

Is a Central Asian Spring Likely?

Subodh Atal*

Like Middle East, the five 'stans' of the Central Asian region have repressive regimes, poor governance, ethnically fragmented populations, income inequality and a lack of opportunity. This, when combined with the past unrest including Islamic fundamentalism and vast energy resources in some of the regions, poses the question of whether there can be a "Central Asian Spring" with mass anti-government revolts and overthrows. This article examines the question via a review of these countries' recent histories and current situations – case by case – along with an analysis of the regional security architecture. It comes to the conclusion that such an outcome is unlikely in the current context.

INTRODUCTION

The year 2011 will be remembered as a landmark, with decades-long equilibrium and equations in the Middle East upended. The "Arab Spring", reportedly triggered by a self-immolation in Tunisia in December 2010, has caught fire all across the region. Egypt's Hosni Mubarak, Libya's Muammar Qaddafi and Tunisia's Ben Ali have been overthrown while Yemen's strongman Ali Abdullah Saleh barely survived an attack, his injuries forcing him out of the country. Regimes in nations such as Syria and Bahrain have resorted to varying degrees of severe repression.

Other countries such as Saudi Arabia, Morocco and Jordan are trying to stay ahead of the revolutionary curve by offering a varied mix of economic and political carrots to restive populations. Strategic calculations for this region by world powers, notably the US, Russia and China, are being reformulated. NATO has been drawn into along Libyan civil war. The fast moving events in various parts of the region are still at an early stage and

*Subodh Atal is an independent foreign policy analyst specialising in South and Central Asia. His analyses on topics related to these regions have been published in the Cato Institute Policy Analysis and Foreign Policy Briefing series, The National Interest, The Mediterranean Quarterly and The American Conservative. Mr. Atal's op-eds have appeared in newspapers such as Chicago Sun-Times, San Diego Union-Tribune and the Orange County Register. Mr. Atal was a member of the 2005 Cato Institute Special Task Force, which authored the book "Why the US Must End the Military Occupation and Renew the War against Al Qaeda".

the ultimate end points in the various nations and in the region as a whole are impossible to gauge.

Another region, Central Asia, shares tinderbox ingredients with the Middle East, including oil and gas reserves that are vast enough to draw attention from energy-hungry nations of the world, national boundaries artificially drawn by colonial powers within the past century, Islamic fundamentalist segments in the society, and a ruling class that clings to power while much of the general population is denied economic opportunities and freedom of expression.

In one country in the region, Kyrgyzstan, revolts have overthrown two successive presidents, while intra-ethnic conflicts within and across its boundaries continue to simmer. A mix of authoritarianism, weak legal systems and derelict infrastructure mean that in the other regional countries, poverty and discontent are common. In Uzbekistan, a revolt in the Andijan area was put down with Islam Karimov's characteristic repression in 2005. Along with Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan had the ignominious distinction of being listed in Freedom House's recent compilation of the "Worst of the Worst 2011: The World's Most Repressive Societies". Being part of upcoming great power China does not help Xinjiang distinguish itself from the rest of Central Asia. In 2009, the autonomous region erupted in inter-ethnic riots just a year after China had showcased its progress at the Beijing Olympics.

With these similarities to the Middle East, inevitable questions arise. Are conditions ripe for anti-government fervour in the near future in Central Asia? And could unrest spread rapidly across the region? A phenomenon similar to the Middle East would have far reaching consequences. Central Asia has become a key player in the world energy market, and widespread unrest there would further damage the shaky global economy. Furthermore, its geo-strategic significance implies that regional powers such as Russia, China and India would have intense interests in heading off or containing such events.

The United States, with a long time involvement in Afghanistan, a key military base in Kyrgyzstan, as well as interests in the energy potential of the region, also would have keen concerns in such an event. Russia and China jointly head the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), an alliance of regional nations that includes all the Central Asian "stans". The Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) is the security arm of the nearly defunct Russian-led Commonwealth of Independent States

(CIS). Structures within both these alliances could potentially get drawn into any unrest, just as NATO has been drawn into a long standoff with the erstwhile Qaddafi regime in an attempt to shape the outcome of the civil war in Libya.

