

Central Asia- Afghanistan Security Nexus: Post-2014 Perspectives

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Abstract

With the approaching drawdown of U.S. forces from Afghanistan by 2014, Central Asian countries seem worried that Taliban will use this as momentum to launch a new offensive, threatening to re-destabilize the country and make it a safe haven for terrorism and extremism.

It has repeatedly been stated by Central Asian leaders that re-destabilization of Afghanistan could bring about serious security implications for the region including spillover of violence, spread of extremism and increases in drug trafficking. The mobilization of extremist groups with links to Afghanistan and increase in trafficking is already being observed in Central Asia, and the situation will likely be exacerbated if Afghanistan collapses into anarchy and violence. The internal weaknesses of Central Asian countries make them increasingly vulnerable to the negative impacts of the situation in Afghanistan. The combined effects of the rise of violence in Afghanistan and internal weaknesses of Central Asian countries has the potential to leave the whole region extremely insecure vis-à-vis the possible deterioration of stability in Afghanistan after 2014.

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The longest war in the U.S. history – the Afghan war - has already cost about half a trillion U.S. dollars, and has taken the lives of about 2200 American soldiers.¹ Over the past years, U.S. public opinion has been increasingly turning against the Afghan war, demanding that the president end the war and pull out American troops. The withdrawal of the U.S. troops from Afghanistan started in June 2011. Washington has already announced that U.S. forces in Afghanistan will cease combat missions in 2013, leaving the burden of those operations to U.S. special and elite forces, and trained Afghan forces.² It is expected that the majority of American and all international troops will leave Afghanistan by 2014. With this deadline approaching, Central Asian (CA) countries seem increasingly worried that Afghan army will be incapable of fighting the Taliban without the support of foreign combat troops. As many fear in Central Asia, with new momentum, the Taliban will be able to resume full-scale insurgency to defeat Hamid Karzai's government. While it is unrealistic to posit that Taliban will be able to reestablish the jihadist regime that was in place until the U.S. invasion in 2001, it is quite possible that without fully-

¹ *Casualties by Category, National*, *The Washington Post*, May 2013 update, at <http://apps.washingtonpost.com/national/fallen/>

² Elizabeth Bumiller (February 2012) in Stephen Blank, "Central Asian Perspectives on Afghanistan after the U.S. Withdrawal", *Afghanistan Regional Forum*, *Elliot School of International Affairs, George Washington University*, No. 2, November 2012, at http://www.centralasiaprogram.org/images/Afghanistan_Forum_2,_November_2012.pdf

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fledged American military commitment, the Taliban can destabilize the country in the long term, making it a safe haven for terrorists and extremists. Therefore, Afghanistan, already unstable, is likely to become more so, and the negative implications of this destabilization might ripple across CA.

What kind of security threats does the destabilization of Afghanistan represent for Central Asia, and why is this region is particularly vulnerable to such threats? To answer this question, the article looks at the current rise of militancy and illegal trafficking in the region, attempting to illuminate its development prospects after the withdrawal of foreign combat troops by 2014. However, examining only the factors external to the Central Asian region – threats coming from Afghanistan - is not enough to fully understand the CA-Afghanistan security nexus. Therefore, the article also explores the internal weaknesses of the regional countries, specifically their political systems, in order to uncover the reasons that CA countries are vulnerable to negative influences from Afghanistan.

View from Central Asia on Post-2014 Afghanistan

Many officials and experts from CA countries have little faith that the Karzai government has the legitimacy or competency to survive the withdrawal of the U.S. and NATO troops.³ Over the course of the last decade, the U.S. tried to establish a legitimate central government in Afghanistan, cut down opium production, and build up security forces capable of subduing Taliban and other forms extremist-terrorist behavior. However, the opposite happened: opium production rose, exceeding the period of civil war and Taliban rule in the country; the Afghan army in which the Americans invested so much to train and equip is not yet a capable of controlling the whole territory of the country or to fight terrorism and extremism; and most importantly, Hamid Karzai has not become a national leader who can mobilize the Afghan elite and society to build a new, stable and developing Afghanistan.

