Afghanistan Analysts Network

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BETWEEN CO-OPERATION AND INSULATION

Afghanistan's Relations with the Central Asian Republics

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The various problems in Afghanistan, from security to economics, are often acknowledged as having a regional component. In this context, rightly so, the focus is mostly on Pakistan and, to a lesser extent, on Iran. Other states and actors in the broader region are given less attention by analysts. This report seeks to address, in a comprehensive manner, one region of concern within the various foreign relationships of Afghanistan – the former Soviet republics of Central Asia to the north. In contrast to many other reports that treat these countries (Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan; only the former three directly bordering at Afghanistan) as if they were a homogenous region (the '–stans'), here they are analysed separately, as each forms its own foreign policy – often in a bilateral manner, eschewing genuine regional co-operation. In addition, the US and Russian roles played in security, economic and counter-narcotics fields within Central Asia will be illuminated, as both of those states have recently increasingly seen their engagement in Central Asia as related, by varying degrees, to Afghanistan.

On the Afghan side, special attention is given not just to the formulation of foreign relations with the Central Asian republics by the central government in Kabul, but also to the actions and motivations of influential actors in northern Afghanistan towards them. This includes an assessment of connections between current northern Afghan political opposition and neighbouring Central Asia and of local government authorities, commanders, traders, insurgents and Islamists in northern Afghanistan, although all these categories are often overlapping.

The research in this report focuses especially on local and regional security trends involving Afghanistan and the Central Asia republics. In this regard, both state and non-state level interactions are analysed. The findings of this report note the difficulty in not only accurately assessing current security-related trends, but especially so in predicting future security scenarios. Nevertheless, this report argues that security risks that link Afghanistan to the former Soviet republics of Central Asia are often highly exaggerated, especially so the alleged link between narcotics trafficking and radical Islamist groups. In reality, throughout Central Asia the main players in narcotics trafficking are government employees, security officers and mafia figures. Further findings point to a lack of a serious threat to the Central Asian republics from terrorists and insurgents in northern Afghanistan, who are overwhelmingly recruited from among Afghan citizens and focused locally. Attributing a significant level of insurgent activities to the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and trans-national fighters is an exaggeration and politically motivated. The anti-government fighters in the north are of a local character, with the Uzbek insurgents among them being Afghan Uzbeks rather than being from across the border in Uzbekistan and not necessarily linked to the IMU.

As for ethnic connections in general, the findings of this research are that Central Asian governments and citizens do not share any remarkable affinity for their co-ethnics in Afghanistan. Rather, relations– in narcotics trafficking, business, strategic relations, etc – are largely formed based on mutually beneficial interests, not on ethnic sympathies.

Overall, the governments of Central Asia are focused on internal threats to their rule – threats which have little to nothing to do with Afghanistan. Kazakhstan is by far the most insulated from Afghanistan, and the modest security risks it faces are tied to other regions. In contrast to all other Central Asian leaders, Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev rejects the post-2014 "catastrophic theories" of security in Central Asia related to Afghanistan. Kazakhstan is somewhat notable for its attempts to position itself as a mediator or leader for various small initiatives related to Afghanistan, such as hosting conferences for diplomatic and multilateral initiatives, offering a wide range of student scholarships to Afghan students, and assisting Afghanistan via its international development agency KazAid.

Kyrgyzstan faces a similar situation, with threats to security and stability being overwhelmingly internal. Like Kazakhstan, incidents of militant violence here are also more so connected to the North Caucasus, not Afghanistan. Kyrgyzstan is geographically isolated from Afghanistan and, with the closure of the US air base near the capital Bishkek, has increasingly few concerns related to Afghanistan. Unlike Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan does not have the resources or international clout to contribute much to regional multilateral and bilateral initiatives focused on or including Afghanistan.

Meanwhile, Turkmenistan, while noted for its apparent isolation from Afghanistan, has actually often quietly formed obscured arrangements with various actors in Afghanistan over the last two decades. Turkmenistan has hopes for some significant economic infrastructure that would tie it to Afghanistan, especially the proposed TAPI (Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India) pipeline. Nevertheless, scepticism remains about its fate amidst deteriorating security and a lack of funding.

Uzbekistan, with arguably the most formidable domestic security forces in the region, perceives a certain level of security risk from Afghanistan (even after a decade without any serious security incidents with ties to Afghanistan), and has formulated a policy of engaging on select economic projects and supporting certain proxies within Afghanistan while strongly restricting population movements and independent trade across the very short Afghan border. Nevertheless, the government of Uzbekistan, while publically declaring instability in Afghanistan to be a threat, does not subscribe to alarmist assessments in private. Rather, the focus is on domestic controls over the people of Uzbekistan and potential – and realistic – rivals for power inside Uzbekistan.