In order to understand the likelihood and implications of such unrest in the region, a review of the historic context, the conditions within each nation, as well as an understanding of the regional security structures and alliances and their efficacy in handling regional issues, is imperative.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Central Asia sits at the crossroads of strategic geopolitics and hosts corridors for global trade. This potential was abundantly realised in the form of the busy Silk Road that enriched numerous towns and cities along its routes centuries ago. Since the Soviet Union's collapse, global energy demand has spurred a proliferation of oil and gas pipelines (and plans for) connecting energy-rich Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan with major energy consumers such as China and Europe.

With China to the east, the Indian subcontinent to the south, Russia to the north, and the road to the Middle East and Europe to the west, this region has had a multitude of influences and invasions from each side. Thus Russian, Chinese, Mongolian, Turkish, Persian and other connections remain even while Islam has been the predominant religion and cultural influence. The most recent cultural influence was the colonisation by Russia, which ended with the crumbling of the Soviet Union in 1991. The current borders were drawn in the 1920s by the Soviets. The boundaries split ethnic communities among the five different Central Asian countries, in an attempt to reduce Islamic, Turkish and Iranian influence. Ethnic composition of the countries was further altered due to immigration by Russians during czarist and Soviet rule. In addition, during World War II, there was a combination of forced deportation of uncooperative ethnic groups and evacuations from areas under threat from German military advances. These ethnic mixes add to the tensions within the nations and across national boundaries.

The countries had significant economic aid from the central Soviet state. After 1991, the aid vanished, leaving the nations to cope on their own. Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan sit on immense oil and natural gas resources, which were diverted up north towards Russia during the Soviet era. With

attention now coming from China, Europe, US and others, these two energy-rich nations hold the most potential for a bright economic future within the region. However, the authoritarianism and poor governance in the two countries, similar to those in petro-Arab states means the potential may not be fully realised. The economic fruits of these resources could end up disproportionately in the hands of the regimes rather than be invested in the kind of growth seen in fast moving economies around the world today. Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, particularly the latter two, are far less generously endowed with natural resources than Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan. Lack of good governance is common among the nations, while poverty, income inequality and ethnic tensions all contribute to the likelihood of unrest, fears of which have already come to fruition several times in the short contemporary history of Central Asia.

A. Kazakhstan

The nation is the largest among the Central Asian ‘stans’. It adjoins Siberia to its north, China to the east and shares part of the Caspian Sea coast on the west. Due to its proximity to Russia, Kazakhstan’s ethnic Russian minority is the largest in the region and despite declining from the Soviet era, is still at about 30% of the population. The Soviet-era strongman Nursultan Nazarbayev has ruled with an iron hand ever since the nation’s 1991 emergence as an independent state.

Kazakhstan has the 11th largest proven reserves of oil and the 15th largest proved natural gas reserves. The earlier reliance on Russian pipelines has been steadily eroded. Kazakhstan’s oil is now exported through the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline to Europe, as well as through pipelines being built to China. In addition to energy exports, Kazakhstan is also rich in minerals, including uranium, titanium and others. These riches provide the country a significant economic advantage over the rest of its Central Asian neighbours. Between 1991 and 2007, the nation’s economy flourished, growing at a brisk 9% average pace. While economic growth has favoured those connected to the regime – an inevitable consequence of the lack of democracy – Nazarbayev’s regime has not put too many hurdles in the path towards a free market economy.

The relative economic prosperity has quenched some of the ethnic tensions that the mix of orthodox Russians (and a smaller Ukrainian minority) with the Islamic Kazakhs and Uzbeks could possibly engender. The Nazarbayev regime, worried by last year’s overthrow of the Kyrgyz president Bakiyev

and the subsequent Kyrgyz-Uzbek violence, has been emphasizing ethnic unity. The southern part of Kazakhstan, with a significant Uzbek minority, is poorer, and economic progress, rather than ethnic unity campaigns, may be the key to preventing unrest there.

