometimes deadly, among the populations living along the poorly demarcated Uzbek-Kyrgyz and Uzbek-Tajik border are frequent. Erosion of Uzbek command and control would result in more disputes along Uzbekistan's border with Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan.

A softening of the Uzbek border also has the potential to change religious dynamics in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. The Kyrgyz and Tajik governments have consistently viewed Uzbek religious leaders as extremist. Throughout much of the Tajik civil war the Uzbek militants, Juma Namangani and Tohir Yoldosh,

25 There are limits to this safety. Shohruh Saipov's older brother, also a journalist, was gunned down in Osh in 2007. Muhammadrafiq Kamalov was killed on the outskirts of Osh in 2006. Both attacks are believed to be closely linked to the Uzbek security services.

fought alongside the United Tajik Opposition and against President Emomali Rahmon. Namangani and Yoldosh would later form the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, a militant Islamist group that repeatedly ignored Tajik and Kyrgyz territorial sovereignty when launching incursions into Uzbekistan in the late 1990s and early 2000s. More recently Kyrgyz police arrested Rashot Kamalov in February 2015 and charged the ethnically Uzbek imam with inciting his followers to fight alongside isis.26 In October 2015 imam Kamalov was sentenced to five years for "inciting religious hatred and distributing extremist material."27 While the Kyrgyz government case against imam Kamalov is questionable, what is certain is that a softening of borders would allow Uzbeks straddling the Kyrgyz-Uzbek-Tajik borders to form a more coherent community. This, along with a concomitant softening of Uzbek state control over Islam in a post-Karimov environment, could result in a marked upsurge in the influence of Uzbek imams across the Central Asia region. It is unlikely that these imams will be extremist. Twenty-five years of religious revival in Central Asia demonstrate that figures like Namangani and Yoldosh are more the exception than the rule. It is likely, though, that these imams would be influential, would have large followings, and as such, would be perceived as threats by Central Asia's secular autocratic states.

Throughout the Soviet period the Central Asian muftiate was headquartered in Tashkent. Following independence each Central Asian state created its own national muftiate in an effort to indigenize and exert government control over Islam as practiced within state borders. These muftiates have proven largely ineffective and, moreover, riddled with corruption. What has, however, advanced the Kyrgyz and Tajik indigenization of Islam has been the hobbling of the Uzbek muftiate under President Karimov's repressive autocratic rule. If Uzbekistan's leadership succession proves contested and protracted and state repression of Islam recedes, the Uzbek religious elite could once again assume a position of prominence among the Islamic clergy throughout Central Asia.

I have prioritized the potential pathways and possible consequences of Kazakh and Uzbek political instability not because domestic politics in the three other Central Asian states is inconsequential, but because politics in Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkmenistan is more predictable and of less regional import. Kyrgyz politics will remain chaotic. The Tajik central government will continue to struggle to exert control in the regions. And the Turkmen

26 "Kyrgyzstan Silences Popular Imam with Extremism Charges," EurasiaNet, February 17, 2015, http://www.eurasianet.org/node/72116.

27 "Kyrgyzstan: Popular Imam Gets 5-Year Jail Term," EurasiaNet, October 8, 2015, http://www.eurasianet.org/node/75461.

government's fortunes will continue to rise and fall with the price of hydrocarbons. We may and likely will see instability in these states. Instability in these states, though, will not have the dramatic inter-state consequences that instability in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan potentially can have. The regional dynamics of Central Asia are approaching a critical juncture. The political and economic elite in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan are navigating waters they have never navigated before. How leadership succession unfolds in these two countries will define Central Asian politics for decades to come.

Great Power Politics in Central Asia[28]

China, Russia, and the United States have, until recently, pursued diverging objectives in Central Asia. China's priority has been primarily economic, compared to Russia's neo-colonial agenda. And us interests in Central Asia have been focused on supporting the military mission in Afghanistan. These diverging priorities have, thus far, been able to coexist. There are signs, however, that Russian interests are gravitating more toward the economic and Chinese interests are moving more toward the political. Should this trend continue, Central Asian countries may be forced to choose between continuing close political alignment with Russia at the expense of increased Chinese investment or gravitating toward China and risking Moscow's retaliatory manipulation of Central Asian domestic politics. us interests, however, will likely become less defined and, as such, Washington will become increasingly peripheral to the calculus of Central Asian leaderships.

Chinese Interests in Central Asia

Beijing's driving interest in Central Asia is natural resources. China now consumes more of Turkmenistan's gas than does Russia.[29] In 2012 China invest- ed $2.5 billion in Kazakh hydrocarbons.[30] And in 2013 Beijing announced $15

28 An earlier version of this discussion first appeared in "Central Asia's Autocrats: Geopolitically Stuck, Politically Free," August 2015, http://www.ponarseurasia.org/memo/central-asias-autocrats-geopolitically-stuck-politically-free.

29 Martha Brill Olcott, "China's Unmatched Influence in Central Asia," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, September 18, 2013, http://carnegieendowment.org/2013/09/18/ china-s-unmatched-influence-in-central-asia.

