



US POLICY TOWARDS CENTRAL ASIA UNDER TRUMP

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Abstract:

U.S. policy faces numerous challenges in Central Asia, such as the decreasing U.S. military and economic resources in the region; Russian and Chinese hostility to a long-term U.S. military presence in Eurasia; restrictions on religious and other freedoms due partly to counterterrorism concerns; limited U.S. involvement in the region compared to other external players (like Japan as well as Russia and China); an undeveloped U.S. policy regarding regional multinational institutions; and the indifference and ignorance of U.S. business toward regional commercial opportunities beyond the energy sector. However, advocates of “America First” in the Trump administration do not see these threats as sufficiently serious to garner U.S. military intervention beyond occasional training, equipping, and intelligence sharing. Terrorism, drug trafficking, economic isolation, and human rights restrictions in Central Asia do not present an immediate existential threat to the United States, sowing ambivalence over the future of U.S. foreign policy in the region.

Keywords: United States, Trafficking, Trump, Terrorism, Cyber

Título en Castellano: *La política de Estados Unidos en Asia Central bajo el Presidente Trump*

Resumen:

La política de Estados Unidos ha de afrontar numerosos desafíos en Asia Central, como la disminución de los recursos militares y económicos en la región, la hostilidad de Rusia y China a su presencia militar a largo plazo en Eurasia, restricciones a la libertad religiosa y otras libertades

Palabras Clave: *Hybrid warfare, hybrid threats, Russian Federation, NATO, strategic deterrence, strategicheskoe sderzhivanie, comprehensive approach.*

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1. Introduction

The collapse of the Soviet Union ushered in a new dimension of U.S. foreign policy. The United States began its relationship with the five newly-independent states of Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan) by assisting them to establish free-market institutions, develop their energy resources, foster democratic governance, build national, economic and political institutions, and manage Soviet-era WMD stockpiles. Before 1991, the states of Central Asia were marginal backwaters for Washington. But in the 1990s, after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the energy resources of the Caspian Sea attracted many U.S. oil companies. Eventually, the energy resources of the Caspian Basin produced tension in U.S.-Russian relations. Central Asia also became a battlefield on the U.S.-led War on Terror. Violent clashes erupted between ethnic groups in Uzbekistan and groups in Tajikistan; the region then became entangled with war in Afghanistan. Still, the U.S.- Central Asia relationship changed radically after September 2001, when the United States undertook a prolonged military campaign in the region within the framework of the global war against terrorism. The United States assisted Central Asian countries to counter extremist groups like the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan. The Pentagon has helped their militaries become more efficient, effective and professional. The U.S. agenda for Central Asia and Afghanistan has included countering WMD proliferation; fighting terrorists and securing borders; advancing U.S. economic interests and regional integration; promoting good governance and civil liberties; monitoring Russian, Chinese and Iranian activities in the region; and pursuing bilateral cooperation with each regional state.

Human rights and democracy promotion were among the top priorities of the Obama administration in Central Asia. These efforts were often coupled with (and were often a condition of) security cooperation, mainly focused on fighting violent extremism in the region. According to the U.S. State Department's Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2016, Central Asia has shown inadequate progress towards democratic and human rights reforms. Repression of civil society and the press, religious and LGBT discrimination, and a lack of free and fair elections continue.² According to Freedom House's Human Rights Index—with the exception of Kyrgyzstan, which is ranked "partly free" by the Index—the states that comprise Central Asia are ranked "not free." Additionally, all five countries received a Freedom Rating between 5 and 7 (0 being "most free" and 7 being "least free"). The Obama administration spearheaded Annual Bilateral Consultations (ABCs) with all five countries to discuss a wide range of topics, including "counter-narcotics, counter-terrorism, democratic reforms, the rule of law human rights, trade, investment, health, and education."³ In 2012, the ABC discussions between the U.S. and Kazakhstan were elevated to Strategic Partnership Commission. The Trade and Investment Framework Agreement (TIFA), an economic arrangement established by the Bush administration, was continued by the Obama administration to improve regional integration and increase trade and investment between the U.S. and Central Asia. The TIFA Council, consisting of representatives from the U.S. and Central Asia, convenes annually to discuss multilateral collaboration in areas such as energy, industry, infrastructure, and trade.

U.S. policy faces numerous challenges in Central Asia, such as the decreasing U.S. military and economic resources in the region; Russian and Chinese hostility to a long-term

² "Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2016", U.S. Department of State, 2016, at <https://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/hrrpt/humanrightsreport/#wrapper>.

³ Nichol, Jim: "Central Asia: Regional Developments and Implications for U.S. Interests" Congressional Research Service, (March 2014), at <https://Fas.Org/Sgp/Crs/Row/R133458.pdf>.



U.S. military presence in Eurasia; restrictions on religious and other freedoms due partly to counterterrorism concerns; limited U.S. involvement in the region compared to other external players (like Japan, as well as Russia and China); an undeveloped U.S. policy regarding the SCO, the OBOR, the EEU, and other regional institutions; and the indifference and ignorance of U.S. businesses toward regional commercial opportunities beyond the energy sector. Since the U.S. government was not involved with Central Asia prior to the 1990s, it lacks extensive regional expertise. In addition: although the Central Asian states occupy a single, shared geographic sphere, they cannot be approached as a single entity. Over the years of independence, the political divisions between the Central Asian states have hardened. The borders of these states, inherited from the USSR in 1991, were created by Moscow. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, these borders have turned into illogical, contested boundaries—fracturing ethnic groups, rupturing trade and communication routes, and breaking economic and political interdependencies. At the same time, the borders have remained porous to illicit trade of weapons and drugs smuggling from Afghanistan, which caused the spread of infectious diseases like HIV/AIDS. With the retreat of Russian influence, the states found themselves at the nexus of a number of interlocking regions: Russia and Eurasia, the Middle and Near East, South Asia, and Asia more broadly. Central Asia plays the role of a buffer zone and transit area for these regions. The region is represented by diverse ethno-linguistic and religious groups from Russia, Iran, China, and Afghanistan. Turkey represents the western extension of one of Central Asia's broader cultural spheres. Finally, the last twenty years have also seen the economic, political and military involvement of new states in Central Asia. Asian countries such as India, Japan, South Korea, and China have become more engaged in the region.

What policies the Trump administration will pursue in Central Asia remain to be seen. Despite a Sino-Russian partnership in the region, the United States can, in the future, pursue shared goals, such as energy cooperation and regional security, preventing instability in this potentially explosive region. However, U.S. engagement with the region will likely remain secondary in comparison to the greater role of China and Russia in the region. Given the national security priorities of the current White House administration, Central Asia may become an afterthought in U.S. foreign policy. The changing political landscape has already led Russia and its Central Asian neighbors to prepare for an expected power vacuum following U.S. military withdrawal from Central Asia. A great uncertainty remains over the Afghan state's ability to foster peace and stability within its country, while fighting terrorism and drug trafficking with crumbled infrastructures and weak political institutions. The countries of Central Asia see terrorism and drug trafficking as real destabilizers in Afghanistan. However, advocates of "America First" in the Trump administration do not see these threats as sufficiently serious to garner U.S. military intervention beyond occasional training, equipping, and intelligence sharing. Terrorism, drug trafficking, economic isolation, and human rights restrictions in Central Asia do not present immediate existential threats to the United States, sowing ambivalence over the future of U.S. foreign policy in the region.

2.Terrorism

The United States may stay engaged in Central Asia to fight the spread of terrorism—and other illicit activity, like drug trafficking, that helps to finance terrorism. Terrorist groups are building alliances, gathering material and technical support, and are capable to maintain their groups despite losing bases or personnel. Terrorism is Central Asia's most significant and persistent regional threat, stemming from local Islamist organizations like Chechen separatists or from international terrorist organizations such as al-Qaeda and ISIL. Since the collapse of the USSR, an interest in political Islam in Central Asia has grown . More recently, the Syrian



crisis has provided new opportunities for extremist groups to gain legitimacy among the jihadist movement, develop recruitment channels, and gain military experience.

