

Central Asian Leadership Succession: When, Not If

by Eugene B. Rumer

Key Points

In the next 10 years, leadership succession will emerge as the most important political issue in Central Asia. With the exception of Tajikistan, where a protracted and bloody civil war in the 1990s followed the death of its first post-Soviet president, Central Asia has been ruled by Soviet-era leaders. They have proven to be neither competent reformers nor popular politicians. They are likely to be remembered for their firm hold on power, but that hold has yet to translate into a long-term legacy of stability. The challenge for the next generation of Central Asian leaders—of assuring stability and security through systemic change—promises to be greater than it is today.

Unpopular and mired in allegations of corruption, the current generation of Central Asian leaders have proven themselves nonetheless. They have maintained a measure of stability, which no one at the time of the Soviet breakup took for granted. As they did so, some leaders introduced significant economic reforms and tolerated limited political opposition. Others have accepted neither political nor economic reform and turned their countries into dictatorships.

It is not clear at this point that the successor generation will be up to the difficult tasks of maintaining a modicum of internal stability and sustaining complex diplomatic efforts abroad. Furthermore, there is no evidence that the next generation of leaders will prove capable of making up for the shortcomings of the incumbents.

Leadership succession will be a delicate, complicated process, which the United States can best facilitate by a clear articulation of its interests, intentions, and commitments.

The Central Asian political landscape yields few signs of an impending storm in the near term. The absence of threats to the status quo, however, does not mean that it is acceptable or that it represents a stable political equilibrium in the region. Leadership succession in Central Asia bears watching for several reasons:

- as a precedent-setting process, it will provide the key missing element for the emerging political structures of the Central Asian states
- the tenure of the next generation will either make up for the shortcomings of its predecessors or aggravate them
- in the event of the latter, the stage will be set in Central Asia for more radical changes that could reverberate far beyond remote regional boundaries.

Generational Change

For all the uncertainty surrounding leadership succession in Central Asia, one thing is known: it is going to happen. Saparmurat Niyazov (age 63) of Turkmenistan, Nursultan Nazarbayev (65) of Kazakhstan, Islam Karimov (65) of Uzbekistan, Askar Akayev (58) of Kyrgyzstan, and Imomali Rahmonov (51) of Tajikistan all came of age politically during the Soviet era, and all survived its demise. Male life expectancy in Central Asia hovers around 60. If the actuarial tables are to be believed, over the next decade or so, the question of what these leaders will leave their successors—stasis, chaos, reform—will loom ever larger. In this respect, the recent political crisis in Azerbaijan, triggered by President Heidar Aliiev's declining health and efforts to secure a smooth transfer of power to his son Ilham—culminating in his October 15, 2003, election to the presidency of the country—is only the first act in a drama of generational change.

Furthermore, in November 2003, unrest in the Georgian capital of Tbilisi led to the resignation of Eduard Shevardnadze long before the end of his term as president. While technically not a crisis of succession, Shevardnadze's departure from the scene is likely to focus the minds of fellow post-Soviet leaders on how to hold onto power and how to ensure its orderly transfer to a trusted and worthy successor.

To be sure, leadership succession is not a new issue for the post-Communist states of Central Eurasia. The fact that the incumbent Soviet-era generation of leaders has been in power for more than a decade does not mean that these leaders have not thought about or prepared for succession. Indeed, succession appears to be the main preoccupation of these leaders, who have put the well-being of their personal regimes above all else and done everything within their (considerable) means to keep succession from happening.

This monopolistic pursuit of power has produced stable political regimes whose prospects for continuity and long-term stability are nonetheless in doubt. As incumbents accumulated power and shaped institutional and constitutional arrangements to secure the authority to match their aspirations for political longevity, they eliminated both potential apparent successors and mechanisms that would make succession a predictable and transparent process.

America's Interests

The stakes for the United States are significant, given the changing geopolitics of Eurasia. This may have been a situation that U.S. policymakers could have overlooked 5 to 10

years ago because of what was then widely perceived as rather limited U.S. interests in Central Asia. Not anymore. The future of Central Asia and its continuing stability have become an increasingly important concern for the United States in the aftermath of the military campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq.

