ENERGY, ENVIRONMENT
AND THE FUTURE OF SECURITY IN CENTRAL ASIA

Understanding the Security Implications of Critical Energy and Environmental Issues

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CONVENTIONAL SECURITY RISKS TO CENTRAL ASIA
A SUMMARY OVERVIEW

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This paper briefly outlines the conventional threats to the security of the five former Soviet states of Central Asia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. It also attempts to identify the common features contributing to insecurity in the region. For the sake of brevity I have attempted to summarise these in two lists. I then devote some space to the new and quite disturbing threat to regional insecurity – the growing risk of a spillover of insurgency into the region from Afghanistan.

The backdrop

Government officials and analysts specialising in Central Asia increasingly describe the five states as brittle or fragile. "Hollow" might be a better term. They have the trappings of a normal governance – ministries, legislatures, in some cases even opposition parties. In many cases, however, they pay little more than lip service to the fundamental requirements of government, such as the provision of basic services to the population. Most of the states are affected to a greater or lesser degree by an inversion of values: their primary concern is wealth creation and preservation for the ruling elite; security is largely viewed as security for that elite, not for the populace at large. Lower level corruption is endemic and officially tolerated.
This situation has been in place essentially since the collapse of the Soviet Union. So far the countries of the region have muddled through, with a little help from commodity prices, foreign aid, good luck and a tendency of the rest of the world to ignore them. All these factors are, to a greater or lesser degree, changing.

Overview: Common Regional features

(1) Political/Economic

- Institutional fragility and built-in unpredictability of political structures. All are authoritarian; most are ruled by aging and corrupt leaders who preside over a narrow, usually family-based elite that is increasingly fixated on its own political survival.
- Absence of a transparent succession mechanism; in four of the five countries a strong indication that the current leader is looking to a member of his family to take over power. The exception is Turkmenistan, where the current leader seems, however, to be creating a new version of the personality cult erected by his predecessor, Sapurmurad Niyazov, Turkmenbashi
- Soviet-era physical infrastructures, poorly maintained since independence, are now grinding to a halt. This is increasingly aggravated by institutionalised corruption, and the first clear indications of environmental deterioration. This is particularly disturbing in Tajikistan. So far the clearest sign of infrastructural decline in the region as a whole has been in the power generating sector. The next sector to be seriously affected, however, is likely to be education, as the last of the Soviet trained teaching professionals retire.
- Looting by the ruling elites of the exchequer, natural resources, remaining viable parts of the national infrastructure. This is usually accompanied by tight control over the most profitable sectors of the economy and often by extortion from or expropriation of more successful businesses.
- The lack of a functional, recognisable economy in most of the region. Most rely on one or two sectors to fill the exchequer. This is migrant labour in the case of Tajikistan (over40 percent of the GDP), Kyrgyzstan (30 percent) to a lesser degree Uzbekistan. Other region

countries depend largely on raw material exports -- gas and oil in the case of Turkmenistan, gas, oil, uranium and coal for Kazakhstan, cotton and some gas and oil for Uzbekistan

- The international economic crisis has been slow in making an impact on the region, but is doing so now. Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan will probably be hit especially hard, as they tend to survive hand to mouth, hoping for handouts from international organisations and governments. (The chances are high that additional funding from base issues in Kyrgyzstan will be quickly absorbed by corruption). Kazakhstan's dream of being a major middle tier player will, at the very best, be pushed back a number of years. A possible, widely predicted, second wave of economic crisis in Russia could have a serious impact on the region.
- Two countries look particularly vulnerable at the moment – Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. Kyrgyzstan may not be far behind, though any instability here is more likely to be triggered by events in neighbouring countries rather than at home.