Some terrorist groups use Afghanistan and Pakistan as launching pads for operations in Central Asia. The Islamist problem in the Fergana Valley has been a concern for decades. The underground mosques and madrassas were developed in the Fergana Valley during the Soviet era: in the 1980s, the valley became the fertile ground for the formation of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and the Hizb ut-Tahrir. The IMU is a terrorist organization—originally limited to Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan, now globally active in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, and Syria. The IMU used Afghanistan as a launching point for missions targeting Uzbekistan and other parts of Central Asia—until the turbulent events in 2001, during which the leader of IMU, Namangani, was killed, and another leader, Yuldashev, moved to Pakistan. The IMU has historically been infamous for its use of crime as a source of financing, using the general lawlessness of Central Asia and the tribal regions of Pakistan to its advantage. Activities have included extortion of local communities, ransoms, arms trafficking, and assisting the Taliban to smuggle opium and heroin in exchange for more funding. Today, the IMU is an umbrella term for two related factions that both consider themselves 'the true movement'. One faction has pledged loyalty to the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).⁴ Another pledged allegiance to al-Qaeda and the Taliban, which were IMU's original spiritual leaders.⁵ Whereas the first has subscribed to IS's goal of establishing a multi-ethnic Islamic caliphate in the Middle East, the second continues to seek IMU's original goal—overthrow of secular Asian governments, particularly those of Uzbekistan and Pakistan, in favor of Islamic ones.⁶

Central Asia's terrorism threats need to be considered in two areas: internal and external, the latter of which mainly come from Afghanistan, Syria, and Iraq. The changing political landscape in Afghanistan has already led Russia and its Central Asian neighbors to prepare for the fallout from the expected power vacuum following NATO's withdrawal, as well as international uncertainty over Afghanistan's capability to maintain its strategic goals to bring about peace and stability to its country. Currently, ISIS has been emerging in parts of Afghanistan, and there are fears that the extremist group will cross its borders into Central Asian countries. According to one expert, the ISIS campaign became a global strategy in this sense. Since 2016, ISIS leaders have changed their tactics from amassing a large military force to fight in Syria and Iraq to encouraging those in their places or residences to join the jihad. Combat veterans in Iraq and Syria were charged with helping local communities organize the struggle and improve their methods. However, the Islamic Jihad Union (IJU), the Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement, and the non-violent Hizb ut-Tahrir are also currently identified as threats by some Central Asia regimes. Groups like the IMU and the IJU migrated from Central Asia to South Asia following the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan. The extremist threat thus far has been contained south of the border. Nonetheless, the threat has persisted and can potentially migrate back north in the event of a crisis caused by economic problems, leadership succession, or other destabilizing developments in Central Asia.⁷

⁴ Pannier, Bruce: "The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan Comes Unraveled", *Radio Free Europe*, (November 2015), at <http://www.rferl.org/A/Qishloq-Ovozi-Islamic-Movement-Uzbekistan-Fractured/27395160.html>.

⁵ Roggio, Bill and Weiss, Caleb: "Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan Faction Emerges after Group's Collapse", *Long War Journal*, (June 2016), at <http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/06/islamic-movement-of-uzbekistan-faction-emerges-after-groups-collapse.php>.

⁶ National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism, "Islamic Movement Of Uzbekistan (IMU)," (March 2015), at <http://www.start.umd.edu/baad/narratives/islamic-movement-uzbekistan-imu>.

⁷ Lukyanov, Grigory: "The Islamic State in Afghanistan: A Real Threat to The Region?", Russian Council On



Kazakhstan has traditionally been viewed as a relatively stable Central Asian country, with lower levels of terrorist activities than many of its neighbors. The government has prioritized domestic security and stability through repressive policies that target not only religiously-extreme organizations, but all opposition. The primary trigger for the rise of radical Islamic militancy in Kazakhstan has been ongoing conflicts and instability in Afghanistan. The Kazakhstani government has banned various terrorist organizations which are active either in the country or in other parts of Central Asia, including Al Qaeda, the IMU, Hizb ut-Tahrir, and the East Turkistan Islamic Movement. Historically, the most active radical Islamic militant groups operating in Kazakhstan have been the IMU and its splinter group called the Islamic Jihad Union. Neither groups treated Kazakhstan as its primary target, but both are considered continuing threats. Both groups have received support from al-Qaeda and the Taliban. Another group named Jund al-Khilafa was started by two Kazakhs and claims that most of their followers are also from Kazakhstan. However, their leadership is based in Pakistan, and the organization has not made any attacks in Kazakhstan since a suicide bombing in 2011. At present, the prevailing trend is characterized by radical Islamic militants leaving Kazakhstan to join ISIL's fights in Syria and Iraq. Kazakhstani fighters make up a small portion of ISIL's forces, but represent a threat to the country if they manage to return to Kazakhstan.

Kyrgyzstan has a complicated relationship with political Islam, viewing it both as a way of defining the nation's identity post-independence, and as a threat to the established regime. The government has sought to deal with this problem by differentiating between local "good" forms of Islam that reinforce Kyrgyz identity, and "bad" foreign ones which threaten it. For this reason, the internationalist Islamic movement Hizb ut-Tahrir is considered a threat by the regime, despite the organization's commitment to non-violence and lack of militarization. Hizb ut-Tahrir has not been directly engaged in violence within Kyrgyzstan, but it remains at the forefront of the focus of Kyrgyzstan's security services.⁸ There is concern that Hizb ut-Tahrir is providing ideological momentum to radicalism in the region. This is of particular importance to Kyrgyzstan, as they have the largest presence of Hizb ut-Tahrir members in Central Asia.⁹ The most persistent threat to Kyrgyzstan has come from the IMU, which has carried out multiple attacks in the country. In the south of Kyrgyzstan, a large Uzbek ethnic minority has come into conflict with the majority Kyrgyz in the past. Kyrgyzstan does not share a border with Afghanistan, but it does share some ethnic ties with the Afghan population. Its weak and porous borders with Tajikistan, however, make it vulnerable to security threats that may emanate from its neighbor. While its membership in the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) makes it somewhat dependent on Russian military and economic assistance, Kyrgyzstan receives U.S. anti-terrorism, border security, and counter-narcotics assistance. The police's capacity to secure borders is considered a matter of utmost importance. The US has allocated funds for equipment, training, and the building of checkpoints to monitor drug trafficking.¹⁰

International Affairs, 19 September 2016, at http://RussianCouncil.Ru/En/Inner/?Id_4=8111#Top-Content.

⁸ Tromble, Rebekah: "Securitising Islam, Securitizing Ethnicity: The Discourse of Uzbek Radicalism In Kyrgyzstan", *East European Politics* vol.30, n° 4 (2014) p. 539, at <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/21599165.2014.950417>

⁹ Azizian, Rouben: "Islamic Radicalism in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan: Implications For The Global War On Terrorism" *ISN*, (September 2005), p. 4, at <http://www.isn.ethz.ch/Digital-Library/Publications/Detail/?Lang=En&Id=44044>.

¹⁰ Marat, Erica: "Two Decades of U.S.-Kyrgyz Relations", Rethink Institute, at <http://www.rethinkinstitute.org/two-decades-of-u-s-kyrgyz-relations/>.



After the fall of the Soviet Union, Tajikistan fought a five-year civil war from 1992-1997, which ravaged the country and evidenced the weakness of the government. Al-Qaeda and the Taliban government supported Islamist factions, which led the Tajik government to seek help from Uzbekistan and Russia to quash the threat. Spillover violence from the growth of the Taliban in Afghanistan could be imminent —coupled with potential spillover of Daesh, which has increased its presence with the defection of the chief of Tajikistan's Special Forces, Colonel Gulmurod Khalimov, a senior Tajik officer trained in the United States.¹¹ The Tajik government purports connections between small Tajik extremist groups and the IMU as a way to bolster credibility.¹² Jamaat Ansarullah has become the pre-eminent terror group in Tajikistan —not because of the frequency of attacks, but rather due to state media coverage.¹³ Tajikistan shares a 749-mile border with Afghanistan. Many Tajiks have been recruited and are currently fighting in Syria and Iraq. Although the Department of State has warned about Tajikistan's widespread corruption and human rights violations, which has exploited counterterrorism laws to suppress political opposition, the United States has furnished financial assistance for counter-terror and counter-narcotics assistance.