American stakes in the region and its stability are now perceived to be greater than they were in the 1990s, when access to Caspian energy dominated Washington's policy concerns. At stake are the post-September 11 U.S. military presence in Central Asia; proximity to Afghanistan; a foothold in the backyard of China, Russia, and Iran; and the security and stability of a vast but poorly governed region of nearly 4 million square kilometers and nearly 60 million inhabitants, rich in mineral wealth, which runs the risk of becoming the geopolitical bone of contention among its neighbors and home to a variety of local, regional, and transnational actors whose behavior has the potential to reverberate throughout the region and far beyond.

In other words, American interests in Central Asia are manifold: they include access to the region for the foreseeable future; ability to control others' access to, and influence over, the region; and steering the countries of Central Asia toward sustained independence, political stability, and economic development. Leadership succession in one or more of these states could put at risk all three of these interests.

For the United States, leadership succession in Central Asia is a complicated issue for several reasons. For more than a decade, but especially since the terrorist attacks of September 11, the United States has developed a series of productive relationships with key regional leaders that have paid off in tangible terms. However, given the peculiarities of Central Asia's domestic politics, these relationships are highly personalized and dependent upon the strength of the personal regime of a given leader. The institutional arrangements underlying U.S.-Central Asian ties are weak, as are the counterpart institutions, which the U.S. Government has sought to develop and enlist as partners.

The example of Azerbaijan is all the more poignant because its former president

Heidar Aliiev, unlike some of his Central Asian counterparts, did not exercise unrestrained power, instead allowing a considerable degree of opposition and relatively free media to exist in Azerbaijan. But even Aliiev, despite many of his statesmanlike qualities and reputation as a rather benign autocrat, failed to see transition in institutional terms and treated it as little more than a dynastic enterprise, seeking to hand over the presidency to his son rather

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than forge a meaningful compromise with the opposition and attempt to institutionalize a more open and transparent process.

Outstanding Issues

The United States is confronted with a paradox: the key factors that have made it possible for U.S.-Central Asian cooperation to develop in the aftermath of September 11 are also the reasons why future U.S. relations with Central Asia have to contend with a strong dose of uncertainty. The handful of institutional relationships that U.S. Government agencies have been able to establish are with institutions that embody the most problematic aspects of their regimes: the security services, which regional leaders have turned into instruments of personal political power and survival. Even though they play an important role as pillars of Central Asian regimes and in U.S.-Central Asian cooperation, these institutions are also among the likely obstacles to political stability in the region in the long run.

In the absence of established open political systems and transparent patterns of orderly transfer of power, the prospect of political transition in Central Asia raises a multitude of questions. How will transition be managed? Who will decide on the order and timing of political transition? What personalities and institutions are likely to play the key role in

that process? What external players are likely to get involved? How will U.S. interests be affected? Is the process likely to lead to political destabilization? Will the existing institutions of power and key power brokers be able to control the political processes? How durable is their hold on power likely to be after the current generation of leaders moves on?

None of these questions can be answered definitively at this point. Nonetheless, the record of Central Asia's post-Soviet development suggests a number of plausible guesses.

The Insiders

The patterns of domestic politics in Central Asia since independence suggest that political transition in the region is likely to be nontransparent to outsiders. It will probably be decided by, at most, a handful of power brokers chosen on the basis of their positions of prominence in an official or unofficial structure—a government agency, clan, ethnic group, or family or regional grouping. Existing constitutional and legal arrangements are more likely to be used to legitimize the power brokers' decision than serve as the guide for their action.

The execution of political transition will be a function of the specific circumstances necessitating it. Given the hold on power of the current generation of leaders, the notion that any of them would initiate an orderly succession while they are still firmly in control or even in the event of a terminal illness appears highly doubtful. Most are likely to view themselves as indispensable to the well-being of their regime and country and therefore probably will cling to power until the very end.

Given the crucial role of security services in post-Soviet regimes of Central Asia, their senior personnel are virtually certain to play an important role in succession. Their support of a particular candidate will be one of the necessary preconditions for a smooth transition and consolidation of power by the new leader.

Senior police and interior ministry personnel are also likely to play an important role in future successions in the region. By virtue of their control of men with guns, they may be called upon to play the crucial role in the event of mass disturbances triggered by leadership transition.