30 Daniel C. O'Neill, "Risky Business: The Political Economy of Chinese Investment in Kazakhstan," *Journal of Eurasian Studies*, 5, no. 2 (July 2014): 146, doi:10.1016/j.euras.2014.05.007.

billion in new investments in Uzbek oil, gas, and uranium deals.31 Outside of the energy sector, China has made large investments in construction, gold, and mining. In March 2015 China unveiled its "Silk Road Economic Belt," a plan that will see Beijing investing $40 billion to improve and integrate Central Asia's transportation infrastructure.32 There is reason to believe China will make good on its Silk Road plan. In 2000 Chinese trade with Central Asia was $1.8 billion.33 In 2013 Chinese trade with Central Asia reached $50 billion, a figure firmly establishing Beijing as Central Asia's largest trading partner.34 China, in short, has both the financial resources and the economic interest to continue expanding its presence in Central Asia for decades to come.

China has thus far avoided direct interference in Central Asian politics. China's rapidly expanding economic profile in the region, however, calls into question Beijing's ability and willingness to remain on the political sidelines. A foreshadowing of this new inclination to engage Central Asian politics can be seen in the text of Beijing's Silk Road plan. In its March 2015 announcement of the plan, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs explains that the objective of China's Silk Road Economic Belt is:

> Promoting orderly and free flow of economic factors, highly efficient allocation of resources and deep integration of markets; encouraging the countries along the Belt and Road to achieve economic policy coordination and carry out broader and more in-depth regional cooperation of higher standards; and jointly creating an open, inclusive and balanced regional economic cooperation architecture that benefits all.35

The goal of the Silk Road Economic Belt extends beyond foreign investment. Beijing's vision for greater economic policy coordination, regional cooperation,

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31 Umida Hashimova, "Political and Economic Developments in Uzbekistan: 2013 Year in Review," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, January 24, 2014, http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=41874&no_cache=1 (accessed May 13, 2015).

32 "China to Establish $40 Billion Silk Road Infrastructure Fund," Reuters, November 8, 2014, http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/11/08/us-china-diplomacy-idUSKBN0IS0BQ2014 1108.

33 Jack Farchy, "China's Great Game: In Russia's Backyard," *Financial Times*, October 14, 2015, http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/d35d34ca-6e70-11e5-aca9-d87542bf8673.html#axzz46z WCQg3J.

34 Ibid.

35 "Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road," March 28, 2015, http://en.ndrc.gov.cn/newsrelease/201503/t20150330_669367.html.

standardization, and a "regional economic cooperation architecture," will re- quire institution building and coordinated bilateral and multilateral agreements, something that has traditionally been Moscow's preserve in Central Asia. Recently we have seen signs of what this institution -building might look like. In March 2016 Beijing proposed establishing "an anti-terror regional alliance consisting of Afghanistan, China, Pakistan, and Tajikistan."36 Economic integration requires political stability and, at least at the interstate level, China is expressing a growing willingness to build institutions that can advance political stability.

Russian Interests in Central Asia

Moscow has repeatedly played the role of kingmaker in Central Asia politics. President Emomali Rahmon owes his seat to Moscow's support during and after the 1990s Tajik civil war. Russian state media—which blankets the Kyrgyz press—actively undermined President Kurmanbek Bakieyv's rule and made the Kremlin's position clear that, once the Kyrgyz president was ousted in 2010, he "would not be welcome in Moscow."37 In Astana not a single Kremlin initiative has crossed President Nazarbayev's desk without receiving his approval. And although Nazarbayev needs little prodding, Russian President Vladimir Putin does emphasize from time to time that he is "confident that a majority of its [the Kazakh] population supports development of close ties with Russia. … Nazarbayev is a prudent leader, even the most prudent in the post- Soviet space. He would never act against the will of his country's people."38

Moscow's influence in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan is less pronounced than in the three other Central Asian states. Both Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan have avoided Moscow's multilateral treaties and organizations. At the bilateral level, though, Russian-Uzbek and Russian-Turkmen relations remain strong. Here, too, there is little indication that Central Asia's seeming outlier states have any intention of challenging Moscow's political hegemony in the region.

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36 Joshua Kucera, "China Proposes New Central Asian Military Alliance," EurasiaNet, March 21, 2016, http://www.eurasianet.org/node/77896.

37 Simon Shuster, "Kyrgyzstan: Did Moscow Subvert a us Ally?," *Time*, April 8, 2010, http://content.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1978590,00.html.

38 Ian Traynor, "Kazakhstan Is Latest Russian Neighbour to Feel Putin's Chilly Nationalist Rhetoric," *The Guardian*, September 1, 2014, http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/sep/01/kazakhstan-russian-neighbour-putin-chilly-nationalist-rhetoric (accessed May 14, 2015).