Despite the large number of ISIS fighters originating in Uzbekistan, this Central Asian country is still considered to be the least vulnerable to a terrorist attack from Afghanistan. Uzbekistan has a well-fortified border, with a strong national army and border guards. The home-grown IMU carried out major terrorist attacks in the country in 1999, which led the government to take a hardline stance towards religious extremism in the country. The IMU has been forced out of the country through these efforts, in addition to strong Uzbek policing of the Afghanistan border. Spillover violence emerging from Afghanistan after the exit of coalition forces is the most significant future threat to Uzbekistan. The Islamic State's prospects in Uzbekistan are slim, due to the lack of a power vacuum and a reliable network wherewith to funnel weapons and supplies. Legislation mandates that any Uzbek who leaves the country to join the jihad will be imprisoned if they return home, further reducing the risk posed by supporters of ISIS. Other terrorist organizations have sprouted, such as the Islamic Jihad Group (IJG), which *inter alia* performed a lethal attack at the US embassy in Tashkent in 2004. The U.S. has supported Uzbekistan's counterterrorism efforts and security capacity by providing financial assistance. Diplomatic efforts include bilateral political consultations held every year. Some U.S. equipment leftover from Afghanistan has been transferred to the Uzbek government, including 300 MRAP mine-resistant vehicles.¹⁴

In 2001, Turkmenistan opted to stay out of the U.S.-led military coalition in Afghanistan, in line with its policy of neutrality. Although President Niyazov allowed humanitarian transport across the country to support U.S. efforts in Afghanistan, travel has not always been smooth. It has been reported that some flights to Afghanistan have been blocked, and that road transportation has been hampered.¹⁵ Counter-terrorism efforts are also

¹¹ Solovyov, Dmitry: "Commander of Elite Tajik Police Force Defects to Islamic State", *Reuters*, 28 May 2015, at <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/05/28/us-mideast-crisis-tajikistan-iduskbn0od1ap20150528>.

¹² Rafiyeva, Mavlouda: "Tajikistan Tries 23 Alleged Members of Jamaat Ansarullah", *Plus/Tajikistan*, 11 April 2015, at <http://www.plus.tj/news/2015/04/11/tajikistan-tries-23-alleged-members-jamaat-ansarullah>.

¹³ Vinson, Mark: "A Look at Tajikistan's Jamaat Ansarullah Leader Amriddin Tabarov", *Militant Leadership Monitor*, (August 2015), at <https://jamestown.org/program/a-look-at-tajikistans-jamaat-ansarullah-leader-amriddin-tabarov/>.

¹⁴ Kucera, Joshua: "U.S. Defends Giving Armored Vehicles to Uzbekistan", *Eurasianet*, 5 July 2015, at <http://www.Eurasianet.Org/Node/74126>.

¹⁵ Nichol, Jim: "Turkmenistan: Recent Developments and US Interests", Congressional Research Service, (December 2013), at <https://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/97-1055.pdf>.



weak at a national level: law enforcement lacks proactivity, and corruption is widespread.¹⁶ Thus far, no terrorist groups have operated in Turkmenistan. However, Turkmenistan does face a persistent threat from terrorist organizations which operate in Afghanistan. Reportedly, in 2014, three Turkmen border guards and three soldiers were killed by militant attacks on the border. The Turkmen regime generally does not participate in regional security organizations or maintain bilateral security arrangements, although they have recently begun to ask for U.S. assistance to counter the threat emanating from Afghanistan. As far as diplomacy is concerned, the United States has been conducting annual bilateral meetings with Turkmenistan since 2010. Furthermore, the United States has provided assistance to Turkmenistan for anti-terrorism, anti-narcotics, and related programs. Still, it is unclear how well prepared the Turkmen military is for repelling a terrorist attack, since the country's government has adhered to a policy of neutrality and denied the existence of Afghanistan's extremists until late 2015.

The U.S. strives to prevent the further spread of terrorism by improving security in the region through working together with regional governments. The United States has implemented several bilateral and multilateral exercises, training programs, military financing assistance and foreign military sales, and information operations. For example, the annual exercise Steppe Eagle is a multilateral exercise with the U.S., the U.K., and Kazakhstan aimed at developing Kazakhstan's Armed Forces' peacekeeping potential. During the last several years, it has become more regional in scope, with Tajikistan and the Kyrgyz Republic also taking part.¹⁷ This training is conducted by U.S. Special Forces troops under USCENTCOM, and the cooperation has been productive.¹⁸ Dushanbe views security cooperation with the United States as a key element to strengthening regional peace and stability.¹⁹ U.S. interests in Central Asian countries are rooted in their strategic location. Tajikistan, for instance, allows the United States to use its territory for over-flights and logistical support to the International Security and Assistance Force in Afghanistan.²⁰ In turn, American military aid to Tajikistan is focused on fighting terrorism.²¹ Also, U.S. policy aims at strengthening the government's ability to control its borders against the trafficking of arms, narcotics, and persons.²² Prior to 2015, Kyrgyzstan had been the top recipient of the U.S. training. After the Manas air base was closed that year, the United States has not trained any of Kyrgyzstan's special forces.²³ Yet, in its statement, the CENTCOM suggested that U.S. military aid could resume.²⁴ Also in 2015, in order to improve U.S.- Central Asian relations and address challenges that require international cooperation, a new multilateral dialogue format, C5+1, was launched between

¹⁶ "Country Report on Terrorism 2014," U.S. Department of State, at <https://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/2014/>

¹⁷ Wesolek, Monette: "Arizona National Guard Soldiers Participate in Multi-national Training Exercise", *U.S. Army*, 2 August 2016, at https://www.army.mil/article/172673/arizona_national_guard_soldiers_participate_in_multi_national_training_exercise

¹⁸ Brautigam, Christopher: "Steppe Eagle Builds Capacity and Cooperation", *U.S. Army*, 27 April 2016, at https://www.army.mil/article/166836/steppe_eagle_builds_capacity_and_cooperation

¹⁹ "U.S. Military Commander Talks with Tajik Leader in Central Asian Tour", *Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty*, 15 June 2016, at <http://www.rferl.org/a/centcom-commander-central-asian-tour/27799175.html>

²⁰ "Inspection of Embassy Dushanbe, Tajikistan", U.S. Department of State, March 2015, at <https://oig.state.gov/system/files/isp-i-15-17a.pdf>.

²¹ Votel, General Joseph L.: Commander U.S. Central Command, Before the Senate Armed Service Committee On The Posture of U.S. Central Command, March 2017, at https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Votel_03-09-17.pdf

²² "Inspection of Embassy Dushanbe, Tajikistan", op. cit.

²³ Kucera, Joshua: "U.S. Boosts Special Forces Training in Central Asia," *Eurasianet*, 28 March 2017, at <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/83021>.

²⁴ Votel, op. cit.



the United States and Central Asian countries. Among other considerations for deepening six-party collaboration was the Global Counterterrorism Forum Regional Dialogue, to counter security threats from foreign terrorist fighters and radicalization in Central Asia.²⁵ From an American point of view, increasing regional governments' capability and confidence will provide the security of their sovereign spaces, even with a limited presence of U.S. investment and troops.²⁶ In Afghanistan, however, U.S. efforts continue to require significant effort.

3.Afghanistan

The United States and partner countries are training the Afghanistan National Security Forces, while retaining counter-terrorism assets and abilities within the country. Afghanistan is widely perceived as the source of terrorist and drug trafficking activity that spills over into Central Asia's territories, as well as compromises the security of Afghanistan itself. Aside from the Taliban and al-Qaeda, the territory of Afghanistan will grow more occupied by ISIS, which has been pushed out of its strongholds in northern Iraq and Syria. The ISIS transportation routes cross Central Asia from Afghanistan, and they compete with the Taliban for control of local institutions and earnings from the production and transit of drugs, arms, and food. The narcotics trafficking routes proceed from Afghanistan into Russia through Central Asia, and contribute to the "fragility" of Central Asian states.²⁷ Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan have already begun strengthening security along their shared borders. Tajikistan, for example, shares a 746-mile border with Afghanistan, and is the most vulnerable Central Asian state. In 2016, Taliban forces penetrated Tajikistan's borders on two occasions. When the Afghan army forced the militants out of the border areas of Kunduz, Russian troops stepped in, repelling an invasion in the country. Tajikistan also has close ethnic ties with the Afghan population, and shares its desire to suppress domestic political opposition. As a member of the CSTO, Tajikistan also depends on Russian economic and military assistance to fight against any domestic or regional security threats. In 2015, Moscow began reinforcing its 201st Motor Rifle Division stationed in Tajikistan to strengthen security along the Afghan-Turkmen border against growing concerns over the threat of ISIS. As of 2016, an estimated 2,500-4,500 fighters from the Commonwealth of Independent States' member-countries have joined the ranks with Taliban and ISIS fighters in Afghanistan and with ISIS fighters in Syria and Iraq.²⁸ According to a 2014 report of the International Center for the Study of Radicalization (ICSR), there were 500 fighters from Uzbekistan, 360 from Turkmenistan, 300 from Kyrgyzstan, 250 from Kazakhstan, and 190 from Tajikistan. Furthermore, the same paper quotes the Brookings Institution's data which places Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Kyrgyzstan among the top-20 source-countries for the Islamic State.