Senior military leadership is likely to have an important voice, albeit a less influential one than either the secret services or the forces of the interior ministries. This is a

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function of the militaries' lack of tradition of involvement in domestic politics and relatively new status as national institutions. Nonetheless, ability to control select military units may prove an important asset should the situation call for use of force in the course of succession or in its aftermath.

While these institutions and, even more importantly, their leaders are bound to play a critical role in any future succession scenario in Central Asia, it would be a mistake to think about succession as a simple unidimensional power play among competing bureaucracies. Far more important and far less transparent to outside observers is likely to be the role of traditional institutions and actors—family, clan, tribe, region, ethnicity—which supercede, but probably not entirely supplant, the obvious institutional structures, further complicating the process of succession and analytical efforts to decode it.

Last but certainly not least among the insiders are the shadow or informal business networks, which are inextricably tied to government institutions, regional factions, clans, and ethnic groups. Following long-established, pre-independence patterns, these networks—sometimes acting in collusion and sometimes in conflict with each other—are almost certain to play key roles in succession struggles.

Outside Players

A crisis of succession in one or more Central Asian countries most likely will involve outside players. The list will probably include one or more of the following: domestic and exiled political opposition leaders; intelligence services of Russia, China, Iran, Turkey, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Israel, and Saudi Arabia; one or more Central Asian countries; corporate entities; and transnational, religious, and separatist groups.

The degree of involvement by external players is much harder to predict than the likelihood of it. Their ability to play a crucial part in succession and to determine its outcome is probably quite limited because of the decisive role reserved for regime insiders. This does not, however, mean that the outsiders will opt to stay out of the fray or that their involvement will be insignificant.

Outside involvement in leadership succession in Central Asia is likely to be proportional to each actor's assessment of interests at stake, opportunities, and costs. Some of their interests

are easily perceptible. For Russia and China, on the one hand, succession in any of Central Asia's countries would present an opportunity to undercut U.S. influence in their strategic backyard. On the other hand, they would have to consider the alternative to the predominant U.S. role in regional security affairs and the specter of destabilization. Neither Russia nor China, despite their individual efforts and cooperative ventures within the framework of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, proved capable of playing the role of the region's security manager. Their cost-benefit analysis of alternatives to the U.S. role in regional security may well lead them toward restraint, for attempts to destabilize the region

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in order to undermine U.S. influence there are likely to backfire and lead to increased threats to their own security.

For Iran, succession in one or more Central Asian countries—but especially in Tajikistan, with which it has close ethnic and cultural ties, and Turkmenistan, with which it shares a long border—would present an opportunity to pierce a gap in what Iranian leaders are likely to perceive as U.S. encirclement. But just like their Russian and Chinese counterparts, Iranian policymakers have to consider the alternative to U.S. efforts to fill the security vacuum in Central Asia. Iranian leaders will have to weigh the prospect of destabilization and power vacuum in the region against the continuing U.S. presence there.

For India and Pakistan, succession in one or more Central Asian countries will present another opportunity to play a balancing act against each other. For corporate players, it would be a chance either to protect or expand their investments.

Predicting the list of likely meddlers in succession scenarios is easier than understanding the cost-benefit analyses that will guide their actions. These will depend on their perceptions of interests and actions of major powers, most

importantly the United States. While regional actors are likely to have—by virtue of shared historical and cultural experience—a solid understanding of each other's equities and intentions, they are likely to have a much weaker grasp of U.S. intentions and interests at stake. For the United States, this calls for clarity and precision in communicating its commitment to and interests in the region.

The good news is that the list of the likely meddlers in Central Asian succession scenarios consists largely of status quo powers. Despite occasional pronouncements to the contrary, not one of Central Asia's neighbors has either the well-defined ambition or the means to emerge as the region's new hegemon. Many can make life difficult for Central Asia, but none is likely to dominate it. Iranian, Russian, and Chinese ambitions in Central Asia appear to be largely defensive. All came together in a peculiar alliance to defeat the Taliban in the late 1990s. All view with suspicion any hint of increased influence of Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, which are seen as sources of destabilizing, militant Islam.