Tajikistan is left as the most vulnerable state in Central Asia with regard to trends in Afghanistan. Its relatively weak government and unprofessional security forces have not proved highly successful in recent years. However, security problems in Tajikistan are highly localised and have few, if any, direct connections to Afghanistan. Near-term risks in Tajikistan, as in other Central Asia countries, are overwhelmingly domestic despite being more comprehensively connected to Afghanistan than the other Central Asian republics. As for economic connections, the post-2001 increase in cross-border trade has not been large enough to make Afghanistan a valuable trade partner for Tajikistan. Ethnic connections and personal ties between northern Afghan powerbrokers and Tajik government officials have not created any solid and lasting relations that can compensate for the lack of common interests in forging stronger cross-border bonds.

Despite quite considerable growth since 2001 that has benefited people in the border areas and beyond (but starting from a very low level), particularly locally along the frontier between Afghanistan and Central Asian republics, economic integration in the region will continue to suffer. This is due to Afghanistan and the countries of Central Asia being marginal economic hinterlands connected not so much among each other but in different directions (Afghanistan to Pakistan and Iran; Central Asia to Russia and China), combined with serious security and infrastructure problems, as well as the tendency of the states in this region to avoid genuine multilateral co-operation while embracing restrictive border regimes. US strategic plans to move the Central Asian republics away from the Russian sphere of influence and connect the region economically to Afghanistan and South Asia failed completely – aside from some modest gains in terms of electricity exports to Afghanistan. The real gains in economic ties to Central Asia have been made instead by China.

For Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, their economic ties are overwhelmingly in the direction of China and Russia. Afghanistan cannot be expected to offer anything of significance to their economies. For Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, the economic significance of Afghanistan can only be felt in some of the smaller towns immediately adjacent to the Afghan border. Closer to the centres of power in these two states there are some individuals

and companies with economic interests in Afghanistan. However, the accumulated interests are quite modest when measured against other, far larger, trade partners.

The comparatively short period of time immediately after the fall of the Taleban was squandered in terms of using the relatively good security conditions to bolster regional trade, infrastructure and economic connections with the Central Asian republics. It is unsure whether plans for the near future to make up for lost time with new electricity, gas and railway connections will gain traction considering the deteriorating security situation and difficulty in securing international funding and delivering it locally. The trans-border narcotics trade between Afghanistan and Central Asia – supported, managed and/or protected by government officials and security forces on both sides of the border – is the one enduring economic connection that has demonstrated resilience since the fall of the Taleban, as well as promise for the future. It is the only true cross-border economic activity that is truly supported by all relevant state and non-state actors.

Afghanistan and the countries of Central Asia remain strangers, with historic ethnic and religious ties not being able to overcome the numerous barriers to more substantive connections. On the Afghan side of the border, different groups of people (political-military figures, government authorities, traders, students, former migrants and other local people), mainly in northern areas, interact with neighbouring Central Asia on a limited basis. However, their cross-border relations do not amount to a basis for any enduring and significant relationship. Central Asia cannot be expected to be an important factor in Afghanistan in the same manner as are Pakistan and Iran.

Central Asian states will continue to face domestic problems, both economic and political – with Afghanistan having very little role to play there now and in the near future. Central Asian governments are aware of this, whether they publically acknowledge this or not. For this reason, they overwhelmingly focus their efforts on repressing internal forces, with Afghanistan being used only – with the notable exception of the relatively wealthy Kazakhstan – as a rhetorical tool to seek Russian and western funding and support while scaring their populations away from pressing for political change. Europe, the US and Russia will continue to engage Central Asia, particularly in supporting the security sector (the police and military forces).

For the US and various European countries, the focus in Central Asia is switching from transit logistics and support for military operations in Afghanistan to a more focused effort on training of security forces and border programme support. What future role the countries of Central Asia will continue to play in supporting western forces in Afghanistan is at the moment unclear, as there is yet to be a decision made on the Afghan-US agreement that would be the basis of a continued deployment and, when this happens, on the number of western forces to remain in Afghanistan after 2014. Nevertheless, the future co-operation of Central Asian countries with the US and various European countries for their operations in Afghanistan, if required, would likely be assured – at a price (eg, security assistance, human rights waivers, economic support, etc). For Russia, the goal is to maintain its military presence in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan while attempting to keep Uzbekistan, which is more independent in its military and strategic relations at the moment, from moving too far outside of the Russian sphere of influence. Recent Russian involvement in the ongoing crisis in Ukraine can be seen as either a warning that Russia is willing to intervene in the former Soviet republics (which includes Central Asia), or that its energies are focused in the direction of Europe, not Central Asia and Afghanistan.

In the near-term, an important development to watch out for is the outcome of the presidential elections in Afghanistan and whether it heralds significant shifts in its domestic and foreign policies, coupled with the on-going international security and economic drawdown, and whether and how these impact current trends in Afghan-Central Asian interactions.

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