

By Vladimir Radyuhin
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Tajiks approve

56 amendments to the country's constitution, which also eliminated a constitutional right to free health care and free education.

The voters could either approve or reject the changes en masse.

It is the fourth time Mr. Rakhmonov, who at 50 is the youngest President in ex-Soviet Central Asia, has initiated constitutional changes since coming to power during bloody civil strife in Tajikistan in the early 1990s.

Following his election as Chairman of Parliament in 1992, lawmakers abrogated presidency.

Two years later, presidency was re-

stored in a referendum, paving the way to Mr. Rakhmonov's election to the post.

After the presidential term was extended from five to seven years in 1999, Mr. Rakhmonov was re-elected

President, winning 97 per cent of the vote. Extending stay in power through

referendum is a typical know-how of Central Asian leaders.

Uzbekistan last year amended the Constitution allowing the President, Islam Karimov, to run for two seven-year terms after his current five-year term expires in 2005.

In Turkmenistan, people in 1999 voted to make their leader, Saparmurad Niyazov, President for life.

Opposition parties have strongly opposed Sunday's referendum in Tajikistan and plan to set up a united front to field a single candidate in the next presidential election in three year's time.

longer tenure for President

With the wounds of the civil war that ended in 1997 still bleeding, opposition forces may also resume armed struggle against the regime of Mr. Rakhmonov.

Two months ago, former field commanders threatened the take up arms again if Mr. Rakhmonov went ahead with the referendum.

However, the leader of Tajikistan clearly counts on the support of Russia, which has 25,000 troops deployed in the country, and the United States, which signed a defence pact with Tajikistan earlier this year.



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Central Asia
10-14 176

Iran, Tajikistan discuss transport corridor

By Atul Aneja

MANAMA, JUNE 16. Iran and Tajikistan today began discussions on building transport corridors to connect Teheran and Central Asia via Afghanistan. Tajikistan's President, Imomali Rakhmonov, who arrived in Teheran today, is expected to discuss the construction of the "Anzab tunnel". A development of a road network between Iran and Afghanistan will not only connect Iran to Tajikistan, but also to some other key Central Asian republics, including Uzbekistan.

From Afghanistan, Uzbekistan can be reached across the Hairatan bridge over the Amu Darya that separates Afghanistan from Central Asia. With an eye on routes that would connect the Persian Gulf zone with Central Asia, Mr. Rakhmonov will attend a four-nation conference in Teheran in the presence of the Presidents of Iran, Uzbekistan and Afghanistan during his three-day stay. India has a deep stake in the success of these projects.

Looking for a route into Central Asia, India and Iran are planning to develop the road from the Iranian port of Chah Bahar into Afghanistan. Once in place, this road can become a part of a trade highway that links India and Central Asia across Afghanistan.

A new Big Game in Central Asia

By Vladimir Radyuhin

The U.S. has moved to put a bigger foot in the South Caucasus and Central Asia... Russia has responded by boosting its military and economic presence, and building multilateral security structures in the region.

CENTRAL ASIA and the Caucasus are emerging as the new focal point of rivalry between Russia and the United States in the wake of the Iraqi crisis. At the heart of the new standoff are rich oil and gas resources in the Caspian Sea basin, which may hold 100 billion barrels of oil alone. Washington has already established a firm foothold in the local hydrocarbon industry, with U.S. and joint U.S.-British companies controlling 27 per cent of the Caspian's oil reserves and 40 per cent of its gas reserves. Last year, the Baku-Ceyhan oil pipeline through Georgia and Turkey, America's most important Eurasian strategic initiative since the Soviet Union's collapse, was launched to bring Caspian oil to Europe bypassing Russia.

In the post-Iraq scenario, the U.S. has moved to put a bigger foot in the South Caucasus and Central Asia. It has mounted a titanic effort to revive GUUAM, a moribund economic and security group of five former Soviet states, Georgia, Ukraine, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan and Moldova, set up four years ago as a counterweight to Russian influence. It was largely thanks to U.S. diplomatic pressure that a long-delayed GUUAM summit was held on July 3-4 despite the fact that three out of the five heads of state failed to attend. Georgia's President, Eduard Shevardnadze, one of the two leaders who did come for the summit, frankly admitted: "Without support of the Americans it would be difficult to resolve the issues facing the organisation." The U.S. has pledged \$46 million to support GUUAM projects in anti-terrorist training, information exchange and in establishing a GUUAM Parliamentary Assembly. A joint GUUAM-U.S. statement said that both sides were "looking forward to a new level of joint cooperative projects."

Georgia, which suspects Russia of trying to tear away its rebel provinces of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, has emerged as Washington's main ally in the region. Earlier this year, the Georgian Parliament ratified a defence pact with the U.S. giving the American military unprecedented rights to visa-free travel and free deployment of troops, weapons and defence hardware on Georgian territory. Since last year, American Green Berets have been training Georgian troops in anti-terrorist operations. Last week, a NATO Air Force General was in Georgia to seek its consent for AWACS planes, deployed at a NATO base in Turkey, to patrol in

Georgian airspace. American U-2 spy planes have already made several flights along Georgia's border with Russia. This allows the U.S. to spy deep inside Russia's territory, including the North Caucasus, the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea.