Even though there are two more years to go until 2014, signs of serious concerns about the possible implications of withdrawal for CA are already visible across the region. In March 2011, Tajik President Emomali Rahmon expressed concern over NATO plans to withdraw troops by

3 Chaye Sarah, "Forgotten Player in a Post-2014 Afghanistan: Uzbekistan", *Pakistan Observer* September 11, 2012, at <http://pakobserver.net/201209/11/detailnews.asp?id=173376>

2014, and the possible spill-over effects on regional security, specifically regarding terrorism, extremism, drug trafficking, weapons smuggling and illegal immigration.⁴ In January 2012, Uzbekistan's President Islam Karimov stated that "the announced withdrawal of American and ISAF forces from Afghanistan by 2014 can increase the threat of spillover of terrorist and extremist activity, tension and confrontation in this vast region and lead to the emergence here of a permanent source of instability."⁵ He stressed that this withdrawal would bring about "an increased threat of the expansion of terrorist and extremist activities."⁶

At the NATO Chicago summit in May 2012, CA countries once more expressed their concerns about the possible consequences of the pull-out of troops. Two weeks later, at the meeting of the SCO in Beijing, the dominant issue for CA countries was again Afghanistan. Moreover, during Russian President Putin's visit to CA countries in the beginning of June 2012, the Afghan issue was raised by CA leaders as the one of the most pressing problems for the region.

4 "Tajikistan concerned over decision to withdraw anti-terrorist coalition forces from Afghanistan", *RIA Novosti*, 12 March 2011, in Beluer Christian, "Central Asia Security policy Brief № 7", *Center for Security Policy and OSCE Academy*, February 2012, at http://osce-academy.net/uploads/docs/bleuer_policy_brief7.pdf

5 Farkhad Tolipov, "Central Asia And Afghanistan After 2014", *Central Asia and Caucasus Institute*, April 18, 2012, at <http://cacianalyst.org/?q=node/5756>

6 *Financial Times*, "US confronts challenge of Afghan exit", July 2012, at <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/1188dc8e-c6d...#axzz1zhdOUNL>

In short, many in CA are worried that the possibility of civil conflict, with combat and extremist incursions swirling up against the borders of CA, represents a serious national security threat to the region, particularly to the Central Asian countries bordering Afghanistan. Already unstable, Afghanistan is likely to become more so, and the negative implications of destabilization will course through the region. For CA, the most serious

lately the Uzbek security forces in late 1990s and the U.S. global war on terror launched in 2001, many extremist organizations retreated to Afghanistan, to the uncontrolled tribal areas on the border with Pakistan. This significantly lowered the terrorist-extremist pressure on regional countries. As a result, CA countries had a fairly calm and peaceful period during the first decade after the war was launched in Afghanistan.

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risks of the withdrawal, threatening security and stability in this region, include the spillover of terrorism and extremism and an increase in drug trafficking.

Spillover of extremist violence

During the late 1990s, when violence was on the rise in Central Asia, regional terrorist and extremist organizations used the territory of Afghanistan as a safe haven to hide from attacks by government forces, and also as a location to train their fighters. Moreover, the participation of CA terrorist groups in illegal activities in Afghanistan such as drugs and arms trafficking provided a vital source of income. With successful operations by government troops, particu-

However, during recent few years, the Karzai regime has continued to weaken and the Taliban has actively consolidated its power over certain parts of the country. Along with the Taliban, CA-origin extremist groups hiding in Afghanistan again have begun to remobilize both in Afghanistan and Central Asia, deploying their militants northwards, closer to the borders with CA. For instance, in Tajikistan, which experienced a brutal civil war from 1992 to 1997, the presence of armed Islamic opposition linked to Afghanistan is now being felt in certain parts of the country, particularly in the Rasht valley - the main passage route for the Afghan opium into Tajikistan.⁷ On July 8, 2009, an armed skirmish took place between the Tajik armed forces and Mullo Abdullo's fighters, who returned to Tajikistan from Afghanistan having been in hiding there for about a decade. As a result, 17 people died from both