The Afghan government vowed that the Taliban would take no major cities in Afghanistan, but by September 2016, the province capitals—including Lashkar Gah in the Helmand Province, as well as Uruzgan Province where Australian forces had held off Taliban insurgents for four years—were virtually surrounded by Taliban insurgents.¹⁴ Government forces barely staved off an attack earlier in the month, as both provinces are coveted for their

²⁵ U.S. – Central Asia (C5+1) Joint Projects, https://tj.usembassy.gov/wp-content/uploads/sites/143/2016/08/c5-1-fact-sheet_english.pdf.

²⁶ Votel, op. cit.

²⁷ Kazantsev, Andrey A.: "Central Asia: Secular Statehood Challenged by Radical Islam", Valdai Paper nº 2 (42) (January 2016), at <http://Valdaiclub.Com/Files/11419/>

²⁸ Kazantsev, Andrey: "Recruiting Foreign Terrorist Fighters and Dealing With Returnees: European Experience And The Prospects For Russia," Working Paper, *Russian Council On International Affairs*, (April 2016), at http://RussianCouncil.Ru/En/Inner/?Id_4=7385#Top-Content



opium fields. In June 2015, the Afghan government reported that there were at least 7,000 militants from Pakistan, Central Asia, and the Middle East fighting in Afghanistan.¹⁵ There are also a dozen different groups fighting throughout the country, and while some do oppose the Taliban, most are supporters. The emergence of the Islamic State has fostered a partnership between al-Qaeda and the Taliban; although both groups share different ideologies, they both view the Islamic State as a threat.¹⁶

Due to the strategic locations within Central Asia, one of the primary aspects of U.S. foreign policy in the region has been support of the war in Afghanistan. This policy began under George W. Bush, and continued under Obama. In the first few years of the Obama administration, U.S. troop numbers grew dramatically from around 30,000 in 2008 to approximately 100,000 in 2011.²⁹ Central Asia supported a number of operations in Afghanistan. Hoping to reduce the reliance on the transport of supplies through Pakistan, Obama established the Northern Distribution Network (NDN) in 2009. The NDN ended in 2015 as a result of increased tensions between Russia and the West, as well as the NATO troop drawdowns in Afghanistan.³⁰ In addition to the support provided by the NDN, the U.S. and NATO relied on bases established in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, and air services in Tajikistan. In Kyrgyzstan, U.S. forces relied on the Manas Transit Center, which provided logistics, refueling, and transportation services, and transported 5.3 million servicemen and women. The base was vacated by U.S. troops in June of 2014, when the U.S. handed the base back to the government of Kyrgyzstan, due to troop drawdowns in Afghanistan and growing pressure from Russia and Kyrgyzstan for a U.S. removal of troop presence.³¹ While the Karshi-Khanabad Air Base in Uzbekistan was vacated by the U.S. in 2005, a small German air base in Termez continued to support NATO allies throughout the Obama Administration.³² Additionally, Tajikistan supported Operation Enduring Freedom with the Dushanbe International Airport, which provided NATO troops with “gas-and-go” refueling services.³³ Troop numbers have since declined to a little over 8,000 at the end of Obama’s tenure.³⁴

Additionally, some progress was made towards rejuvenating the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) gas pipeline, which began construction in December 2015 in Turkmenistan. The project was offered \$1.5 billion of the \$10 billion price tag by the Asian Development Bank and the Saudi Arabia's Islamic Development Bank; a helpful contribution, as Turkmenistan is responsible for 85 percent of the project costs.³⁵ Continuing complications presented by the Taliban in the region make TAPI’s future uncertain. Unfortunately, the future of the NSR initiative and the role of the U.S. in Central Asian trade and economic cooperation remain largely ambiguous. This is due in part to the arduous process of removing barriers to trade, the closure of the NDN, underdeveloped infrastructure, and U.S.

²⁹ Kurtzleben, Danielle: “Chart: How The U.S. Troop Levels In Afghanistan Have Changed Under Obama”, *NPR*, 6 July 2016, at <http://www.npr.org/2016/07/06/484979294/chart-how-the-u-s-troop-levels-in-afghanistan-have-changed-under-obama>

³⁰ Daly, John C.K: “Russia Shuttters Northern Distribution Network”, *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 15 June 2015, at <https://Jamestown.Org/Program/Russia-Shuttters-Northern-Distribution-Network/>

³¹ Dzyubenko, Olga: “U.S. Vacates Base in Central Asia as Russia’s Clout Rises,” *Reuters*, 3 June 2014, at <http://Www.Reuters.Com/Article/Us-Kyrgyzstan-Usa-Manas-Iduskbn0ee1lh20140603>

³² Lang, Józef: “The Luftwaffe And American Military Equipment In Uzbekistan”, *OSW*, 4 February 2015, at <https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2015-02-04/luftwaffe-and-american-military-equipment-uzbekistan>

³³ Nichol: “Central Asia: Regional Developments and Implications for U.S. Interests”, *op. cit.*

³⁴ Kurtzleben, *op. cit.*

³⁵ “TAPI: A Transnational Pipe Dream”, *Stratfor*, 15 December 2016, at <https://www.Stratfor.Com/Analysis/Tapi-Transnational-Pipe-Dream>



unwillingness to devote significant investment —barring funds related to Afghanistan —into the region.³⁶ Additionally, as the U.S. has decreased its presence in Central Asia, Russia and China have increased theirs. China’s “One Belt, One Road” initiative aims to stake China’s economic influence in the region, focusing on infrastructure development to connect Central, South, and East Asia as well as Africa and the Middle East.³⁷ Meanwhile, Russia has been building a Eurasian Economic Union with several Central Asian member.

On December 23, 2016, President Obama signed the Fiscal Year 2017 National Defense Authorization Act, authorizing \$4.26 billion for the Afghanistan Security Forces Fund to build infrastructure, and for training and operations, equipment, transportation and sustainment of the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF).³⁸ The goal was to strengthen effectiveness, professionalism, and the capabilities of the ANSF in order to increase its self-sustainability.³⁹ During the last two years, the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces have been fully responsible for security in the country, with limited U.S. and coalition support.⁴⁰ They still struggle to stop a resurgent insurgency led by the Taliban and other groups like the Islamic State. According to a report released by the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), as of November 2016, the Kabul government is losing control of the country, while the number of ANSF are decreasing, as both casualties and districts under insurgent control/influence are rising. Moreover, nearly a third of the Afghan population lives in contested areas, areas where neither the insurgency nor the Afghan government maintains significant control.⁴¹ A new UN report (2016) stated that civilians are being killed and wounded in record numbers. Although 60 percent of civilian casualties are attributed to anti-government elements, there was an increase in the number of civilians killed or injured by pro-government forces.⁴² It is clear, however, that the Afghan government remains weak and critically dependent on foreign support. Currently, U.S. and NATO troops conduct two missions in the country: the U.S. counterterrorism mission, called Operation Freedom’s Sentinel, and the NATO train-advise-and-assist mission, Operation Resolute Support. In his testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee on the situation in Afghanistan, Army Gen. John W. Nicholson Jr., the commander of NATO’s Resolute Support mission and of U.S. forces in Afghanistan described the war as a stalemate, and called for more troops in the country. For the United States, the General highlighted, “the main objective in Afghanistan is to keep the nation from being used as a safe haven from which terrorists could attack the United States and its allies.”⁴³ Therefore, it is essential to assist the

³⁶ Weitz, Richard: “U.S. New Silk Road Initiative Needs Urgent Renewal”, *The Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, (March 2015), at <https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13155-us-new-silk-road-initiative-needs-urgent-renewal.html>

³⁷ Eisenman, Joshua and Stewart, Devin: “China’s New Silk Road Is Getting Muddy”, *Foreign Policy*, 9 January 2017, <http://Foreignpolicy.Com/2017/01/09/Chinas-New-Silk-Road-Is-Getting-Muddy/>

³⁸ SIGAR Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction: Quarterly Report to the United States Congress, 30 January 2017, at <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/quarterlyreports/2017-01-30qr.pdf>; and “Justification for FY 2017 Overseas Contingency Operations (OCO) Afghanistan Security Forces Fund (ASFF)”, Office of the Secretary of Defense, Department of Defense Budget Fiscal Year (FY) 2017, February 2016, pp.1-2, at http://comptroller.defense.gov/Portals/45/Documents/defbudget/fy2017/FY17_J-Book-ASFF.pdf.

³⁹ “Justification for FY 2017 Overseas Contingency Operations.”

⁴⁰ Votel, *op. cit.*

⁴¹ SIGAR Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, Quarterly Report to the United States Congress, *op. cit.*

⁴² “Afghan Civilian Casualties Hit Half-Year Record, with 5,166 Dead or Maimed –UN,” *UN News Centre*, 25 July 2016, at <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=54543#.WOGbLxyPdsQ>.