Kazakhstan, of all Central Asian nations, has been the most successful in avoiding the spread of radical Islam. Two recent incidents hint at a possible change in this environment. On May 17th, 2011, a 25 year old man blew himself up in the offices of a government intelligence unit, in Aktole, an oil city in western Kazakhstan. A week later, a car blew up outside an Astana facility run by the unit. These appear to be the first suicide bombings in Kazakhstan. While the motives are unknown, the incidents suspiciously happened soon after the government announced that four Kazakh “reconstruction specialists” would be stationed at NATO headquarters in Afghanistan. Reports of Kazakhs killed in Russian clashes with Islamic militants also indicate that the country may not be as much of an oasis from fundamentalism as its leaders claim.

Despite incipient Islamic fundamentalism, and the potential for unrest in the poorer south of Kazakhstan, this nation may be the least ripe for instability of the Central Asian countries, as indicated by a survey done in August 2010. The poll, conducted in the aftermath of the Kyrgyz regime change and Ferghana valley violence, suggests a large majority of the population is in favour of status quo.

B. Turkmenistan

Turkmenistan shares three characteristics with its northern neighbour Kazakhstan, as well as with several Middle Eastern nations: the Caspian Sea shoreline, abundant hydrocarbon reserves and authoritarianism. While Kazakhstan’s energy wealth is preponderantly in the form of oil, Turkmenistan is far richer in natural gas than oil. Its proved natural gas reserves are the fourth largest in the world, next only to Russia, Iran and Qatar. Turkmenistan has strived to expand its pipeline network to supply Europe and China, apart from its Soviet era exports up north to Russia. Another significant export route in the works is the TAPI (Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India) pipeline, largely to supply energy hungry India.

Its economic promise is tempered, however, by poor governance. Turkmenistan’s regime maintains a far tighter rein on its citizens than

Kazakhstan. For the first decade and a half of its independence, Sapurmyrat Niyazov maintained total monopoly on power and established a personality cult. After a November 2002 attack on Niyazov's motorcade, the regime cracked down even harder on perceived opposition, imprisoning suspected members of the opposition and even family members.

Niyazov's death in 2007, and the subsequent passing of the presidency to Gurbanguly Berdimukhammedov, has done little to change the conditions in the country. According to a UN report issued on June 6th, 2011, reports of torture are "numerous and consistent" and "there appears to be a climate of impunity resulting in the lack of meaningful disciplinary action or criminal prosecution against persons of authority accused of [torture]". Religious freedom is also limited, and religious institutions have to register with the government to function. Protests are almost unknown, and a recent (June 8th) demonstration by about 50 people in the capital city of Ashgabat against home demolitions was quickly broken up by police.

Freedom House's 2011 report on repressive regimes lists Turkmenistan as one of the 10 "worst of the worst" nations. According to this report, academic freedom is severely restricted in the country, and a state run service provider controls access to the Web. Freedom of association and media freedoms are severely restricted in the nation. Foreign news agencies are faced with official hostility, and local journalists who fell afoul of the regime have suffered years of imprisonment and torture. Due process is lacking, with the president retaining sole power to hire and remove judges. Activities by NGOs, while not illegal, are discouraged by the authorities, and civil society institutions are non-existent.

Unlike Kazakhstan, the Turkmen economic model is reminiscent of the Soviet centralised system, and consequently a large financial disparity has emerged between those closer to the regime and the rest of the population. The profits from the gas exports to Russia, Iran and China have been diverted towards grandiose projects by the regime, with insufficient attention paid to key infrastructure such as telecommunications, roads and health facilities. Doctors without Borders, in an April 2010 report, accused authorities in Turkmenistan of concealing the gravity of the public health situation.

C. Uzbekistan

Uzbekistan boasts of some of the most famous world heritage sites such as the Silk Road cities of Samarkand and Bukhara. The area thrived

economically in ancient times, with the East-West trade bringing riches to the area, which was reflected in exquisite architecture and buildings. Decline set in with numerous invasions starting in the 17th century and Russian/Soviet rule during the 19th and 20th centuries.