⁷ Azad Garibov, "Post-2014 Afghanistan and Central Asia-What to Expect", *News.az*, June 27 2012, at <http://www.news.az/articles/63161>

sides. The next wave of instability in Tajikistan broke out in August 2010, when a group of 25 prisoners accused of terrorism escaped from the State National Security Committee's detention center in Dushanbe. A few days later, on September 3, 2010 two suicide bombers hit the police station in Khujand – Tajikistan's northern capital. On September 19, at least 28 government troops were killed in a sudden attack in Kamarob Gorge. The Tajik Defense Ministry insisted that fighters from Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Chechnya were part of the ambush.⁸

In Uzbekistan, which also experienced severe extremist violence during the late 1990s, three extremist groups – the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), the Islamic Jihad Union (IJU), and the Hizb ut- Tahrir (HuT) – constitute the largest threat to Uzbekistan in terms of groups with links to Afghanistan. After a mostly peaceful decade, Uzbekistan was hit by violence when police were targeted by extremist terrorists in Andijan in May 2009. The deputy head of the interior ministry's counter-terrorism department, Colonel Hasan Asadov, was killed in August 2009.⁹ Since then, Uzbekistan remains alarmed about the possibility of an outbreak

⁸ Andrew McGregor, "Jihad in the Rasht Valley: Tajikistan's Security Dilemma", The Jamestown Foundation, http://www.jamestown.org/programs/gta/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=36990&cHash=c323d4b798

⁹ Sanobar Shermatova, "Should C Asia Fear Taliban Spillover?", Institute for War and Peace Reports, <http://www.isn.ethz.ch/isn/Security-Watch/Articles/Detail?ots591=4888caa0-b3db-1461-98b9-e20e7b9c13d4&lng=en&id=109497>

of terrorist violence. More importantly, the IMU is no longer a small band of militants focused solely on toppling the Uzbek regime as it was during the 1990s. According to different sources, it has between a few hundred up to five thousand armed fighters in Afghanistan and is currently trying to relocate its basis from southern Afghanistan to the northern provinces that directly border CA in order to more effectively operate in Uzbekistan.¹⁰

Kazakhstan, which had been considered the most stable country in the region, experienced its first ever suicide bombing attack in 2011, for which responsibility was claimed by Jund al-Khalifah (Soldiers of Khalifah) - a group of ethnic Kazakh mujahedeen based in Afghanistan. In 2012, eight people (including the attackers themselves) were killed by terrorists in Kazakhstan and 13 terrorists were killed by security forces in operations against terrorist-extremist cells. The killing of 14 border guards on the border with China and of 12 civilians in Ile Alatausk national park in 2012 are also considered by many to be terrorist attacks.

Thus, these facts demonstrate that extremist militancy connected to Afghanistan is already on rise in CA and "accordingly, it can be further triggered by the ISAF withdrawal and re-destabilization of Afghani-

¹⁰ *ibid*

stan.¹¹ There are well-established ties and cooperation between Central Asian and Afghan extremist groups and local jihadist organizations, working in cooperation with or in the spirit of Al-Qaeda, and Afghanistan's lawless and under-governed regions make ideal sites for terrorist training camps and planning for the "Islamic Emirate" in Central Asia.¹²

Now, as the Taliban is actively preparing for the post-2014 period, attempting to spread its zone of influence across the whole country, CA states have reasons to worry about the possible spill-over effects to their region. The possible advancement of the Taliban militants' area of operations to the north after the withdrawal of coalition troops means that the battleground will shift from central and southern Afghanistan closer to Central Asia's borders. As highlighted by Paul Quinn-Judge, Central Asia Director for the International Crisis Group, "If the Taliban took over in that part of the region, I think it would be a very disturbing development for most of the countries of Central Asia."¹³ If this happens, CA-origin radical Islamist allies of the Taliban, such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), could gain a

11 Azad Garibov, "Post-2014 Afghanistan and Central Asia-What to Expect", *News.az*, June 27 2012, at <http://www.news.az/articles/63161>

12 Kamoludin Abdulloev, "Another Jihad in Central Asia", *United States Institute of Peace*, June 2012, at <http://kamolkhon.com/download/Contagious-Jihad-June-2012.pdf>

13 Tom Gjelten, "Afghan War Could Spill Over Into Central Asia", *NPR*, December 31, 2009, at <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=121973427>

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valuable foothold and an excellent jumping-off point to CA. Therefore, the regional countries have solid reasons to worry about the possibility of the rise of the terrorist and extremist threat during the post-withdrawal period, bearing in mind that after defeating the western "enemy", most of the extremist forces of the region engaged in fighting foreign troops in Afghanistan may decide to return back to launch "sacred wars" in their own countries, as happened during the 1990s.