Furthermore, Central Asia is the “strategic backyard” for all of its neighbors. The preeminent strategic concerns—“front yards”—for Russia, China, and Iran are elsewhere—in Europe, East Asia, and the Persian Gulf, respectively. In the context of future successions, stability, continuity, and predictability are likely to be of paramount concern for them, not aggressive pursuit of new spheres of influence or revolutionary change.

The Ultimate Outsiders

The nature of Central Asian regimes, ranging from kleptocratic to totalitarian, leaves little room for their people to have an important role in succession scenarios. There is scant evidence to suggest that popular elections will serve as more than a token legitimizing function in political transition. This is not to say, however, that popular opinion will play no role in that process. That role will be subtle and will vary from country to country.

It would be unfair to paint all of Central Asia with the same totalitarian brush. Two countries—Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan—still maintain elements of an open society. Their ruling regimes have allowed certain amounts of independent media, political opposition, and market-based economic activity, which allow

for limited yet significant competition in the marketplace of ideas and political power. Nonetheless, popular opinion is highly unlikely to prove decisive in determining directly the outcome of succession, even in these more tolerant of the Central Asian countries.

At the same time, public opinion must not be dismissed outright as a factor in leadership succession. There can be little doubt that all Central Asian leaders and elites fear grassroots destabilization and revolt. All are therefore forced to monitor public opinion carefully to keep the level of discontent in the disenfranchised, impoverished public from reaching the boiling point. Public opinion—exercised most likely not at the polls, but as acceptance of transition choices made by the insiders—will play a critical *de facto* legitimizing role in the outcome of transition. Whether that acceptance will be based on clan or tribal loyalties, personal reputation, or both, as well as additional considerations, will not be obvious to outside observers. Nonetheless, public opinion—the ultimate outsider in Central Asia’s internal power politics—is all but certain to be one of the most important factors weighing on the minds of the power brokers as they consider their options.

Limits of Generalization

As the foregoing makes clear, any discussion of Central Asia as a region has its limits. Clearly, U.S. dealings with the five countries that compose it call for a great deal of differentiation. Despite their geographic proximity to each other and a number of common features—shared history of colonization, prevalence of moderate Islam, difficult post-Soviet transformation—generalizations about Central Asia as a region and about U.S. equities there can be counterproductive.

Each country has a unique set of domestic political circumstances, and the United States has a unique set of interests in each of them. Some may not be obvious to casual observers but take on huge importance in a given country’s (and its neighbors’) perspective on its bilateral relations with America.

For example, Turkmenistan may have a well-deserved reputation as a neo-Stalinist dictatorship of little concern to the United States. Nonetheless, its long border with Iran has the potential to make succession and stability in Turkmenistan important concerns to the U.S. national security community.

After Succession

One of the key questions facing both the incumbent regimes and the United States is whether successor regimes will be able to preserve the existing degree of stability in their respective countries. Several conditions are required for that to occur. First among them is the firm consensus among the insiders in support of the new regime. Second, the insiders must be able to withstand or deflect meddling by outsiders. Third—beyond the immediate succession—is progress toward systemic change, which is universally recognized among students of Central Asia as the necessary condition to maintain the region’s stability and guarantee its security.

Absent these conditions, should a crisis occur following succession in the capital of a Central Asian country, is it likely to lead to a wider destabilization? The answer depends on specific country conditions. One factor that is likely to act as a brake on destabilizing tendencies in a succession crisis is the lack of organized opposition in most countries of the region. This makes political mobilization difficult and leaves domestic politics in the hands of a relatively small elite.

This is not to say, however, that in a country such as Tajikistan, with its long-standing ethnic, regional, and tribal divisions, a crisis of succession cannot trigger renewed internal strife. There is nothing in Tajikistan’s current internal political circumstances to suggest that a repeat of its tragic history following the breakup of the Soviet Union can be ruled out.

Islamic extremism is also on the list of potentially destabilizing factors in the context of leadership succession in Central Asia. However, militant Islam was dealt a heavy blow as a result of the defeat of the Taliban regime and Central Asia’s indigenous militant groups that had found refuge in Afghanistan before 2001. Any potential resurgence of these groups in Central Asia probably would be a product of the long-term systemic conditions that prevail in the region rather than leadership succession itself. Furthermore, few of the outsiders or potential meddlers are likely to give shelter and provide support to these groups because almost all of the outside powers had made a common front against the Taliban government, its brand of militant Islam, and its protégés.