Since independence after the Soviet disintegration in 1991, lack of free markets and limited foreign investment has prevented Uzbekistan from realising the full economic potential of its natural gas, oil and mineral resources. From Soviet times, cotton has been Uzbekistan's major industry and forms a significant part of its economy. However, the mismanagement of its water resources for cotton cultivation has had a catastrophic effect on the Aral Sea. Satellite pictures show that the once large sea has lost most of its volume of water within the past two decades – in effect one of the world's worst ecological disasters. The effects of this loss have reverberated through the environment as well as the economy, resulting in pollution and migrations. The combination of a lack of a market economy and mismanagement of its resources contributes to significant income inequality. Pervasive corruption ensures that the elite associated with the regime are preponderantly able to take advantage of economic opportunities.

Uzbekistan shares the ignominious distinction with Turkmenistan of being one of the two “Worst of the Worst” repressive Central Asian regimes in the annual global list compiled by Freedom House. President Islam Karimov and his regime retain tight control and any political opposition is severely repressed. Freedoms of speech, media and religion are non-existent. Civic activists and non-conforming journalists are prosecuted and face lengthy prison terms. Abuse and torture of political opponents in Uzbek prisons has been well publicised. Government intrusion extends deep into towns and villages, where traditional *maballa* (neighbourhood) committees have become conduits for official surveillance. Freedom of assembly and of association is also restricted, and organising without official sanction risks government persecution.

Since early in Uzbekistan's independent history, the Karimov regime has struggled to head off Islamic fundamentalism in the country. Two Salafist groups in particular, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), and Hizb-ut-Tahrir, has attempted to make Uzbekistan into the primary battleground for bringing about Islamic rule in Central Asia. The IMU, which also fraternises with Al Qaeda in Pakistan and Afghanistan, has carried out several violent attacks in Uzbekistan in the late 1990s and

in 2004, including bombings and hostage-takings. Hizb-ut-Tahrir does not advocate violent jihad, but still espouses a return to a global Islamic caliphate encompassing all Muslim nations, finds sympathy and followers in the Ferghana valley. President Karimov uses the fear of the IMU and Hizb-ut-Tahrir to justify the extreme repression in the nation.

While the IMU is clearly on the run in Uzbekistan, and Hizb activities are well contained, the stifling of democracy has not always been successful. In May 2005, unrest over the imprisonment of two dozen businessmen in Andijan, a key city in Ferghana valley, boiled over and protesters stormed the prison, freeing the businessmen, and taking over local administrative buildings. Many protestors occupied the central Babur Square in the city, shouting slogans against the Karimov regime. In scenes uncannily presaging those in Egypt, Syria, and other Middle Eastern countries undergoing the “Arab spring”, government forces fired upon the massed protesters in the square. Civilian deaths are estimated to have been in the hundreds. The protests and government action continued for several days afterwards. Many refugees fled to Kyrgyzstan, and the authorities expelled numerous media organisations, NGOs and human rights groups in the aftermath.

Karimov, at the age of 72, is looking at succession plans. His daughter, Gulnara, is an unlikely candidate to follow in his footsteps. Another candidate could be Ilgizar Sobirov, who chairs the Uzbek Senate. However, his level of support in such an event is uncertain. If Karimov decides to voluntarily leave the post, or health or sudden death create a power vacuum, conditions for unrest like that in Arab nations may be possible, unbridling long repressed forces.

D. Kyrgyzstan

Without the benefit of the oil and natural gas deposits that Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan have, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are the poor siblings in Central Asia. Kyrgyzstan holds the distinction in Central Asia of being the only nation to have had its post-Soviet dictator overthrown, and not once, but twice. In recent years, it has also been the most democratic nation in the region. While the democracy has been deeply flawed at times with regimes repeatedly trying to accumulate undue power, the extent and degree of repression seen in other Central Asian countries is not evident in Kyrgyzstan.

Its first president, Askar Akayev, who initially was popular and won in legitimate polls, steadily accumulated power. Akayev’s regime resorted to

electoral irregularities in the 2000 elections to ensure that results were in its favour. Organization of Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) observers declared that the 2000 elections were invalid. Nationwide protests were held in 2002 after an opposition politician was shot dead by the police. In response, Akayev promised constitutional reforms. However, the changes he actually instituted in 2003 weakened the parliament and the constitutional court, giving him even more power. Elections in February-March 2005 followed the trend away from democracy. While there was some improvement in electoral procedures, OSCE observers again declared that the elections could not be termed “free and fair”.