Moreover, the decision by Central Asian states to allow their territories to be used to bring military freight into Afghanistan via the Northern Distribution tied Central Asian governments directly to the Afghan war. In the view of the Taliban and other Islamist movements, "Central Asia is now part of the general theater of war."¹⁴ So, cooperation over the northern supply and withdrawal routes, as well as the U.S.' military

14 Tom Gjelten, "Afghan War Could Spill Over Into Central Asia", *NPR*, December 31, 2009, at <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=121973427>

assistance to local regimes, makes them a legitimate target for terrorists and extremists.

Rise of drug trafficking

Another major problem for CA, which could become more serious after the drawdown of foreign troops and re-destabilization of the situation in Afghanistan, is the steadily increasing drug trafficking. A considerable portion of the heroin produced in Afghanistan “makes its way through Central Asia bringing not only drug addiction but the attendant criminal networks, as well as serving as a funding source for terrorist activities.”¹⁵

Currently Afghanistan produces around 90 percent of the world’s opium used to make heroin in a thriving international trade worth an estimated 65 billion USD a year, according to the United Nations.¹⁶ Although the traditional route for Afghan narcotics continues to run through the porous borders of Iran and Pakistan, the UNODC estimates that 30 per cent of this of opium now flows through the ‘northern route’ - the an estimated 90 tons of heroin along different paths through the Central Asian States to the Russian Federation, Europe and newly growing Chinese mar-

¹⁵ Faisal Al Yafai, “Central Asia fears a spillover of instability as NATO leaves”, *The National*, June 12, 2012, at <http://www.thenational.ae/thenationalconversation/comment/central-asia-fears-a-spillover-of-instability-as-nato-leaves>

¹⁶ “Shifting Afghan Drug Trade Threatens Central Asia”, 19 January 2011, *The Moscow Times*, at <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/news/article/shifting-afghan-drug-trade-threatens-central-asia/429125.html>

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ket every year.¹⁷ Increased counter-narcotics cooperation from Pakistan meanwhile, together with tightened security along the border with Iran, has further squeezed traffickers in the south and west. A military surge in 2010 in southern Afghanistan also pushed drug trafficking up into the north, closer to the borders with Central Asian republics.¹⁸ After the withdrawal of coalition troops by 2014, many experts believe that in a power vacuum and the total absence of any struggle in Afghanistan against drug production, trafficking through CA will certainly increase. The year 2014 looms large in the minds of many regional and international government officials, and a brief look at regional efforts to date provides little evidence to suggest that Central Asian states will be able to contain the anticipated increase in drug trafficking. In the presence of poorly guarded and complex terrain, as well as corruption, it is likely that

¹⁷ UNODC, “Central Asia: The Situation”, at <http://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/drug-trafficking/central-asia.html>

¹⁸ “Shifting Afghan Drug Trade Threatens Central Asia”, 19 January 2011, *The Moscow Times*.

an increased volume of drugs will penetrate Central Asia once the already unstable situation in Afghanistan further deteriorates after 2014.

Internal weaknesses of Central Asian states

There is every indicator that Afghanistan's evil twins – extremist-terrorism and drug trafficking - will impact the security of the region after 2014. However, exclusively examining external factors cannot provide a comprehensive answer to the question of why the situation of extremism-terrorism and drug trafficking in Afghanistan might seriously affect CA and threaten regional stability during the post-2014 period.