Slow Change

While inevitable, succession is not certain to bring to the fore a new generation of leaders, nor is it obvious that the new team, while a product of more than a decade of independence, will be fundamentally different from or better than its predecessors. Although almost certain to have had more exposure to Western culture and values and be more urbane than their predecessors, the new leaders remain part and parcel of a system riddled with nepotism and corruption and are unlikely candidates to lead their countries toward systemic change. Thus, change is likely to be very slow, and possibly painful, in Central Asia.

In the near to mid-term, succession does not pose a major problem for the United States. The present alignment of domestic interests that has supported Central Asia’s rapprochement with the United States is likely to remain in place with all the attendant consequences for U.S. equities at stake. In the long run, however, this is a problem that the United States will have to confront as a function of its continuing involvement and interests in the region. Stagnation in Central Asia is fraught with the prospect of destabilization. Moreover, already in the near to mid-term, the United States runs the risk of becoming increasingly associated in the eyes of Central Asian public opinion with the region’s oppressive and corrupt regimes.

This is not a new problem for U.S. policy in Central Asia, and there are no quick or easy solutions. In weighing our choices, we must be prepared to keep a long-term perspective and develop a clear sense of priorities that can keep the prospects for reform alive during a possibly turbulent period.

U.S. Policy Priorities

Without question, the top priority for the region must be economic liberalization, which can be an important pacing element for political reform. None of the countries in Central Asia can be held up as the paragon of political and economic reform, but the two that have made the most progress in the area of economic reform—Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan—also happen to be the two that have had the benefit of relatively open (by Central Asian standards) political regimes. The two countries that have accomplished the least in the area of economic reform—Uzbekistan

Central Asia



KAZAKHSTAN

[Qazaqstan Respublikasy]

Capital Astana
Area 1,052,100 square miles
Head of state Nursultan Nazarbayev (became first party secretary, 1989)
GDP per capita (2002) \$6,560
Defense budget (2003) \$274 million
Population 15,989,000
Males (18–32 years) 2,205,000
Armed forces 65,800 active; 237,000 reservists [estimate]
Birth rate (per 1,000 population) 14
Infant mortality (per 1,000 live births) 20.8
Life expectancy (for men) 58.9 years

KYRGYZSTAN

[Kyrgyz Respublikasy]

Capital Bishkek
Area 77,180 square miles
Head of state Askar Akayev (elected president, 1990)
GDP per capita (2002) \$2,950
Defense budget (2003) \$24 million
Population 5,078,000
Males (18–32 years) 619,000
Armed forces 10,900 active; 57,000 reservists
Birth rate (per 1,000 population) 21.7
Infant mortality (per 1,000 live births) 7.2
Life expectancy (for men) 63.4 years

TAJIKISTAN

[Jumkhurii Tojikiston]

Capital Dushanbe
Area 55,240 square miles
Head of state Imomali Rahmonov (became president of Supreme Soviet, 1992)
GDP per capita (2002) \$1,275
Defense budget (2003) \$16 million
Population 6,116,000
Males (18–32 years) 843,000
Armed forces some 6,000 active
Birth rate (per 1,000 population) 17.7
Infant mortality (per 1,000 live births) 19.9
Life expectancy (for men) 64.5 years

TURKMENISTAN

[Turkmenistan]

Capital Ashkhabad
Area 186,4000 square miles
Head of state Saparmurat Niyazov (became first party secretary, 1985)
GDP per capita (2002) \$8,247
Defense budget (2003) \$173 million
Population 4,850,000
Males (18–32 years) 589,000
Armed forces 29,000 [estimate]
Birth rate (per 1,000 population) 20.3
Infant mortality (per 1,000 live births) 52
Life expectancy (for men) 62.5 years

UZBEKISTAN

[Uzbekiston Respublikasy]

Capital Tashkent
Area 172,741 square miles
Head of state Islam Karimov (became first party secretary, 1989)
GDP per capita (2002) \$ 2,531
Defense budget (2003) \$46 million
Population 25,678,000
Males (18–32 years) 3,219,000
Armed forces 50,000 to 55,000 active
Birth rate (per 1,000 population) 23.1
Infant mortality (per 1,000 live births) 22.3
Life expectancy (for men) 65.8 years

Sources: The Statesman's Yearbook: The Politics, Cultures and Economies of the World 2004 (Basingstoke, U.K.: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance, 2003–2004* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

and Turkmenistan—are also the ones that have the region's most oppressive regimes.