⁴³ Pellerin, Cheryl: “Resolute Support Commander: More Troops Needed to Break Afghan ‘Stalemate,’” U.S. Department of Defense, 9 February 2017, at <https://www.defense.gov/News/Article/Article/1078377/resolute-support-commander-more-troops-needed-to-break-afghan-stalemate>.



ANDSF in addressing their capability gaps. The Resolute Support mission has been extended at least through 2017, because U.S. military presence is crucial for regional stability.

4. Cyber Security

The dangerous attributes of the new cyber security dimension in Central Asian states are enhanced by the ominous reflection projected by the local government, which is incapable of dealing with the implications of digital revolution. Blocking websites and internet providers, meddling with the internet connection speed —these are common practices exercised regularly by the local governments. Over the last decade, Central Asian activities in cyberspace have increased considerably, especially given the wide dissemination of mobile phones (at nearly one phone per person). The Central Asian states represent an attractive target for hackers from the more technologically developed abroad. Hackers from Estonia, Russia, Turkey, and China exploit Central Asia's cyber space for various criminal activities, such as practicing denial-of-service attacks for ransom, messing up the government's websites, and interfering with commerce. The main cybersecurity challenges in Central Asia are connected to the vulnerability of energy infrastructures and major industrial sites to cyber attacks. In Kazakhstan, the lack of funding and technology represent the main barriers for countering cyber crimes. The energy infrastructures are managed by the Supervisory Control and Data Acquisition (SCADA), a remote management system for the processing of large amounts of real-time telemetry. The national railway company, Temir Zholy, and the state electric company, KEGOC, both lack technological support for their extensive operations. Kazakhstan is developing its own space program to control the communication satellites, but Astana is putting its strategic assets at risk by computerizing the government and the state businesses through the National Science and technology Holding Company Parasat. The other barriers to countering cyber crimes are related to factors such as the authoritarian culture of the regimes, control of the internet, corruption, obscurity, absence of public debate, and repression of dissent. The Central Asian countries are not part of NATO's Cooperative Cyber Defense Center of Excellence, which could be helpful for framing the basic requirement for cyber security in the region under one umbrella. Situated between Russia and China, the Central Asian states have been integrated into the web skillfully woven by the two powerful neighbors. According to Kaspersky Security Network, cyber perpetrators attack Kazakhstan more often than any other Central Asian states. Hackers from Estonia, Russia, Turkey, and China have discovered a conducive environment in the technically-weak Central Asian states (about 85% of the internet attacks in Central Asia). Most of the attacks target government sites to gain financial information. In 2011, at the Euro-Asian Economic Forum, the Kazakh officials stated that they have encountered about 500,000 attacks on the government networks. During the summer of 2011, hundreds of the computers of Kazakhstan officials working abroad were infected by a virus enabling the theft of sensitive information from the Kazakhstani government. It appears that the hackers are mostly inspired by financial gains at the local level. In 2010, the FBI arrested a cyber criminal group consisting of citizens of Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, and Kazakhstan. Ideological information warfare, aimed at the regime change and cyber terrorism, represent the main reason for the local governments' authorization of the repression and control of the internet. The right to use the internet in Uzbekistan remains the most restrictive in the region, with the government throwing any individual reflecting ideas opposing the interests of the government in jail. The internet, however, is also a venue for the hackers, who are enraged with the local regimes, to express their dissatisfaction with their governments.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Laruelle, Marlene: "Cybersecurity in central Asia; Real Issues, false excuse?", George Washington University, at <https://app.box.com/s/j14c2hogr3w636etdn67>; and Kutnaeva, Nuria: "Central Asian Cyber Security",



In order to counter cyber crimes, the Central Asian government communication services reportedly block numerous sites. In Kyrgyzstan, a group specializing in cyber threats was organized within the Ninth Directorate of the Ministry of Internal Affairs in 2009. In Tajikistan, the Directorate for Combating Organized Crime is working on crimes across different dimensions. In Uzbekistan, the Computer Emergency Response Team began in 2005. In 2005, Uzbekistan joined the Computer Emergency Response Team (CERT), an international system of security for information technology and communication. Kazakhstan introduced its KZ-CERT, integrated with the Ministry of Communication and Information, in 2009. It oversees all activities across the internet domain “.kz”, and works in accord with partners in Russia, Armenia, and India. The Kazakh Committee of National Security (KNB) has established a department —the Computer Crime Unit —to counter cyber crimes. For dealing with cyber security issues, the Central Asian governments are adopting methods exercised by Russia, while purchasing software from China. The political goals of cybersecurity in Central Asia are correlated with Russia’s. The Russian cyber specialists are integrated within the framework of SCO.

4. Other Transnational Challenges

Much of the heroin produced in Afghanistan for Europe is transported through Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, then into Kazakhstan (or then, less frequently, into the Russian Caucasus, then into the Balkans, then into Western Europe), and finally into Russia. The Russian government sees the levels of drug addiction among its population as a national emergency, and has sponsored a number of draconian, punishment-oriented methods of outdated treatment and mass arrests to attempt to handle the problem, in addition to heavily financing counter-narcotics law enforcement operations.⁴⁵

The Central Asian disputes over bodies of water crossing their territories and borders have been greatly exacerbated. The water sources that dry up force the states to look for alternative waters, and to increase protection of the waters they possess. Furthermore, water in Central Asia is closely related to energy, as multiple countries are embarking on hydroelectric projects to increase electricity supply. In addition to increased demand, different water usage patterns and needs of each state may bring about additional conflicts. Many of the Central Asian water agreements are based on previous agreements from the Soviet era. This is problematic, as the Soviet Union folded over 25 years ago, and the water needs for these countries have changed drastically. During the Soviet era, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan were tasked with providing natural gas and electricity. In return, neighboring republics Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan contributed water, which came from their plentiful reservoirs and the Amu Darya River. Until 1991, this system kept the entire region saturated with power and water. But in the aftermath of the Soviet collapse, there was no central authority to regulate the resources. The upstream countries started conflicting with the downstream states —like Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan over control of collective hydrocarbon resources. In 2009 and 2010, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan decided to remove themselves from the Central Asian Electricity Grid to sell their resources outside the region. This step forced Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan to increase their production of hydropower. For example, both Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are planning to build dams for hydroelectric power,

Unipath, at

https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=3&ved=0ahUKEwiZi67rkM3UAhVIFT4KHRFbBXUQFggyMAI&url=http%3A%2F%2Fcentral-asian-cyber-security%2F&usg=AFQjCNF96pfAV8gJzJ_cg3oNoGHe09m8Aw&sig2=ZzwB7BsLbPAIWO8046zhHg

⁴⁵ Luhn, Alec “Why Did Russia Shut Down Its Version of the DEA?” *Vice News*, 6 July 2016, at <https://News.Vice.Com/Article/Vladimir-Putin-Shut-Down-Russian-Version-Of-The-Dea-Fskn>



but Uzbekistan's farmers use water from the same rivers to irrigate their farmland; as such, Uzbekistan opposes measures to dam the rivers. In particular, Tajikistan is constructing the Rogun Dam, which is expected to open in 2018. Uzbekistan has responded with protests and travel restrictions.⁴⁶ However, increased cooperation, through partnerships in all five Central Asian countries, can help strengthen security; and even with Afghanistan, through the development of more regional initiatives to counter the ever-growing problems of climate change. All states must realize that climate change is a global threat, and that the drought and limited access to water and energy resources could increase alongside the spread of diseases throughout the region. The international community, including the United Nations, must foster a dialogue with Central Asian countries, as well as with Russia, China, and the United States, focused on preserving the natural resources in Central Asia—especially water.

When examining nuclear proliferation challenges in Eurasia, one sees a strong contrast between Central Asia and the South Caucasus. While the former is in the unique position of having signed and ratified the only nuclear weapon free zone agreement in the Northern Hemisphere, the latter has become the site of opaque and illegal trading in nuclear material. Following Mongolia's self-declaration as a nuclear weapon free zone in 1992, all Central Asian states became a regional NWFZ in 2005, the first in the Northern Hemisphere. The Central Asian Nuclear Weapons Free Zone (CANWFZ) bound the signatory countries to uphold commitments "not to research, develop, manufacture, stockpile, acquire, possess, or have any control over any nuclear weapon or other nuclear explosive device." Furthermore, they agreed to "enforce a safeguards agreement," institute export controls, and uphold the physical protection of nuclear material.⁴⁷ In contrast, the South Caucasus is the site of multiple arrests of traffickers attempting to smuggle nuclear material to sell to terrorist organizations. Three of the most recently recorded incidents involving the smuggling of radioactive materials occurred in Georgia during the first six months of 2016. The attempted smuggling involved fissile and non-fissile uranium, as well as cesium.