Before the “Arab spring” term came into vogue in 2011, there were the colour revolutions: Georgia had its Rose revolution in 2003, Ukraine had an Orange revolution in 2005, and Iran’s opposition staged the ill-fated Green revolution in 2009. In the case of Kyrgyzstan, the unrest after the March 2005 elections turned into the Tulip revolution. Protests against massive electoral fraud began soon after the election results were announced. Within days, protestors overran the presidential administration building, forcing Akayev to flee the country.

Opposition leader Kurmanbek Bakiyev took over after Akayev’s overthrow, and was formally elected president in July 2005 polls that were regarded reasonably fair compared to elections during the Akayev era. After some progress towards constitutional reforms, Bakiyev started retracing Akayev’s footsteps. In late 2007, Bakiyev made retrogressive changes in the constitution and held elections that repeated the irregularities carried out by the previous regime. Elections held in 2009 were equally flawed, again returning Bakiyev and his cronies to power. Opposition to Bakiyev mounted, and nationwide protests were held in April 2010. Violent clashes between the opposition and security forces resulted in dozens of deaths. Between April 6th and 15th, a second post-Soviet coup had occurred: protesters overran security headquarters in Bishkek, and former foreign minister Roza Otunbayeva took over as the new leader, while President Bakiyev resigned and fled the country.

Kyrgyzstan shares the Ferghana valley with Uzbekistan, and has a significant Uzbek minority. Kyrgyz-Uzbek ethnic tensions in the region, long suppressed during Soviet rule, have been simmering since independence. Ex-President Bakiyev reportedly favoured the Kyrgyz. Soon after his ouster, there were reports of Kyrgyz attacks on Uzbeks in Ferghana valley. Kyrgyz had also attacked ethnic Russians in northern

Kyrgyzstan around the same time, however, the far more serious clashes with Uzbeks escalated. In early June 2010, large parts of the cities of Osh and Jalalabad were burnt down. Mobs singled out Uzbek residences and stores for destruction. The new regime blamed the deposed Bakiyev for fomenting the violence. Russia, terming the violence Kyrgyzstan's internal affair, turned down Otunbayeva's repeated pleas of help. By the time the violence died down in mid-June, significant ethnic cleansing had taken place, with tens of thousands of Uzbeks having fled across the border to Uzbekistan.

As on the Uzbekistan side, the Ferghana valley is also a hotbed for Islamic fundamentalist activity in Kyrgyz territory. Some have expressed fear that the clashes and unrest in Kyrgyz cities such as Osh and Jalalabad, and the lack of economic prospects in the area, could help the IMU and Hizb-ut-Tahrir to make further inroads into the valley. A well-known human rights activist, Dinara Oshurahunova, however, points out that with Bakiyev's ouster, the sense of repression in the valley has diminished, and locals are less likely to be recruited by extremist groups.

In June 2010, Otunbayeva conducted a referendum which ushered in a parliamentary system, moving away from the presidential system favoured by the rest of the Central Asian nations. At the first anniversary of this landmark change in Kyrgyzstan, it is not clear that governance has improved significantly; however, the devolution of power in at least one country in the region cannot but be a step in the right direction.

E. Tajikistan

Tajikistan lags behind even Kyrgyzstan economically. In fact it is the poorest nation not only in Central Asia but also among all ex-Soviet states. Unlike Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, Tajikistan doesn't have the abundant hydrocarbon sources to convert to financial prosperity. At the same time Tajikistan's regime is repressive, ineffective and corrupt, with uncertain control over large parts of the nation.

A bloody, prolonged civil war started soon after Tajikistan's emergence from Soviet rule. Lasting from 1992 to 1997, the war was joined by many militias and regional groups, largely from the southern part of the nation, pitted against President Emomali Rakhmonov's supporters. The primary group amongst the opposition alliance was the Islamic Renaissance Party. While Rakhmonov's side was supported by Russia and its newly formed

allies from the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), the southern alliance received support from the then Afghan mujahedeen as well as from Iran, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. An estimated, 50-100,000 lives were lost in the war and over a million civilians were internally displaced. The civil war further decimated the economy of Tajikistan. At the end of the war in 1997, over 60% of 16-29 year olds were unemployed. The end of the conflict was aided by sustained efforts of the Dartmouth Conference Regional Conflicts Task Force, a joint US-Russian non-governmental group.

