

Assessing Central Asia's Role in the Antiterror Campaign

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Brief Analysis

In the aftermath of the attacks of September 11, Central Asia has emerged as a key frontline region in the war against Osama bin Laden's terrorism network and his state-sponsor in Afghanistan.

Afghanistan's Northern Tier

Three Central Asian states -- Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan -- are geographically positioned just north of the Afghan border. Since gaining their independence in 1991, these Muslim-majority countries have emerged as secular states interested in maintaining good relations with neighboring powers, including Russia, China, Iran, and Turkey, as well as with the West. Recently, all the Central Asian states have drawn closer both to Russia and China in a common effort to fight the radical Islamic terrorism that has threatened to destabilize the region.

Over the past week, the United States, with reluctant Russian support, appears to have secured commitments from several Central Asian states for varying degrees of military cooperation to support a campaign against Osama bin Laden and the Taliban. The accompanying social unrest in Pakistan is notably absent in Central Asia, making it a suitable staging ground for the coalition's military operations. At the same time, the region's fragile stability, rich resource endowments, and geographic location will prove challenging as the United States engages to move this campaign forward.

Tajikistan. An impoverished country of 6 million, Tajikistan has long been viewed as the geographic bulwark between Afghanistan and the rest of Central Asia. Tajikistan's internal stability is fragile following a bloody civil war between tribal factions, Islamic fundamentalists, and the Communist Party that ended in an uneasy peace in 1997. Although Tajikistan has begun a slow economic recovery, its unsettled political situation, grinding poverty, drug-running criminal networks, radical Islamic activists, and close proximity to the war in Afghanistan are major obstacles.

As President Emomali Rakhmonov has sought to stabilize the country, he has come to rely on a large contingent of Russian forces. A year ago, the government entered into bilateral security agreements that granted Russian military basing rights and allowed a strengthening of Russian border troops. In return, Russia has appeared willing to help shore up Tajikistan's internal stability, secure its porous border with Afghanistan, and prevent a destabilizing inflow of Afghan refugees. The strengthened Rakhmonov government, in turn, has stepped up its campaign to suppress both the opposition Islamic Revival Party and the Hizb-ul-Tahrir, a radical Islamic party, without, however, being able to resolve internal tensions. To be sure, as Tajikistan's leaders consider cooperation with the United States in this war on terrorism, they will be guided by cues from Russia.

Uzbekistan. This is the most populous of the Central Asian states, with a population of 24 million in a state roughly the size of California. Uzbekistan is characterized by a determined independence and strong sense of national identity, sizable resource endowments, and regional military strength. The government of President Islam Karimov has sought to maintain internal stability, notably by repressing fundamentalist Islam at home. These actions may have catalyzed an expanding radical Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) in the densely populated and poverty-

stricken Ferghana Valley. The IMU draws its support from the Taliban regime and bin Laden's network and aims to establish an "Islamic Caliphate of Turkestan," encompassing Central Asia and China's Xinjiang Province. The IMU, which finances its operations through drug smuggling and other criminal activities, has conducted guerilla raids and terrorist operations in the capital, Tashkent. The government's battle with the IMU has led to Uzbekistan's growing support for the anti-Taliban United Front in Afghanistan.

Since independence, Uzbekistan has sought to diversify its relations beyond Moscow, establish itself as a regional leader, and maintain good relations with the West. In the security sphere, Uzbekistan has been an enthusiastic member of the U.S.-sponsored Central Asia battalion and has sought deepening ties with NATO through the Partnership for Peace. Recently, however, leading Uzbeks have perceived the West as badgering them on democratization and economic reform while abandoning them in their struggle against terrorism. As a result, the Uzbekistan government adjusted course over the last year, signing previously rejected bilateral security agreements with Russia and joining the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (comprised of Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan) formed principally to combat Islamic terrorism. Still, Tashkent remains sufficiently independent and interested in U.S. ties; the government publicly opened the door to discussion of military cooperation even as Moscow was making initial statements ruling out U.S. presence in the region.

Turkmenistan. A small, resource-rich country, Turkmenistan shares a long, open border with Iran and Afghanistan. It is deeply dependent on Russia and Iran for its gas exports, which represent Turkmenistan's primary source of income. In light of its vulnerabilities, Turkmenistan has cultivated its position as a neutral nation, seeking good relations with Russia, Iran, and Afghanistan, while eschewing multilateral obligations. This has allowed the government of Saparmurad Niyazov to sidestep controversy and engage in international relations selectively. For instance, Turkmenistan has avoided the anti-Taliban Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) collective in favor of positioning itself as a regional peace broker in the Afghanistan conflict. Likewise, it has avoided participation in the CIS, while establishing a bilateral defense agreement with Russia to protect its borders. Over the past week, Turkmenistan has gone beyond its usual neutrality to signal support for the U.S. war against terrorism, but it has made clear that its status as a neutral state would prevent it from engaging directly in military activities.

Beyond these frontline states, a second tier of regional countries, beginning with U.S. ally Turkey and including the South Caucasus states and Kazakstan, may also be called upon to help in the campaign against bin Laden and the Taliban.

Managing Policy Trade-offs

U.S. engagement in the region has already confronted conflicting interests between regional powers and Central Asian states. Moscow supports Washington's broad antiterrorist objectives but will remain deeply ambivalent about any American presence in the region, fearful that it could challenge Russia's dominant position. Over the past year, Russia has worked hard to take advantage of instability in Afghanistan and the growing strength of the IMU to bring Central Asia back under its security umbrella. Indeed, it achieved through bilateral military agreements in the last year what it had failed to achieve when it first proposed CIS collective security agreements in 1991, 1992, and 1993. Thus, the reported decision by Russian President Putin to deny U.S. access to Russian air space or air bases while leaving similar security decisions "up to individual Central Asian states" has left Moscow with maximum flexibility and placed the burden of war squarely on the shoulders of any Central Asian state risking a more cooperative line.

Several frontline states, particularly Uzbekistan, may still be open to U.S. involvement in the region but will expect concrete support to bolster their independence. In light of Moscow's policy, they will calculate carefully the potential benefits arising from cooperation with the United States against the potential security dangers they will face when U.S. forces leave the region. Furthermore, it is likely that they will seek U.S. support in their internal political struggle to contain radical Islam and drug-running criminal networks. Given the possibility for authoritarian

regimes to label legitimate opposition groups as radical Islamic parties, Washington will have to be judicious in determining whether and how to become involved in these internal issues.

Conclusion

As it enlists local parties in the antiterrorist campaign, the United States will have to walk a fine line in balancing the interests of those Central Asian states that allow a U.S. military presence and those of regional powers, particularly Russia, that are capable of playing the role of a spoiler. What is clear is that the process of defining a strategy to target Bin Laden and his Afghan hosts will have the consequence of forcing a review of wider U.S. interests in the broader South Caucasus and Central Asia region.

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