

---

# Books in Brief

---

## ***Central Asia: A Gathering Storm?***

EDITED BY BORIS RUMER

(New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2002) \$29.95 paper

---

When U.S. troops landed in Afghanistan to destroy the Taliban and al-Qaeda, the little known countries of Central Asia were thrust into the spotlight. The U.S. elicited Central Asia's leaders to contribute to the war on international terrorism. But today, the battlefield has shifted to the Middle East. As events surrounding the invasion of Iraq dominate the news headlines, the world's attention has once again swung away from Central Asia. That is an erroneous move: as *Central Asia: A Gathering Storm?* makes clear, this region cannot be ignored.

Boris Rumer, the book's editor, opens the discussion with an overview of the factors that are destabilizing Central Asia, namely Islamic radicalism, crony capitalism, authoritarianism, and declining living standards. In fact, all of the essays share the view that the litany of problems confronting this region is getting worse. Unless the world's superpowers take notice, the authors argue, the swelling of discontent will lead to social upheaval and chaos.

Much of the book is dedicated to geopolitics. Several of the authors portray Central Asia as the stage of a new "Great Game" involving the U.S., Russia, China, Turkey, Iran, Japan, South Korea, Pakistan, and the EU. These players are drawn to Central Asia by its large deposits of oil and natural gas. Accordingly, each player seeks to control access to these energy resources. A corollary of this is that all sides are embroiled in a zero-sum game where another country's influence is perceived as a challenge to their own. This frame of analysis, however, fails to provide a deeper understanding of Central Asia. Many of the authors spend too much time analyzing the rivalry between foreign powers over control of the gas station, i.e., Central Asia, rather than analyzing the gas station itself.

The book's more interesting chapters show how Islam has evolved in the region since the collapse of the Soviet Union. In a superb overview, Evgeniy Abdullaev illustrates the emergence of "oppositionist Islam" in Central Asia—a "less value-laden" term referring to unofficial movements that operate under Islamic slogans. According to Abdullaev, the phenomenon of oppositionist Islam mainly stems from growing economic impoverishment, endemic corruption, and the region's rich economic potential. The economic crisis and corruption,

---

Abdullaev argues, have made it easy and cheap for Islamic movements to recruit supporters. Moreover, he claims that Central Asia's vast natural resource base makes it an attractive place to build an Islamic caliphate.

In response to the threat of oppositionist Islam, the Central Asian states have engaged in greater military cooperation. However, as Abdullaev points out, this cooperation has been weakened by continuing disputes over territory and natural resources and disparities in levels of economic development.

The book closes with a review of the anachronistic economic policies pursued by the Central Asian republics. Fearful of losing power, the leaders of Central Asia have delayed implementing painful economic reforms as prescribed by the IMF and World Bank. Each country has relied on import substitution, price controls, and the export of raw materials such as gold and oil to shield its people from the competitive economic forces of globalization. With little prospect of economic development, a continuing brain drain, growing negative balance of payments, and foreign indebtedness, it appears that Central Asia is headed for a dead end. ■

—*Kimito Mishina*