Russia's economy lies in recession, due to U.S. and Western sanctions, and declining oil prices over the last several years. Since at least three of the five Central Asian economies rely heavily on economic partnership with Russia—especially through remittances from Central Asian migrant laborers—Central Asia's economic stability has declined as well. The Russian economy is still in very difficult shape, and this has led officials to send laborers from Central Asia back home, as well as to withdraw from investment commitments made to Central Asian governments. Tajikistan is the most remittance-dependent country in Central Asia, and may be the least stable in Central Asia, considering its proximity to Afghanistan and relational dependence on Russia.⁴⁸ The Russian Federation has a large human trafficking problem. Russia's Federal Migration Service estimated that in 2016, 1.5 million migrants to the country were "irregular."⁴⁹ Meanwhile, trafficking of small arms and explosives in and out of Russia is relatively frequent, and has impacted numerous ongoing international conflicts. Russian organized crime syndicates smuggle weapons from conflict zones to Central Asia.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ Dominguez, Gabriel: "Central Asia's Intensifying Water Dispute", *Deutsche Welle*, 12 September 2014, at <http://www.dw.com/En/Central-Asias-Intensifying-Water-Dispute/A-17917965>

⁴⁷ "Central Asia Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone (Canwzf)", *Nuclear Threat Initiative*, (July 2016), at <http://www.nti.org/Learn/Treaties-And-Regimes/Central-Asia-Nuclear-Weapon-Free-Zone-Canwz/>

⁴⁸ Kazantsev, Andrey A.: "Central Asia: Secular Statehood Challenged by Radical Islam", Valdai Discussion Club, #2 (42) *Valdai Papers*, (January 2016), at <http://Valdaiclub.Com/Files/11419/>.

⁴⁹ "Trafficking in Persons Report 2016", U.S. Department of State, n.d., at <https://www.state.gov/j/tip/rls/tiprpt/2016/>.

⁵⁰ Prentice, Alessandra and Zverev, Anton: "Ukraine, after war, becomes a trove for black market arms trade", *Reuters*, 25 July 2016, at <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-ukraine-crisis-arms-insight-idUSKCN1050ZE>.



5. Relations with Great Powers

Russian leaders repeatedly express concerns about Islamist militants from Afghanistan and the Middle East moving into Central Asia. Of the 20,000 foreigners fighting for the Islamic State or other jihadist groups in Iraq or Syria, nearly 2,000 are Russian nationals, and 1,500 are from Central Asian republics. Growing economic issues tied to low oil prices and Western-imposed sanctions limit Moscow's ability to project military power. Russia has had to scale back expenditures, cutting defense spending by 10 percent in 2016, with more cuts possible. This could explain Russia's recent decision to downsize its military presence in Tajikistan, which, of the Central Asian states, is the most geographically exposed to Afghanistan, and is the site of Russia's largest external military deployment, consisting of several bases and roughly 6,000 troops. The force reduction followed a decision by Russia in December 2015 to redeploy from a base in the southern city of Kulyab to a facility closer to the capital, Dushanbe. Russia's reduction and reorganization of military forces in Tajikistan stand in stark contrast to the build-up plans the country espoused less than a year ago. It was in April 2015 that a commander at Russia's military base in Tajikistan announced plans to increase troops to 9,000 by 2020. When he announced the force reduction in late January, Col. Gen. Vladimir Zarudnitsky, commander of Russia's Central Military District, explained that the move would enable Russian forces to enhance mobility and combat readiness. The base's role as an outpost and guarantor of regional peace and stability would not change, he said. On February 3rd, Russian Deputy Defense Minister Anatoly Antonov reaffirmed Moscow's commitment to defending Tajikistan, stating that Russia would continue to deliver equipment, weapons, and training to Tajik security forces in response to threats coming out of Afghanistan. Despite Russian military officials' attempts to downplay the troop reduction, the decision is likely motivated at least in part by pressures on the Kremlin: namely, the contraction of Russia's economy, and the sizable military assets deployed by Russia in both eastern Ukraine and Syria. Indeed, Russia has not fulfilled previous plans to increase military personnel in its facilities in Kyrgyzstan and other countries, and Moscow has become more selective in the financial assistance that it provides to certain former Soviet countries. In addition, Russian attempts at more direct involvement in border security initiatives in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan have not, so far, made any meaningful progress, because both countries are wary of aligning strategically with Moscow. Growing concern among Central Asian states that Russia is weaker than it was before the beginning of the Ukraine crisis may also contribute to Russia's difficulty in projecting military power in the area.⁵¹ Through its dominance of Central Asian media, Moscow has the ability to skillfully manipulate public opinion toward its preferred direction through Russian advertising and broadcasting. The results of a recent survey conducted by Gallup showed that residents of Central Asian states share Russia's views on NATO. Particularly, more people in Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and even Kazakhstan consider U.S. led-Western military alliance as more of a threat than as a source of protection.⁵²

Given Russia's growing involvement in Central Asian security, any U.S. security engagement in countering terrorism must factor in Russia's response. Cooperation between Russia and the United States in Central Asia is logical; both countries share mutual interests

⁵¹ "Russia Re-Evaluates Security Ties in Central Asia", 3 March 2016, Stratfor, at <https://www.stratfor.com/analysis/russia-re-evaluates-security-ties-central-asia>.

⁵² "Most NATO Members in Eastern Europe See It as Protection", *Gallup*, 10 February 2017, at http://www.gallup.com/poll/203819/nato-members-eastern-europe-protection.aspx?g_source=World&g_medium=newsfeed&g_campaign=tiles.



in neutralizing international terrorism and its convergence with drug trafficking networks. The United States and Russia could establish common standards to measure improvements in the Central Asian border management and drug interdiction, along key stretches of border that are particularly prone to drug trafficking and terrorist movements. Specifically, the Afghanistan-Tajikistan border and the Tajikistan-Uzbekistan border demand greater focus to impede movement of terrorist fighters and resources. Formulating common measurement standards would enable Russia and the United States to better understand the strengths and weaknesses of certain border stretches. In this way, Russia and the United States can help provide border guards and anti-drug contingents with mentors, training, or more technical and operational equipment.⁵³ However, recent political developments and differences between the two nations complicate the prospect of genuine collaboration in Central Asia. Firstly, Russia and the United States do not possess a common understanding of what policies should be utilized to reduce terrorist threats. A primary example is the discrepancy between Russian and U.S. views on the link between recent Syrian democratization efforts and terrorism. In Washington's opinion, Russia's support of Bashar al-Assad's regime against Syria's citizens contributes to the growing terrorist threat in the Arab world.⁵⁴ In turn, Moscow blames the growing terrorist activity in Syria on U.S. support for Syrian rebels.⁵⁵ Secondly, Russia prefers to keep U.S. influence in Central Asia to a minimum. While Moscow remains tolerant of U.S. presence in Afghanistan, any American involvement further north is perceived as a pretext for expanded U.S. military encroachment in Russia's sphere of influence.⁵⁶ Third, fallout from various global issues such as the Ukraine crisis have deteriorated the quality of communications between Russian and U.S. officials, making it difficult for the two countries to collaborate over the Central Asian threat.⁵⁷

For the same reason of geographical proximity to the region, China shares similar interests with Russia on strengthening regional security, improving political stability, as well as minimizing U.S. ability to pursue its objectives there. China's national interests, however, focus closer on expanding its economic rather than military influence over Central Asia. With the rapid growth of Chinese economy, Beijing's main target is the Central Asian energy sector: energy export and energy-related infrastructure projects. China is interested in a stable Central Asia and sees the region as a potential market, a source of energy and other natural resources, and as a communications bridge to Iran and the Middle East. China has already invested billions of dollars in the region's countries. With the new The Belt and Road Initiative, launched by President Xi Jinping in 2013, Chinese involvement in the Central Asian region will be unprecedented. Since the region will play an important role in the success of the Initiative, a stable environment is essential. China has been steadily expanding its economic and security footholds in the region. Massive Chinese infrastructure projects have occurred throughout Central Asia, consisting of roads, railways, and pipelines linking Central Asia to China and the rest of East Asia. Central Asia offered Beijing new sources of raw materials and new markets, as well as a major transit zone for exports, to feed China's

⁵³ Gavrilis, George: "Afghan Narcotrafficking: The State of Afghanistan's Borders", Joint U.S.-Russia Working Group On Afghan Narcotrafficking, Eastwest Institute, (April 2015), pp. 26-28.