The strength of the regime in Uzbekistan—the pivotal Central Asian state—for example, makes the trade-off between political and economic liberalization in favor of the latter a relatively safe bet. The biggest threat to regime stability lies in the impoverishment of the population and lack of employment or commercial opportunities. A program of assistance aimed at creating such opportunities would go a long way toward defusing internal tensions and enhancing stability in Uzbekistan and the region. The relative stability of the Uzbek regime means that it has the time to work with U.S. assistance to implement an economic development program that would contribute to domestic political stability.

Another priority for U.S. efforts in Central Asia ought to be large infrastructure projects. Roads and water have been repeatedly mentioned as the two weak spots in the region's economic development. Projects sponsored by the United States and the international community that are aimed at providing Central Asia with new highways linking it to the Indian subcontinent would open new commercial opportunities, create jobs, and provide new strategic outlets for the land-locked region.

A further benefit of the Central Asian regimes' relative stability is that the United States has the time to work with the new generation of leaders and assist in the development of key institutions that could ultimately play the decisive role in securing the region and making it more stable. Therefore, education and training must be given a high priority. Without harboring undue expectations and illusions about the impact of generational change on Central Asia's internal developments, the leaders who will come to the top of the political pyramid in 10 to 15 years will have far more exposure to the outside world than their parents.

That difference alone is unlikely to be sufficient to alter the domestic political dynamics in Central Asia. The United States should undertake a sustained effort to educate and professionalize the next generation of Central Asian leaders—in business, government, military, and other areas—and forge a shared understanding of what is likely to be at stake when they are ready to assume power. Such an effort, combined with a carefully targeted program of economic assistance, are the best options U.S. policy has at its disposal

for influencing the long-term trends in Central Asia and helping it achieve long-term stability and security.

Central Asian perceptions of U.S. power in the aftermath of military campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq have added an important cache of credibility to the United States in the eyes of local elites, long eager for help in managing regional security affairs. While U.S. policymakers may find themselves frustrated by

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their inability to encourage positive change in Central Asia, analysts in Moscow, Tehran, and Beijing, as well as the capitals of Central Asia proper, will pay far more attention to U.S. military presence there and other manifestations of U.S. "hard" power and the ability to project it. It should be noted here that these perceptions of the United States are likely to be disproportionately affected by these analysts' peculiar interpretations of U.S. policy initiatives in the region—interpretations that will have little to do with their original intent.

Nonetheless, the "shock and awe" effect on Central Asia from the military campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq should not be overestimated. Central Asian elites and leaders are likely to have two major reasons for scrutinizing the aftermath of both campaigns. The first has to do with their fears of continuing instability in both countries and the possibility of it spreading to affect their own security and stability. The second reason has to do with their perceptions of U.S. long-term commitment to combat the kinds of challenges that

may confront Central Asia—and the United States as a result of its presence there—in the future. How they gauge American commitment and stamina will have a powerful and long-lasting effect on their attitudes toward the United States and will affect U.S. relationships and interests in the region.

The next round of succession in Central Asia is unlikely to destabilize the region radically. Leadership succession will be a delicate and complicated process, which on the part of the United States can best be facilitated by precision and clarity about its interests, intentions, and programs, as well as by flexibility and realistic expectations with regard to the developments in Central Asia itself and its neighbors.

We overlook this process at our peril. What the next generation of Central Asian leaders is and does, and how the United States interacts with it, will have a profound impact on Central Asia and its long-term future. In the best of all worlds, this next generation will see an opening to act on the agenda bequeathed to it by the region's current leaders. If it fails, the prospects for a stable and secure future for Central Asia 20 years from now will be bleak indeed.

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