(2) Negative Security factors

- The war in Afghanistan. With the Taliban already on stretches of Afghanistan's border with Central Asia and the US banking heavily on the region for resupply, there is a strong risk that the Afghan war may spread north, into Tajikistan and beyond. The re-infiltration of Central Asian Islamist insurgents from their bases in Pakistan and Afghanistan has already begun.
- Greater US involvement in the region as support of the Afghan war effort may further weaken reform efforts. Most if not all of these are alive in public pronouncements rather than reality. A number of regional leaders – Tajikistan and Uzbekistan in particular – clearly hope that US involvement in its current form will both freeze the political status quo and provide new sources of financial support.
- Long, poorly policed frontiers that are incapable of preventing spillover from the war in Afghanistan, and independently of this could themselves prove a flashpoint for intra-regional conflict. Tajikistan has 1200 km of borders with Afghanistan, for example, and Turkmenistan 744 km. If major violence were ever to break out in Uzbekistan, its 6000-plus kilometers of borders with Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan could become the scene of local clashes and/or large spontaneous concentrations of displaced persons, seriously overstraining fragile infrastructures, particularly those of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan.
- The widespread involvement of the political and security elites in all countries, and the ruling families in several states, in the transport of narcotics from Afghanistan to Russia, China and Europe. As a former governor of one of the region's more important provinces put it, "Those who control power control the drugs." Enough stays in the region to contribute to growing addiction and HIV/AIDS.
- The inter-connectedness of the five states. Major problems in one country can very quickly affect the others. No country has developed the political or institutional resilience that would guarantee it against a crisis spilling over from a neighbour. A security breakdown in Tajikistan will have immediate implications for Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, and shock waves would quickly reach Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan. The collapse of central power in Uzbekistan would likewise have a profound impact on the whole of Central Asia. Economic – or environmental - collapse anywhere in the region will almost certainly trigger large and potentially destabilising population movements.

Countries at particular risk: Tajikistan and Uzbekistan

Tajikistan is increasingly being written off by its neighbors and even officials in major capitals. Senior Kyrgyz and Kazakh officials have recently both essentially dismissed the country's chances of pulling itself out of its deep economic and infrastructural crisis. Senior western officials do not challenge the assessment that Tajikistan is sliding into the category of a failed state. Some specialists believe that the further decline will be slow and silent and largely unnoticed by the outside world. This could well be triggered by environmental degradation, compounded by the country's growing vulnerability to outbreaks of disease as a result of the sharp decline of the health system.

There are other less quiet scenarios. Over 40 percent of the population is unemployed or underemployed. In response to this, the government has actively encouraged almost half of its labour force to work in Russia and Kazakhstan, mainly in the building and small retail sector. Their remittances last year provided over 40 percent of the country's GDP, and added to the considerable wealth of the president's relatives, who control much of the banking and transport sectors. In the wake of the world economic crisis, the IMF estimated recently that remittances would drop by some 35 percent. The outflow of migrant labor is widely seen as the security valve that has kept the country quiet in recent years. Migrant laborers are viewed within Tajikistan as the most enterprising and energetic part of the population – the people who might be inclined to come out onto the streets to protest if they remained at home. This theory could well be tested if the opportunities for work abroad remain sharply limited for the next couple of years.

The president meanwhile seems at times to have overtly abdicated responsibility for his people. In one recent public pronouncement he called on Tajiks to build up two years of food supplies "in order to soften the impact of the crisis in various spheres of the life of the state and the people."

Uzbekistan is generally viewed within the region, with some plausibility, as a cataclysm waiting to happen. Senior Kyrgyz and Kazakh officials are, for example known to be very pessimistic about the country's future, and concerned at the impact unrest there would have on their states. The Tajik view is perhaps even darker. The working assumption among analysts and a senior officials of the neighboring states is that sooner or later the draconian, tightly-coiled security system created by Islam Karimov will blow. This could happen tomorrow or in 5 years: nobody knows. Karimov has been rumoured to be seriously ill for at least the last ten years, but there has been convincing proof of this. At the moment, he is believed to favour his daughter Gulnara as a successor. The disintegration of the regime could be triggered by the president's death, natural or otherwise, by in-fighting, or possibly by external pressure from Islamist insurgents. If Tajikistan's slow demise will be a tragedy only for its own people, the collapse of the Karimov regime could have enormous repercussions for the region as a whole.

