

EURASIA'S VITAL NERVE CENTRE

Lord Waverley, Chairman of the Central Asia All Party Parliamentary Group, reflects on matters relating to regional security in Central Asia



THE COLLAPSE OF THE SOVIET UNION in 1991 opened the world order to the newly independent countries of Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan). These states found themselves in an increasingly globalised environment without any preparation or pre-warning. A vital nerve centre of Eurasia, the region now attracts the attention of its near and far neighbours in matters of commerce, security, politics and culture.

The Ditchley Foundation recently hosted a timely conference to coincide with the 20th anniversary celebrations of these countries. The aim was to look at developments within the republics; their mutual relationships; prospects for economic growth and further regional integration; and the broader international significance of the region. While fully acknowledging the significant differences between these five countries, the

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conference aimed to analyse regional trends, and the countries' relationships with their neighbours and other international partners, and to discuss how this area of great geopolitical importance – at the crossroads of Europe and the rest of Asia – is likely to develop over the coming years.

Attention focused on three main issues: the role of international organisations in the region and Central Asian

perceptions of these organisations; the role of major powers in the region; and the implications of the NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan. A second basket of issues that are politically sensitive and difficult includes water use and distribution, energy co-operation, interethnic relations, democratisation and governance,

security and the management of external relations, especially with the major powers. The group also discussed in some detail the challenge that will arise from the region's south.

Historically, Central Asia has been the object of great

power rivalry because of its strategic location and resources, and to some extent it remains so today in a post-imperial, post-Soviet era. The challenge for the Central Asian states is to maximise the benefit from the competing interests. The US interest in Central Asia today is largely a function of the war in Afghanistan, although economic and broader political interests also underlie this, and it is unclear how American interests will evolve after 2014 (when the Afghan people will become wholly responsible for their own

security, according to the US President). Russia's interest in Central Asia is longer term and, if we are to believe Mr Putin's latest pronouncements, Moscow will seek to develop a new Eurasian Union during the next period of his presidency. Russia is directly impacted by security threats that emanate from Central Asia, most importantly drugs and religious fundamentalism. The conference included a lively discussion about Russian views of America's presence in the region and about Central Asian views of Russia's intentions. China, Turkey and Iran are also important outside actors, each with their own agendas.

Given the uncertainty about what will happen after 2014, the impact of NATO's withdrawal from Afghanistan is of concern. Afghanistan could revert to its pre-2001 position and the existence of a political vacuum could encourage the re-emergence of patterns that were present after the Soviet withdrawal in 1989, with different regional powers supporting rival ethnic groups. The key country will be Pakistan, which has played a major and often counterproductive role in this conflict. A variety of scenarios, both positive and negative, were discussed. In Northern Afghanistan, visible progress was recorded in terms of education and civil society amongst other positive developments in the country.

Afghanistan is considered a neighbour rather than an integral part of the Central Asian region, but nonetheless it is clear that the Central Asian states will be profoundly affected by what happens there after the NATO withdrawal. Already cooperating with Afghanistan in a variety of bilateral and multilateral ways, Central Asia should be encouraged to see its fate as linked to that of Afghanistan after 2014. Central Asia has a major role to play in Afghan recovery and reconstruction. It is timely now for these states to be in a discussion about planning for life after the military stage.

The EU is also playing an increasingly important role in Central Asia, using soft power to tackle soft security problems. In terms of hard security, there was disagreement over what the Collective Security Treaty Organisation had accomplished. Some claimed that it was an important contributor to stability in the region, others pointed out that it had failed to have an impact on crucial security issues such as trafficking in drugs, arms or people, and had done

nothing during the violence in Osh, Kyrgyzstan last year. The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, on the other hand, was generally viewed as a useful organisation, which had so far effectively managed rivalry between Russia and China in Central Asia

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However it is the main principles and drivers of future economic development in the region that are key. Commodity prices (including oil and gas) are likely to be a significant factor affecting the future.

The completion of new pipelines to export oil and gas from Central Asia to markets in China and the rest of the world is having, and will continue to have, a significant impact on the global markets for those commodities. In the gas sector, recently completed export pipelines are allowing Central Asian gas producers to diversify their markets and earn higher prices for their gas exports. Gas remains to a large extent a regionally traded commodity and new gas supplies from Central Asia are already having a big impact in China, where they have reduced the pressure on the Chinese authorities to conclude a supply agreement with Russia. As export volumes to China increase, we could see less demand for other sources of gas from Chinese buyers, leading to greater competition for markets between liquefied natural gas suppliers in Russia, the Middle East and Australia.

However, there are other world gas supplies (and the Central Asian gas should not be overestimated or overplayed). Chinese economic interests in Central Asia are expanding and diversifying: Central Asia is no longer purely an energy supplier; the region's non-hydrocarbon industries are also increasingly attracting interest from China, which has become one of the key partners of these five states. Russia and India are also key partners with strong interests in the region and their own agenda to pursue. The Iranian factor could, however, play the biggest role. At present, Iran looks ready for a serious confrontation with the West on the nuclear issue. None of the Central Asian countries will support the Western point of view in this regard, since Iran is an important partner for all these states. So the succession of power in Iran will play a crucial role. The situation in the Eurozone will also play a role in the health of the economic systems of the Central Asian states.

The region will find itself in an increasingly multipolar world. Russia and China will remain major sources of influence, and Afghanistan and Iran sources of uncertainty and challenge. The question of the relationship with Europe and the US is uncertain, but will continue to represent an additional option for engagement. In the end, the region's destiny is largely in the hands of the five countries themselves. Success will depend on their ability to find ways to develop governance structures which meet the economic, social and political aspirations of people from all communities.