⁵⁴ "Kerry: Russia Enabling Assad 'Terror'", *Voice of America*, 17 February 2014, at <http://www.voanews.com/content/Kerry-Russia-Enabling-Assad-Terror-Against-Syrian-People/1852696.html>.

⁵⁵ Suslov, Dmitry: "A New Start for Russian-U.S. Counter-Terrorism Cooperation", *Valdai Discussion Club*, 7 September 2013, at <http://valdaiclub.com/usa/60020.html>.

⁵⁶ Mankoff, "United States and Central," *op. cit.*; and Gavrilis, George "Afghan Narcotrafficking: The State Of Afghanistan's Borders", Joint U.S.-Russia Working Group On Afghan Narcotrafficking, Eastwest Institute, (April 2015), pp.14-15, 26-28; and Suslov, Dmitry: "A New Start For Russian-U.S. Counter-Terrorism Cooperation", *Valdai Discussion Club*, 7 September 2013, at <http://valdaiclub.com/usa/60020.html>.

⁵⁷ Gavrilis, George, *op. cit.*



growing economy. In 2001, trade between Central Asia and China totaled \$1.5 billion; by 2013, it was up to \$50 billion (even when trade slowed to \$32.5 billion in 2014 due to China's slow economic growth). However, Beijing still made a commitment of \$64 billion to critical infrastructure in Central Asia, and another \$46 billion as part of its One Belt, One Road (OBOR) initiative. These investments are crucial to Beijing, which predicts that by 2025, an estimated \$2.5 trillion in trade will circulate along the OBOR route. Yet, China's prevalence in Central Asian economies may pose some long-term challenges in the region. While Central Asian governments welcome Chinese economic assistance, many worry about the possibility of popular backlashes against Chinese development projects that may benefit Chinese companies and imported Chinese labor more than local economies. Furthermore, if Chinese development projects fail to deliver tangible economic benefits to local populations, then the unemployment-driven backlash could be reminiscent of Arab Islamist revivals during the 2011 Arab Spring.⁵⁸ In Central Asia, joblessness and associated feelings of economic oppression may motivate factors for individuals to resort to Islamic fundamentalism, the drug trade, and ultimately, terrorism.

Generally, the United States accepts China's growing economic involvement in the region as inevitable, and potentially benign, due to its own resource constraints.⁵⁹ Increasing economic development and business opportunities in Central Asia can alleviate societal disenfranchisement that can cause individuals to turn to the drug trade and terrorist activities. However, the United States and the Central Asian countries have an interest in ensuring that China's regional influence does not translate into a form of neocolonial dominance that restricts Central Asia's ability to form economic and political links with Europe, South Asia, and the Middle East.⁶⁰ While the United States may be unable to devote resources to regional economic development on par with China, it should seek to coordinate economic projects with China that are aimed at countering narcotic activities and terrorism. Regarding such projects, Chinese regional economic policies should employ citizens of Central Asian countries in labor-intensive projects. For many farmers, cultivating poppies provides better financial returns than other crops like wheat due to the high sale price of opium. As a result, displaced farmers and unemployed workers turn to drug production and trade—often under the control of terrorist groups. A U.S.-Sino coordinated strategy of economic assistance and technological support for alternative forms of agriculture would incentivize farmers to migrate away from narcotics production and terrorist-controlled provinces in Central Asia.⁶¹ The United States has found China to be receptive to cooperating on counter-narcotics and counter-terrorism in the region, particularly due to China's own concerns about the spread of Islamic extremism, both in the region and within its own borders.

6. Recommendations

In order to counter terrorists traveling across Central Asia, the U.S. should improve intelligence, law enforcement, and security measures in the region. The UN Security Council

⁵⁸ Mankoff, *op. cit.*, pp. 23-24.

⁵⁹ Blinken, Anthony: "State's Blinken On a Vision for Central Asia", *Iip Digital*, 31 March 2015, at <http://Iipdigital.Usembassy.Gov/St/English/Texttrans/2015/04/20150401314506.Html#Axzz3ehwfhtoq>

⁶⁰ Mankoff, *op. cit.*, p. 24; and Peyrouse, Sébastien: "Central Asia's Growing Partnership with China", Working Paper 4 (Madrid: EuUCentral Asia Monitoring, 2009) pp. 9-10.

⁶¹ Yong-An, Zhang: "Asia, International Drug Trafficking, And U.S.-China Counternarcotics Cooperation", *The Brookings Institution*, (February 2012); and Felbab-Brown, Vanda: "The Obama Administration's New Counternarcotics Strategy in Afghanistan: Its Promises and Potential Pitfalls," *Brookings Policy Brief # 171*, (September 2009), at <http://www.Brookings.Edu/Research/Papers/2009/09/Afghanistan-Felbabbrown>; and Peyrouse, Sébastien: "Drug Trafficking In Central Asia, A Poorly Considered Fight?", *Ponars Eurasia Policy Memo n° 218*, (September 2012), pp. 1-5.



Resolution 2178, which requires countries to take appropriate steps to address the threat of foreign terrorist fighters (including preventing them from entering or traveling through their territories), is not supported by adequate institutional intelligence-and-information-sharing arrangements.⁶² The United States should take a leading role in establishing information-sharing arrangements to provide adequate, actionable intelligence in tracking and interdicting potential terrorists in the region. Integrating European and Central Asian intelligence will help to support the counter-terrorism law enforcement regime worldwide, equipped with secure communications networks, databases, and a system of notices that includes mechanisms to track illicit money transfers, stolen and forged identity papers, and travel documents.⁶³ This is especially true in the case of Central Asian terrorism, as most illicit money transfers for arms and narcotics occur online.⁶⁴

Central Asian governance issues present a structural cause of regional terrorism. Corruption and authoritarian tendencies of regimes, limited public freedoms, increasing poverty and disenfranchisement, along with the appeal of extremist religious thought contribute to increased terrorist recruitment.⁶⁵ Consequently, any U.S. strategy in Central Asia should be supported by the improvements in governance. In particular, the United States must focus on ‘bottom-up’ governance; Central Asian societies often hold greater allegiance to local, ethnic, and religious leaders over national governments, and national governments’ authoritarian characteristics create mistrust among civil society groups.⁶⁶ In this manner, the United States could focus on fostering cultures that can obstruct terrorist recruitment and terrorist acts.

The United States could encourage local initiatives designed to provide disenfranchised youth with vocational skills training, employment opportunities, and English language skills. In many volatile areas, *madrassa* students lacking sufficient employment opportunities are easily recruited into terrorist groups. In Kyrgyzstan, small efforts at providing youth with employment-oriented skills have proved successful, and should be expanded across the region. Additionally, the United States can increase assistance to Central Asian communities to help improve food security, irrigation, and agricultural practices. In Tajikistan, USAID’s Feed the Future Initiative works with Tajik communities in improving the quality and quantity of their crops, which increases families’ incomes, and contributes to the cultures that discourage youth from terrorist activities. U.S. projects such as these should be implemented across the region to generate similar effects. The United States could also

⁶² Rosenblum, Daniel: “Addressing Security Challenges Associated with Recruitment of Central Asian Foreign Fighters by the Islamic State of Iraq and The Levant (ISIL)”, Helsinki Commission Hearing, (June 2015) at http://Csce.Gov/Index.Cfm?Fuseaction=Contentrecords.Viewwitness&Contentrecord_Id=1619&Contenttype=D&Contentrecordtype=D&Parenttype=H; and Cilluffo, Frank J.: “Wanted: Foreign Fighters – The Escalating Threat Of Isil In Central Asia”, Helsinki Commission Hearing, (June 2015) at http://Csce.Gov/Index.Cfm?Fuseaction=Contentrecords.Viewwitness&Contentrecord_Id=1621&Contenttype=D&Contentrecordtype=D&Parenttype=H.

⁶³ Chowdhury Fink, Naureen et al., “Addressing the Foreign Terrorist Fighters Phenomenon from A European Union Perspective”, *Global Center on Cooperative Security*, (December 2014), pp. 7-17; and Cilluffo, *op. cit.*

⁶⁴ Zhang Yong-An, “Asia, International Drug Trafficking, and U.S.-China Counternarcotics Cooperation”, The Brookings Institution, February 2012, pp. 20-22.

⁶⁵ Cilluffo, *op. cit.*; and Saikal, Amin: “Refining the Western Counter Terrorism Strategy”, *East Asia Forum*, 28 March 2015, at <http://www.Eastasiaforum.Org/2015/03/28/Refining-The-Western-Counter-Terrorism-Strategy/>.