Possible consequences include:

Irredentism. If the central power in Uzbekistan begins to weaken, the large Tajik minority – officially 5 percent of the population, but almost certainly significantly more – may agitate for more rights. The plight of ethnic Tajiks and the loss of the historically Tajik cities of Buhkara and Samarkand are constant subjects of discussion in official Dushanbe. Senior Tajik officials say that in the event of chaos in Uzbekistan, unspecified steps will have to be taken to ensure of the rights of ethnic Tajiks.

Secession. The republic of Karakalpakstan, in the west of the country around the Aral Sea, where an underground movement, Free Karakalpakstan, already exists.

Massive population movement in response to major unrest. The 2005 Andijon uprising and subsequent massacre resulted in the thousands of people fleeing to or across the border with Kyrgyzstan. This seriously strained Kyrgyzstan's resources. Replicated on a nationwide basis – or even from other cities in the Fergana valley – such movements could overwhelm the neighboring

countries. They could trigger ethnic unrest, particularly in Kyrgyzstan, where a large Uzbek population lives on the Kyrgyz side of the border.
Civil war, if the IMU and/or other Islamic forces prove strong enough to mount a military challenge.

Regional issues

Impact of the world economic crisis

At the beginning of the crisis there was a facile assumption in the region that their countries were insulated from its impact. Most were barely integrated into the world economy, leading to a popular formula: no economy = no crisis.
This has not been born out by events. The region is largely an exporter of natural resources and raw materials – energy, aluminium, gold, coal, cotton. Prices on all these have plummeted. Kazakhstan has an abundance of natural resources, and had also engaged in a massive, highly leveraged building boom to project its image in the world. (It aims to be a leading middle-tier power in the medium term, and sees itself as a Eurasian, not a purely Central Asian, nation). The construction sector has collapsed, and the banks are heading in that direction.
The poorest countries rely on the mass export of their labour force to Russia and Kazakhstan. The earnings of Tajik migrant labourers – mostly in Russia and Kazakhstan, most in the building and small retail sectors – constituted, as noted earlier, about half the GDP. Kyrgyz labourers provided 30 percent of GDP, Uzbeks substantially less.
The work is not only brutal and exploitative, but highly volatile. The chances are that even after the crisis Russia will use migrant labour as a means of rewarding or punishing Central Asian nations. The first sign of this came in July with the closure of the massive Cherkizovo market complex on the edge of Moscow. This reportedly threatened the livelihood of 10-11,000 Tajik workers as well as a good proportion of Kyrgyz goods produced for the Russian market. (The Chinese sent a deputy minister to Moscow to the plight of the 80,0000 Chinese reportedly dependent on the market for their livelihood. Soon after it was announced that China would invest $1billion in a new market. Whether the Chinese will invite other traders to join them is not known).

The challenge at hand: the return of the IMU

Since the beginning of the year there have been increasing signs that the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), and possibly other Central Asian jihadist organisations, have once again turned their attention to Central Asia, and are heading back home from their long-time bases in North and South Waziristan.

Islamic insurgency has a rich environment in which to develop further – corruption, official abuse and sometimes brutality, poverty, a young population, much of it unemployed, further economic decline and a growing belief, including among moderate Moslems, that some form of Islamic state has to be better than the models currently on offer. It is also reasonable to expect the emergence of new militant groups, as well perhaps the defections from Hizb ut Tahrir to Islamist movements that are prepared to confront the Uzbek

The IMU are tough and battle-hardened, having been engaged in military operations almost full-time for since their creation. The movement emerged in 1998 from organisations formed by two Islamic activists, Juma Namangani (born Jumabay Khodjiev) and Takhir Yuldashev, who had