Rakhmonov's regime has persisted for the decade and a half since the end of the civil war, holding several elections each of which have not met OSCE standards while returning Rakhmonov to massive majorities. His regime restricts media reporting of any opposition, and any direct protests are severely punished.

The country also has an on-going problem with Islamic militancy. In the past year, ambushes by militants have killed about 60 Tajik soldiers. Some reports suggest that the government has been carrying out a large-scale operation to root out the militants, some of who may belong to the IMU. The terrorist organisation's members have been reported to move back and forth between Tajikistan and Afghanistan, with which it shares a long border. Lack of media independence leaves the extent of the militancy is hard to gauge. While much of the population may be exhausted from the long civil war in the 1990s, this is one Central Asian nation where the threat of conflict with Islamic radicals remains more real than in other nations, whose regimes use the Islamic bogeyman to justify their authoritarian rule.

REGIONAL ALLIANCES AND SECURITY STRUCTURES

Earlier in 2011, in one instance in the Middle East-Bahrain-the Gulf Cooperation Council stepped in to send troops to help quell the uprising. NATO launched a longer and much more intense intervention in Libya. In Colonel Qaddafi's instance, his long-time reputation as a ruthless dictator, global pariah and one time goal of seeking nuclear weapons clearly played a role in NATO's decision to jump in the fray. In other nations in the Arab world, most notably Syria, regional and international organisations such as the GCC, the African Union and NATO have kept their distance.

In the event of a "Central Asian spring" or even an upheaval within one of the countries, could regional alliances and structures play a role in

stabilisation and resolution? Since the Soviet disintegration, a number of attempts have been made to establish regional alliances, which could be candidates for intervening in a putative “Central Asian spring”.

The oldest of these groups is the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and its security arm, the Collective Security Treaty Organization, which were established with Moscow’s lead soon after the end of the Soviet empire. Along with Russia, the original members included much of the post-Soviet remnants, such as Belarus, Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Uzbekistan at first refused to join and instead participated in the GUAM alliance, consisting of Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan and Moldova (and making it GUUAM). In 2005, Tashkent reversed its position, making GUAM less relevant to Central Asia, and joined the CSTO. Turkmenistan has never formally joined any of these organisations.

One of the tests of the CSTO was the Kyrgyz-Uzbek conflict in Kyrgyzstan in 2010, soon after the overthrow of President Bakiyev. As the riots and ethnic cleansing escalated in June 2010, the new Kyrgyz president, Rosa Otunbayeva requested help from the CSTO. Her request was seconded by ex-President Askar Akayev, who lives in exile in Moscow and was himself ousted in the “Tulip Revolution” five years prior. The appeals fell on deaf ears however, with Russian President Dmitri Medvedev stating that the conflict was internal and the CSTO could not intervene. Otunbayeva again requested CSTO help in stabilisation in July 2010, but the organisation could not come to any agreement on the request. Subsequently, Belarus President Alexander Lukashenko, who granted asylum to Bakiyev after his ouster in April, raised doubts about CSTO’s future prospects.

The CIS and CSTO have been looked upon as Russia’s attempts to retain its hold over its “near abroad”, and hence have never gained traction. The 2010 Kyrgyz conflict clearly showed the weakness of the structures. A newer and better grounded alliance is the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, which began as the Shanghai Five in 1996. China and Russia, along with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan were the original five nations in the group, with Uzbekistan joining in 2001. The group celebrated its 10th formal anniversary recently, and plans to include India, Pakistan and Iran in the near future. A significant part of its charter is security in member nations. SCO frequently carries out joint military exercises in member nations. Much of its focus has also been on economic and energy cooperation across Central Asia.