Central Asian countries are ill-prepared to handle either resurgent Islamist militants or the rise of drug trafficking. It is frequently claimed that radical Islamism in the region is foremost a home-grown phenomenon. The priority for CA countries in preventing the spillover of extremism and rise in drug tracking is given to intensifying operations against any signs of religious activism and hardening borders. The military force is used as a main means in this struggle, as well as improving border security, principally in its material aspects, including buildings, infrastructure, equipment etc. This is frequently done with international support, again in accordance with the needs that local authorities express

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However, instead of merely focusing on to crack down of religious activism and extremist terrorism, regional authorities should on the root causes of the problem. Central Asian governments' traditional methods of governance, based on a strong secular narrative and intolerance to dissent, seem to push displeased groups towards Islam, including in its radical forms.¹⁹ Consequently, no matter how many terrorists killed and how many religious activists are put into jail, new people, particularly youngsters, join to the extremist cells supplying them with new blood. Or if we look at drug trafficking, only the smaller-scale smuggling passes through the mountain pathways or across rivers and the overwhelming proportion of opiates is not smuggled into the region. It passes across the border by the truckload on established roads and through official checkpoints with the cooperation of government officials, or at least individuals or groups closely connected to the local authorities in the region.²⁰

¹⁹ Jos Boonstr, "Afghanistan and Central Asia: Nobody move, nobody gets hurt", *EUROACTIV*, 20 February 2013, at <http://www.euractiv.com/development-policy/afghanistan-central-asia-move-ge-analysis-517956>

²⁰ Cornelius Graubner, "Central Asia: A Look at Sources of Violence and Instability", *Eurasianet*, August 7, 2012, at <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/65760>

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Therefore, it is naïve to assume that the fight against the spillover of conflict and rise of drug trafficking can be successfully waged merely by focusing on tightening up the borders and training and re-equipping border guards serving on the borders with Afghanistan. However, political authorities in all the at-risk countries still insist on focusing on these aspects, and avoid accepting that internal problems may also play a role. Their logic here is very simple - it is easier for them to present themselves as victims who fought extremist enemies of the West and consequently legitimize their certain oppressive domestic policy strategies by emphasizing the threats of Afghan extremism and drug trafficking.

Thus, in trying to understand the Afghan-CA security nexus, one should definitely take into account the internal weaknesses of CA countries that put them at risk, and significantly downgrade their chances in waging a successful struggle against the identified threats.

Conclusion

Experts in the region and abroad are worried that the impact of Afghanistan's evil twins – drug trafficking and the export of religious extrem-

ism - are already strongly felt in CA and could bring more violence to the region after 2014. Jihadist groups and elements have been consistently present in Central Asia since the collapse of the Soviet Union. U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan could provoke jihadist resurgence in the region. Due to Central Asia's proximity to Afghanistan and the porous and poorly guarded border between Afghanistan and the region, there is potential for violence and instability to spill over. Particularly worrying for Central Asian regimes is that with the U.S. preparing to leave, the Islamist militants in the Afghanistan – now battle-hardened from their war against Western forces- are trying to consolidate their presence in northern Afghanistan, which provides a perfect foothold to penetrate CA through uncontrolled mountain passes and river crossings. Cooperation of the CA countries with the U.S. in establishing Northern Distribution Network over their territories will serve as a further trigger for terrorist attacks, as punishment for being in an alliance with “unbelievers”.

Another serious concern related to the possible security implications of withdrawal is the rise of drug trafficking. CA has already become the one of the main export routes for Afghan opiates towards Russia, China and Europe. The annual drugs production and trafficking via CA has been on the rise for the past several years, causing numerous problems

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for CA countries, including the growth of drug use, establishment of organized crime groups, and funding for extremist propaganda and terrorist activities. Greater instability in Afghanistan after 2014 promises to bring about a rise in opium production and drug trafficking to CA.

The vulnerability of CA to the negative effects of the Afghanistan's possible destabilization is in part the consequence of internal weaknesses in the regional countries. Conditions within the regional countries are conducive to thriving militancy and trafficking. Authorities of CA countries often use the threat of "spillover" from Afghanistan to attract international support and to legitimize their domestic policies instead of trying to find genuine strategies to address this problem. Consequently, the combined effect of violence in Afghanistan and domestic weaknesses of the CA countries could leave the whole region extremely insecure vis-à-vis the possible destabilization of Afghanistan after 2014.