played prominent roles in the Fergana valley in the ferment directly preceding and following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Namangani and his supporters subsequently fought alongside the United Tajik Opposition (UTO) in the Tajik civil war (1992-1997). He and his fighters regrouped to Afghanistan following a peace agreement in Tajikistan. (Veterans of both IMU and Soviet/Russia intelligence services say that the move was facilitated by the Russian and Tajik security services). The IMU played a important role in the fighting in northern Afghanistan that followed the US and allied invasion of late 2001, and suffered heavy casualties, including Namangani himself. What remained of the IMU forces then moved to Waziristan, where they developed a reputation for singular ferocity; the IMU leadership is also reported to have established close ties with the so-called Pakistani Taliban and Al-Qaeda. By the middle of this year it was clear that the Taliban had re-established their positions along several provinces of northern Afghanistan, in particular Kunduz, the home province of Gulbudin Hekmatyar, one of the most ruthless leaders of armed opposition to both Soviet and Western coalition forces. The IMU were not far behind, and were soon reported to be establishing bases in Kunduz and adjoining provinces, and moving back across the border into Tajikistan. (It should be also noted that the Taliban are increasing their presence in provinces adjoining the border with Turkmenistan).
The broad outlines of the IMU re-infiltration route are now pretty clear: across the Pyanj River from Kunduz or Badakhshan to Tavildara – the most likely candidate for a future insurgent base area and Namangani's old area of responsibility. From there they move further north, to the border with Kyrgyzstan – less than 100 kilometers away – or Uzbekistan. Fragmentary reports from Uzbekistan spoke recently of a firefight in Jizzakh, an area where Islamic fighters had been reported active in years past.

One early movement of armed men across the border purportedly took place in April, though it was only reported in June. A group of fighters, variously said to number 40 or 100 – as usual in such matters all figures are vague, and most reports questionable -- is said to have returned to the east-central district of Tavildara. Their leader was said to Mullo Abdullo (real name probably Abullo Rakhimov), a former local commander of the armed opposition during the Tajik civil war who had later thrown his lot in with Al Qaeda.

Unpublished reports assert that Islamic guerrillas have been moving through Batken region, in Kyrgyzstan. Firefights and arrests in Jalalabad and elsewhere in the southof Kyrgyzstan indicated some insurgent presence. So did a series of attacks and firefights in Uzbekistan – most recently late August in Tashkent. Interestingly, a number of alleged guerrillas detained or killed in Tajikistan or southern Kyrgyzstan – for example some of the 18 alleged terrorists whose arrest was announced on July 17 were described as carrying out a logistical role, arranging false papers, supplies, safehouses and communications for the IMU.

There are indications of incipient concern at these developments among US military and civilian officials. This concern is, however, subordinated to – and possibly sublimated by – the more widespread anxiety about the deterioration of events in Afghanistan itself. Some USG officials believe the IMU has already set up sanctuaries in Tajikistan, possibly elsewhere. Several well placed officials, meanwhile, express dismay that little work has been done so far to establish the strength of the IMU. Current published estimates from various media sources in Pakistan and the west – best taken as a psychological reflection of concern rather mathematical accuracy -- range from 1000-5000. (Just over a year ago US government analysts were suggesting that the IMU had been reduced to a mere shadow of its former self). What is clear, however, is that the IMU is now very much a broad jihadist movement, pulling in Islamists from across Central Asia, the south and north Caucasus and some Moslem areas of the Russian Federation. The IMU is no longer a purely Uzbek force. Kazakh, Kyrgyz, ethnic Tatar, Dagestani, Chechen are among those arrested by

Central Asian security forces in the past few months. And reports in early October that Takhir Yuldashev had been killed about two months earlier in a US drone attack were quickly followed by assertions that the new IMU leader was an ethnic Tatar.

Even the lower figure cited above, if fully directed at Central Asia, could cause major problems for a number of regimes, particularly given the shift to suicide bombings as a central weapon in the guerrilla arsenal. The three main guerrilla targets are likely to be Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. If placed under serious pressure Tajikistan could hold on to Dushanbe and a couple of larger urban areas, quietly ceding authority to guerrillas elsewhere. (One could, however, argue that it would be more advantageous for them not to confront the government, but instead set up a discreet network of bases across the country). Other states can withstand relatively greater amounts of stress. It is important to stress the word 'relatively,' however. Theft from the budget and top to bottom corruption has weakened all the states of the region. As noted earlier, the concept of security has been distorted to mean ensuring the well-being of the ruler, not the population. Corruption is indeed perceived to be especially rife in security and related structures. European and other military observers have doubts about Kyrgyzstan's security and military structures; there seems to be especial concern about the security of arsenals and military stores.