SCO is finally emerging from its infancy as both China and Russia emerge stronger in the global economy. In the case of widespread unrest in the region, there is a likelihood of SCO joint forces intervention, particularly if economic or energy interests of its two primary members are threatened. However, such interventionist appetite may be tempered by the particulars of such a situation. For example, if one side or the other in civil unrest in Central Asia is aligned with Russia or China, either nation may be unwilling to invest in a mission with a negative cost/benefit calculation. In addition, plans to include India, Pakistan and Iran as formal members may further introduce tensions within the group that are so far limited largely to Russian-Chinese competition. Iran's membership may create tensions with the west, where it is sanctioned and considered a pariah. If India and Pakistan are both granted membership, while the two long-time enemies may discover new avenues to cooperate economically, their conflict over terrorism and Kashmir could interfere with any future action the group considers in stabilising Central Asian nations.

CONCLUSION

Central Asia as a region is impeded in reaching its potential and recreating its once-renowned era of prosperity by the lack of democracy, free markets and good governance. Significant proportions of the population are severely repressed and poverty and lack of economic opportunities are a general problem across the region. However, a country-by-country analysis of the region reveals significant variation in indicators that could be predictive of a coming "Central Asian spring".

Economically, Kazakhstan is the nation that has made the most progress, having supplanted its hydrocarbon potential with a diversified trade policy and a reasonably liberal attitude towards free markets. Its population is the least restive, although electoral democracy and freedoms of speech and media are absent. There is however indications of unrest in the south, where the poorer ethnic Uzbek minority live, as well as hints of the beginnings of a violent Islamic militancy. Nevertheless, widespread unrest starting from Kazakhstan and spreading to other parts of Central Asia is unlikely. Turkmenistan holds similar economic potential as Kazakhstan but lags behind in governance and its regime is one of the most repressive in the world. The economic benefits of its immense natural gas resources have not percolated down to much of the population, whose basic needs such as health care are not met. There are no indications however that the disaffection among large segments of the population will find its way past the tight shackles that the Turkmen regime employs.

Uzbekistan, which is not as resource rich as its northern neighbours Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, has significant issues with ethnic tensions, and with Islamic fundamentalism and militancy. While Karimov's regime is as repressive and brutal as the Turkmen government, it has not always been able to keep a tight lid on opposition and Islamic fundamentalism, as demonstrated during the Andijan uprising in 2005. Both the IMU and the Hizb-ut-Tahrir find broad sympathy in the Ferghana valley, and continue to be a threat to the regime. Whenever Karimov's reign ends, or appears near, the likelihood of a violent uprising may become stronger.

The notion that uprising in one Central Asian nation would spread to others was belied during the upheaval in Kyrgyzstan last year. While other nations in the region were unnerved by the events, none of those countries were in any impending threat of regime change or uprisings during that period. Tajikistan, despite sharing the Ferghana valley with Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, suffering through civil war in the 1990s, and a continuing battle with Islamic militancy, was not impacted by the Kyrgyz events.

The Arab spring came about after decades of widespread repression of populations. The discontent on the "Arab street" was a well-known phenomenon for long. In Central Asian countries, where repression equals that of Mubarak and Sadat-era Egypt, or the Assad dynasty's Syria, have only gone through twenty years of post-Soviet authoritarianism. There may simply not have been enough time yet for street opposition in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, for example, to evolve and coalesce into the kind of networks that charged the Egypt revolt, and which sustain Syria's on-going uprising despite its regime's brutal response.

Regional alliances such as CIS, CSTO and GUUAM have proven ineffective in handling the few uprisings and conflicts that have occurred in the two decades since independence in Central Asia. SCO, the new "eastern NATO" led by China and Russia has the standing, and finally the sense of purpose, to potentially be a stabilising force in Central Asia's future. However, in the event of an actual conflict, China or Russia's allegiances to one or the other party in such a situation may prevent SCO from acting. Furthermore, the upcoming induction of India, Pakistan and Iran into SCO implies that the grouping is becoming more of an economic union rather than the political-military alliance that it started out as. In fact it is reasonable to postulate that SCO's newfound focus on economic integration and energy trade will be more effective, in the long term, in heading off a "Central Asian spring".