Moscow's vision for Central Asia has expanded, however, beyond politics. The Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), which now includes Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan as well as Russia, Belarus, and Armenia, promises to create a single trade zone among member states. How the Moscow-led EEU will interface with Beijing's Silk Road Economic Belt is unclear. At a May 8, 2015, meeting in Moscow, President Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping pledged to integrate their countries' Central Asia initiatives. Thus, Putin explained, "The EEU and Silk Road projects can harmoniously supplement each other."39

It remains to be seen if the Russian president's optimism will be borne out and if Beijing and Moscow can amicably reconcile their economic and political ambitions. Central Asia's economic future will be profoundly shaped by its ability or inability to achieve this reconciliation. The benefits of closer economic ties with China are clear for Central Asian states. The benefits of economic integration with Russia are less certain. Central Asian countries, however, are in no position to reject Moscow's advances. Russia will not willingly relinquish its geopolitical claim to Central Asia. Should EEU integration with the Silk Road Economic Belt prove untenable and, more broadly, should Chinese goals in Central Asia threaten Russia's neo-colonial claims to regional hegemony, Central Asian leaders will be forced to demonstrate their fealty to Moscow or risk losing their offices to the Kremlin's proven political machinations.

us Interests in Central Asia

us policy toward Central Asia is entering a new, third stage. In the decade after the Soviet collapse, Washington focused its efforts on encouraging Central Asian states to democratize. Following the September 11 terror attacks and the initiation of military actions in Afghanistan, Washington pivoted from democracy promotion to power projection. Now that the us has drawn down its force in Afghanistan, Washington is attempting to redefine its mission in Central Asia.

Deputy Secretary of State Antony Blinken, in a March 31, 2015, Brookings Institute speech introducing the new, yet "Enduring Vision for Central Asia," outlined the us government's three driving goals in Central Asia: (1) advancing "mutual security," (2) "forging closer economic ties," and (3) "advocating for improved governance and human rights." While admirable goals, these are objectives Washington will find difficult to achieve. Moscow has the market on regional security. China eclipses us foreign investment in the region. And the Uzbek, Tajik, Kazakh, Kyrgyz, and Turkmen leaders have repeatedly

39 "Russia and China Agree on Integration of Eurasian Economic Union, Silk Road Projects," tass, May 8, 2015, http://tass.ru/en/economy/793713.

demonstrated that they can ignore with impunity any us efforts at promoting good governance. Washington may be able to affect Central Asian politics at the margins, but it has neither the political influence nor the economic weight that Russia and China have.

Conclusion

Beginning in the late 1990s and lasting through much of the 2000s, analysts repeatedly warned of the looming threat of radical Islam in Central Asia. Analysts again are drawing attention to the specter of Islamist militancy in Central Asia. In April a Tajik special forces commander defected to the Islamic State, raising alarm in Central Asia, Moscow, Western capitals, and in the opinion pages of the international press.40

The Central Asian Islamist threat was overblown in the 2000s and remains overblown today. Kazakh and Uzbek regime instability and great power conflicts, not militant Islam, are what threaten the Eurasian status quo. Stable autocracies in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have kept not only the Kazakh and Uzbek populations quiescent, they have prevented inter-state conflicts that almost certainly would have erupted in the absence of Nazarbayev's and Karimov's tight control over their security services. Political instability in these two countries—a real possibility if leadership successions are botched—could spark irredentist movements in northern Kazakhstan and the Ferghana Valley. These irredentist movements would be capable of fundamentally altering the Central Asian map.

Great power competition in Central Asia, a rivalry between Russia and China, also holds the potential to dramatically shift the Eurasian status quo. Russia and China have long accommodated one another in the region. China remained deferential to Russia's neo-colonial claims and Russia, for its part, abided China's growing economic presence in Eurasia. With the Eurasian Economic Union, however, Russia has signaled its new economic ambitions in Central Asia. And China, with the announcement of its Silk Road Economic Belt and the policy coordination that will come with this initiative, has demonstrated a new willingness to become politically involved in the region. Moscow and Beijing may be able to coordinate their ambitions in Eurasia and continue their past practice of mutual accommodation. An equally likely possibility, however, is that these ambitions will clash and Russia, perceiving its claim to

40 Ahmed Rashid, "Jihad's New Frontier: Tajikistan," *New York Times*, June 11, 2015, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/10/opinion/jihads-new-frontier-tajikistan.html.

Central Asia threatened, will pressure Central Asian leaders to align ever more closely with Moscow.

There is little the us government can do to mediate Russian and Chinese ambitions in Central Asia. The United States can, however, play a constructive role in the leadership successions in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. We know, for example, from the waves of violence that convulsed Kyrgyzstan in 2005 and 2010, that attempts at rapid institutional change disrupt established patterns of patronage rule and that these disruptions result in state collapse, street protests, and ethnic violence. The us, far more so than Russia or China, has worked with Central Asian states to advance good governance. The us can help advance good governance during the coming leadership changes in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan by partnering with Kazakh and Uzbek political elites to achieve incremental rather than rapid political reform. Regime liberalization is an admirable goal, but Central Asian reformers and their Western supporters would do well to pursue this goal at a measured pace rather than through political shock therapy.