Uzbekistan would be a tougher target. It has invested heavily in security. What is not certain is whether the troops are motivated enough to carry out a rolling series of Andijon type massacres in the event of large uprisings, and how far the widespread arrests of Islamists in Uzbek society has undermined loyalty, even within the military, to Karimov. (Having watched well-equipped regimes, starting with South Vietnam and the Philippines, fold in a matter of days, I would be surprised if there are many soldiers willing to die in a ditch for president Karimov).

The absolute worst case scenario in terms of terrorism and insurgency would be a growing together of the insurgencies in Central Asia and the North Caucasus. This is not inconceivable. Central Asian guerrillas were trained in Chechnya in the late nineties and fought there in the first years of this century. Chechens have frequently been reported to be fighting in IMU units in south Waziristan. And the North Caucasus guerrilla leaders are now, like their Central Asia counterparts, Islamist internationalist in their outlook, fighting for Islamic emirates, not national liberation – and making extensive use of suicide bombers.

US in the region – a single dimensional policy

The US has in short order created a network of supply lines for the Afghan war effort throughout the region to supplement the increasingly unreliable and highly vulnerable Pakistani routes. As things stand the Central Asian routes, know collectively as the Northern Distribution Network (NDN) are intended to provide some 40 per cent of the coalition forces' needs. The other 60 per cent will come via Pakistan. These figures could be reversed if the NDN proves its viability and the situation in Pakistan deteriorates further.

The creation of the NDN has been accompanied by a quiet but clear shift of policy emphasis in US relations with Central Asia states. Emphasis on transparency, human rights and governance, has been sharply downgraded. A policy of quiet diplomacy, something that did not prove too successful in the past, is once again being pursued. The Uzbek leadership for one heartily approves and now praises the Obama administration for its pragmatism. A Pentagon official summed up the new approach during a recent meeting. Criticism of the Uzbek leadership for the 2005 Andijan massacre was passé. "It's gone," he said. "Get over it."

All regional countries are involved to varying degrees in NDN. The main players at the moment are Uzbekistan, which is essentially the distribution hub of the operation, and which plays an important role in road, rail and air resupply; Tajikistan, where supplies are trucked over a USAID-built bridge on the river Pyanj, the country's border with Afghanistan to Kunduz province and thence south, the Kunduz Taliban permitting, to Kabul and onwards; and Kyrgyzstan, where the Manas base flies in large quantities of personnel and equipment, and may soon begin trucking supplies in via Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. The July 2009 base agreement, despite a change in nomenclature and some face saving announcements by the Russians, allows Manas to function as before, without any limitation in its operations.

The supply lines, however, do not seem to be working at anything close to the predicted intensity. There appear to be particular problems with one of the main transit points, the Termez-Hairaton border crossing on the Uzbek-Afghan border. Current delays are probably due to incompetence, corruption and weak infrastructure. In the future other problems could emerge. US officials are quietly apprehensive, for example that the Central Asian hosts may use the coalition's dependence on the NDN to extract further concessions from the west. As Gen Stanley McChrystal put it in his Initial Assessment of 30 August: "ISAF's Northern Distribution Network and logistical hubs are dependent upon support from Russia and Central Asian States, giving them the potential to act as either spoilers or positive influences." Other senior officials have made similar comments.

The current policy seems likely to remain in force for as long as a large coalition force remains in Afghanistan. Senior US officials like deputy defense secretary William Lynn speak of this remaining a reality for the "next several years." Even if the policy of quiet diplomacy worked, which it does not seem to have done so far in the region, this would not be enough time to achieve any fundamental changes. The policy risks simply abandoning any effort to modify the behaviour of whjat are widely agreed to be oppressive, corrupt and in some cases brutal regimes. It places the US once again firmly on the side of these regimes. It offers Central Asia jihadists an added incentive to take the war back home. And if this happens, the US and NATO may face calls from their Central Asian allies for armed assistance.

But if the spread of insurgency is a potentially serious threat to the region, it is not the fundamental one. If it fails to materialise, or is defeated, other long-festering issues -- infrastructural collapse, unresponsive and corrupt government, economic crisis and environmental degradation among them – will continue to present a lasting and growing challenge to the region.

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