The U.S. is reported to be nurturing plans to set up a military base in oil-rich Azerbaijan and has encouraged Turkey to negotiate for establishing its military bases in that country. Washington is trying to win over even Armenia, Russia's only staunch ally in the region, with offers of military aid and joint training exercises with NATO.

In Central Asia, the Pentagon has recently resumed talks with Tajikistan on the lease of three military bases in addition to the two the U.S. established in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan in the wake of the 11/9 attacks. Last year, Tajikistan received \$109 million in economic aid from the U.S. and accepted its offer to renovate a runway at Dushanbe airport. Washington is also stepping up military assistance to the three Central Asian participants in the NATO Partnership for Peace Programme — Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. The NATO Secretary-General, George Robertson, held talks in Kazakhstan last week on the opening of two bases on its territory. Last year alone, the U.S. has pumped over \$900 million into Central Asia through various aid programmes.

Russia has responded to the U.S. push by boosting its military and economic presence, and building multilateral security structures in the region. Next month, a new Russian air force base is to be formally opened in Kant, Kyrgyzstan, just 30 km from the U.S. base in the capital, Bishkek. Preparations are also under way to set up a Russian military base with its 201st division deployed in Tajikistan. This will allow Russia to strengthen the network of its military facilities in Central Asia, which also include the Baikonur cosmodrome, the ballistic missiles test range in Kazakhstan, and a major early warning radar in Tajikistan. Russia has also moved to consolidate its naval supremacy on the Caspian Sea with the planned induction of dozens of new

warships in its Caspian Flotilla over the next few years.

At the end of April, Russia and five other ex-Soviet states — Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Armenia and Belarus — transformed the 10-year-old Collective Security Treaty into a full-fledged regional defence pact. The Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) will be modelled after the cold war Warsaw Pact in Eastern Europe, complete with a joint headquarters and armed forces, and a written commitment to repulse aggression against any member-state. Interestingly, Iran's Ambassador in Moscow earlier this month discussed "possible cooperation" with the CSTO with its Russian General Secretary, Nikolai Bordyuzha.

Russia is increasingly teaming up with China to build a security belt in Central Asia and the Caspian to counterbalance U.S. presence in the region. At the end of May, Russia, China and four former Soviet states — Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan — completed the institutionalisation of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), establishing the group's permanent bodies, including a secretariat to be based in Beijing, and a regional anti-terror structure. The latter will be based in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, side by side with a Central Asian branch of the CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States) Anti-terrorism Centre established last year. The SCO will hold its first anti-terrorism exercise next month in Kazakhstan.

Russia also wants India to become a big player in Central Asia as a balancing factor to both American and Chinese presence in the region. It was with Moscow's full support that Delhi built defence ties with Tajikistan and invited the Tajik military to undergo training in India. Russia has been lobbying for India's admission to the Shanghai Group and for close cooperation on regional security in the Moscow-Delhi-Beijing triangle.

On the economic front, Russia scored a major coup against U.S. interests in April with the signing of a mega-deal with Turkmenistan, the world's third biggest holder of proven gas reserves, for the purchase of all of its gas exports during the next

25 years. The deal gives a big boost to the Russian plan to set up an "OPEC for gas," with Russia providing the main channel for gas exports from ex-Soviet states to Europe. This effectively kills a U.S.-backed alternative trans-Caspian route via the South Caucasus and Turkey to Europe and puts a big question mark over a plan to build a gas pipeline from Turkmenistan via Afghanistan to Pakistan, another pet project of Washington. The gas deal with Turkmenistan also opens the way for Moscow's project to supply Iranian gas to Afghanistan, which would eliminate Iran as Russia's competitor in European markets and increase Teheran's influence in Afghanistan.

The new Big Game in Central Asia and the Caucasus is gaining momentum, but Russia is working hard to mitigate, if not to avoid altogether, a confrontational scenario. In his trademark foreign policy style, the Russian President, Vladimir Putin, is trying to find common ground and shared interests with the U.S. even on most divisive issues. While the U.S. is keen to increase its influence and involvement in the region, its ability and willingness to take responsibility for dealing with local conflicts, political instability and lack of democracy is questionable. Neither the U.S. nor Europe has any workable plan, for example, for resolving the bitter territorial dispute between Armenia and Azerbaijan over the Nagorny Karabakh enclave, or for settling the problem of Georgia's breakaway provinces of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. It was Russia that helped put out the fires of war in the region and sat the rivals down at the negotiating table.

Nor is the U.S. ready to use its military presence in Central Asia to protect the local autocratic regimes from internal threats. If anything, these threats have recently increased, as the Taliban rears its head in Afghanistan and extremist Islamic movements in Central Asia rally new supporters on the call to fight "American invaders." The opening of a Russian air force base side by side with the U.S. base in Kyrgyzstan is a sign that the two countries may have agreed on a division of responsibilities in the region: the U.S. deals with external threats, while Russia takes care of internal stability.

Mr. Putin's chances of turning Russian-American confrontation to cooperation in Russia's southern underbelly depend, among other things, on how long the U.S. gets stuck in Iraq and Afghanistan.