⁶⁶ Balci, Bayram and Chaudet, Didier: “Jihadism In Central Asia: A Credible Threat After The Western Withdrawal From Afghanistan?”, Carnegie Endowment For International Peace, (August 2014), at <http://Carnegieendowment.Org/2014/08/13/Jihadism-In-Central-Asia-Credible-Threat-After-Western-Withdrawal-From-Afghanistan?>; and Eustacia, Liana Reyes and Dinar, Shlomi “The Convergence Of Terrorism And Translation Crime In Central Asia,” *Studies In Conflict And Terrorism*, vol.38, nº. 5 (2015), pp. 380-393.



assist international and local NGOs with projects focused on encouraging family members, especially mothers, to identify and address signs of extremism in their communities' youth. In Central Asian families, mothers are particularly influential in the growth of their children, and providing them with the skills to discourage radicalization of family members is vital. A recent pilot project along these lines organized by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe's Countering Violent Extremism (OSCE CVE) initiative is underway, and, if successful, should be implemented across the region.⁶⁷

The United States could also offer assistance, support, and training to local and ethnic leaders in the areas of conflict resolution and security. The strength of ethnic and community ties in Central Asian society often affords local leaders with greater traditional legitimacy.⁶⁸ As small-scale initiatives in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan demonstrate, establishing initiatives that endorse and advance community leaders who oppose terrorism is important, and can be a vital tool in preventing radicalization, discouraging terrorist recruitment, and resolving conflict.⁶⁹ Ensuring that these initiatives are broadened and robustly funded is important to U.S. efforts in countering terrorism. The U.S. could promote moderate Muslim leaders who are resistant to Islamic fundamentalism and terrorism on the local, national, and regional scale. While disenfranchisement and lack of economic opportunities for Central Asians are root causes of terrorist enlistment, religious fundamentalism is a prominent proximate cause. Many disenfranchised youth are attracted to terrorist groups due to the appeal of a "utopian" Islamic caliphate or a "holy war" against Western and authoritarian government tendencies.⁷⁰ Efforts to combat this narrative should be paramount. The authoritarian nature of Central Asian regimes has resulted in the promotion of an official, state-imposed, moderate brand of Islam that is imposed upon citizens by force, and rejects any other practice of the religion. It opposes independent religious expression, regardless of whether that expression is moderate or extremist.⁷¹ In the Arab case, authoritarian tendencies resulted in greater political opposition that often intersected with more extreme religious thought. A similar result in Central Asia is likely. An authoritarian conception of religion will only create greater public backlash spearheaded by hostile religious groups. Consequently, the United States has an interest in assisting and promoting religious leaders who oppose terrorist tactics. Initiatives along these lines can assist in ensuring that religious individuals are not drawn to terrorism and related violence as an outlet for political expression.

The United States should encourage efforts by Central Asian governments to reduce corruption, adhere to rule of law, and advance public freedoms and human rights, as well as encourage business growth, visa liberalization, and inter-regional trade. While these goals require considerable time and effort, moving forward in this fashion will create greater enforcement of anti-terrorism laws, less incentive for individuals to resort to terrorism as a means for political opposition, and generate economic opportunities that reduce the appeal of terrorist activity.⁷² Moreover, the United States should encourage Turkey to cooperate more with Central Asian nations in this intelligence-sharing effort by re-assessing its liberal travel

⁶⁷ Rosenblum, *op. cit.*

⁶⁸ Balci and Chaudet: "Jihadism in Central Asia" and Dinar, Shlomi: "The Convergence of Terrorism And Translation Crime In Central Asia", *Studies In Conflict And Terrorism*, vol.38, n° 5 (2015), pp. 380-393.

⁶⁹ Cilluffo, *op. cit.*; and Cohen, Ariel: "The Threat of Islamism In Central Asia And the North Caucasus," Testimony Before the Europe, Eurasia, And Emerging Threats; And the Terrorism, Nonproliferation, And Trade Subcommittees, (February 2013), p. 8.

⁷⁰ Rosenblum, *op. cit.*

⁷¹ Balci and Chaudet, *op. cit.*

⁷² Mankoff, *op. cit.*, p. 28; and Balci and Chaudet, *op. cit.*



controls. Currently, personnel and resources can travel with ease from the Levant through Turkey, and the Caucasus through northern Iran and into Afghanistan. Travel to Turkey is also visa-free for citizens of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan; Uzbeks receive a 30-day visa upon entry. As a NATO ally, Turkey should be obliged to cooperate in this effort to ensure border security, so that law enforcement officials along this route and in Central Asia can identify and prosecute prospective terrorists.⁷³

Additionally, the extensive and de-centralized networks of Central Asian terrorist groups⁷⁴ demand improved intelligence cooperation with local individuals on the ground. In particular, local, ethnic, and religious leaders offer valuable sources for intelligence collection: to identify terrorism-prone communities, and to strengthen law enforcement and community policing of those areas.⁷⁵ The United States should encourage intelligence cooperation with these leaders in reciprocation for promoting their leadership. In this fashion, law enforcement and border security officials will be able to detect, deter, and thwart terrorists on local, national, and regional levels.

Likewise, the United States should make concerted efforts to improve training of the Central Asian law enforcement and security forces. In many cases, the United States focuses on providing equipment to the Central Asian security personnel. These are often used for the wrong purposes, against the citizens, or ineffectively due to the absence of proper training.⁷⁶ Untrained security personnel with U.S. equipment are often implicated in human rights violations, which generates public backlash against the United States, and contributes to terrorist organizations' anti-Western recruitment narratives.⁷⁷ The United States should expand training for Central Asian law enforcement and security personnel—similar to its 2014 initiative in Uzbekistan, which focused on anti-terrorism measures that maintained human rights and security.⁷⁸ Similarly, establishing training programs that teach internal security forces to handle unarmed protestors without resorting to violence is crucial, to engender greater trust among citizens.⁷⁹

Finally, the United States should be amenable on using military force, if necessary, to thwart regional terrorist operations. To avoid the domestic and international repercussions of re-stationing a U.S. military presence in the region, the United States should seek to negotiate contingency access agreements in each of the Central Asian countries, which would allow the deployment of forces in the event of unforeseen regional crises associated with terrorism.⁸⁰ Negotiating access agreements with each of the Central Asian states is critical to preserve

⁷³ Cilluffo, *op. cit.*, and Satke, Ryskeldi et al., “The Islamic State Threat In Central Asia: Reality Or Spin?” *Terrorism Monitor* 13, No. 6 (2015), at

http://www.Jamestown.Org/Single/?Tx_Ttnews%5btt_News%5d=43680&No_Cache=1#.Vy7knxo6ert; And “Central Asia at Danger: The Islamic State Will Not Halt At The Caspian Sea”, Stratfor, September 5, 2014, <https://Www.Stratfor.Com/The-Hub/Central-Asia-Danger-Islamic-State-Will-Not-Halt-Caspian-Sea>.

⁷⁴ Balci and Chaudet, *op. cit.*; and Reyes and Dinar, *op. cit.*, pp. 380-393.

⁷⁵ Cilluffo, *op. cit.*; and Rosenblum, *op. cit.*; and Cohen, *op. cit.* p. 8.

⁷⁶ Rosenblum, *op. cit.*; and Gorenburg, Dmitry: “External Support for Central Asian Military and Security Forces”, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute-Open Society Foundations Working Paper, (January 2014), pp. 85-90.

⁷⁷ Gorenburg, *op. cit.*, pp. 85-90; and Foust, Joshua: “Security and Human Rights in Central Asia”, *Brown Journal of World Affairs* (Fall/Winter 2012), at <http://Joshuafoust.Com/Security-And-Human-Rights-In-Central-Asia/>.

⁷⁸ Rosenblum, *op. cit.*; and Oliker, Olga And Shlapak, David A.: “U.S. Interests in Central Asia: Policy Priorities and Military Roles”, *Rand Corporation*, 2005, pp. 45-49.

⁷⁹ Gorenburg, *op. cit.*, pp. 87-90.

⁸⁰ Mankoff, *op. cit.*; and Oliker and Shlapak, *op. cit.*, pp. 45-47.



U.S. flexibility in responding to potential crises, as well as to prevent the U.S. from becoming tied down to a single country.⁸¹ These agreements would also provide the United States with some degree of diplomatic standing, for implementing regional counter-terrorism and military operations led by Special Forces, as well as covert elements and airstrikes.⁸² In this fashion, improvements in intelligence, law enforcement, and U.S. military access can help counter Central Asian terrorism, and contribute to regional security.

⁸¹ Mankoff, *op. cit.*, pp. 28-30.

⁸² Cilluffo, *op. cit.*; and Olikier and Shlapak, *op. cit.*, pp. 45-47.



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