



EXTERNAL SUPPORT FOR CENTRAL ASIAN MILITARY AND SECURITY FORCES

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DMITRY GORENBURG

SUMMARY

As the drawdown of foreign forces from Afghanistan has accelerated in the run-up to their withdrawal by the end of 2014, attention has come to focus on the extent to which military equipment will be left behind for the use of the Central Asian states.

Over the past decade, Russia and the United States have been the main sources of military assistance to Central Asian states, while other countries have played much smaller roles. The USA is in the process of reducing its assistance to the region as it completes its withdrawal from Afghanistan. Russia is likely to remain the main source of military and security assistance for most Central Asian states.

External military assistance to Central Asian states is unlikely to have a serious negative impact on regional stability and security. Internal instability is the most serious threat that these states are likely to face. Steps will have to be taken to ensure that future assistance does not enhance the ability of internal security forces to harm civilians. This can be accomplished by focusing on training programmes over the provision of military equipment.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dmitry Gorenburg (United States) is a senior research scientist with CNA Strategic Studies and an associate at Harvard University's Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies. His areas of expertise include security issues, military affairs, and ethnic politics in Russia, Eurasia and Eastern Europe. He has published numerous articles on these topics in policy publications and academic journals, and is also editor of the journals *Problems of Post-Communism* and *Russian Politics and Law*. He has recently published a report on Russian defence industry modernization and is currently engaged in a project examining Russia's strategies in the Arctic region.

This policy brief is based on a longer working paper with the same title, available at <http://www.sipri.org/research/security/centralasia/>.

INTRODUCTION

As the drawdown of foreign forces from Afghanistan has accelerated in the run-up to their withdrawal by the end of 2014, attention has come to focus on the extent to which military equipment will be left behind for the use of the Central Asian states—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. At the same time, recent agreements to extend Russian military basing agreements in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have highlighted the extent to which Russia is providing military equipment and other forms of security assistance to states in the region. This raises questions about the actual extent of external support for military and security forces in Central Asia and the potential impact that augmentation of these forces could have on regional security. This issue has become especially salient as all of these states have recently increased spending on their military and security forces to varying extents, which has in turn led to a gradual increase in capabilities.¹

ASSISTANCE FROM RUSSIA

Russia remains the main source of military and security assistance for most Central Asian states. Its primary goal in the region is to keep the Central Asian states in the Russian sphere of influence while making sure that United States and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) forces leave the region after the completion of the operation in Afghanistan. Russian military assistance to Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, the weaker Central Asian states, can be described as a quid pro quo arrangement, whereby Russia provides political and military support for the ruling regimes in exchange for basing rights and a certain level of acquiescence with Russian foreign policy priorities in the region.

Although Russian military and security assistance to Central Asian states is relatively limited in scale, the low starting capabilities of the Central Asian military and security forces mean that even relatively limited assistance can have a sizeable impact on security and stability in the region. This impact is likely to be mixed in the future. On the one hand, efforts to create a unified air defence system and to improve counterterrorism and counterinsurgency capabilities are likely to help local armed forces protect their countries from the threat of infiltration by radical Islamist groups. On the other hand, the extent of this danger to Central Asian security has been repeatedly overstated, by both local leaders and their Russian partners, in order to justify assistance requests and subsequent security cooperation.²

Most local leaders face a greater threat from internal instability and regime collapse than from outside infiltration. Especially in the aftermath of the Arab Spring and the 2011–12 electoral protests in Russia, Russian and Central Asian leaders see regime stability as their highest security priority.³

¹ SIPRI Military Expenditure Database, <<http://www.sipri.org/databases/milex/>>; and International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), *Military Balance*, 2005–13 edns (Routledge: London, 2005–13).

² Mankoff, J., *The United States and Central Asia after 2014* (Center for Strategic and International Studies: Washington, DC, Jan. 2013), p. 12.

³ Kenzior, S., 'The curse of stability in Central Asia', *Foreign Policy*, 23 Aug. 2013.

To the extent that Russia provides equipment and training to security services without regard for how such assistance may be used, it may prove to be useful for helping local leaders protect themselves from popular protests by repressing internal opposition movements.

REDUCTIONS IN EQUIPMENT TRANSFERS FROM THE UNITED STATES

For much of the past decade, ensuring continued access for transferring supplies and personnel to Afghanistan has been the highest priority for the United States in Central Asia. Other goals—including counterterrorism, counternarcotics and promotion of democracy—have been pursued, but only rarely have they been allowed to infringe on the priority of the Afghanistan mission. The US track record in providing military equipment to Central Asian states is relatively poor. Many previous donations of equipment were wasted because of inadequate maintenance or a lack of training in their use.⁴

In a period of reduced budgets and limited resources, the US withdrawal from Afghanistan will inevitably result in a decreased emphasis on all forms of assistance to Central Asia. The region will once again become a relatively low priority for the US Department of Defense. Security assistance budgets for states in the region have already been cut in recent years and are likely to be cut further in years to come.⁵

Central Asian leaders sense that the withdrawal period presents a final opportunity to receive significant amounts of military assistance from the USA. Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan are most interested in such equipment. In contrast, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan have the financial wherewithal to buy new equipment and are not very interested in donations of used armaments.

Much of the discussion about the extent of US assistance has overstated both the amount and significance of equipment likely to be provided and the potential impact of such assistance on regional security. To date, the US Government has not agreed to transfer any excess defence equipment from the Afghanistan operation to Central Asian states. While it is likely that at some point in the future at least some equipment will be transferred to Central Asian states under the US Excess Defense Articles (EDA) programme, it is not likely to include major weapon systems or even small arms. The security consequences of such donations will be limited.

The greater threat to regional security is posed not by the potential provision of excess military equipment from NATO forces leaving Afghanistan, but by long-standing US training programmes for the region's special forces, as part of an effort to increase counterterrorism preparedness. In recent years, special forces troops trained by the US military have engaged in combat against local insurgents and have fired on unarmed protesters and other civilians in Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and

⁴ Interviews with author, Washington, DC, June, Oct. 2010, Ashgabat, Nov. 2010, and Astana, Dec. 2010.

⁵ Kucera, J., 'Central Asia, Caucasus to see further declines in U.S. aid', *The Bug Pit*, 10 Apr. 2013, <<http://www.eurasianet.org/node/66810>>.

possibly Kazakhstan.⁶ Training programmes such as these are much less costly to the donor than equipment donations and are more likely to be maintained as part of general US military assistance programming after NATO leaves the region.

THE ROLE OF EUROPEAN UNION MEMBER STATES AND OTHER ACTORS

While Russia and the USA are the primary providers of military and security assistance to Central Asian states, other countries also play a role in the region. The European Union (EU) and its member states have been particularly active in efforts to improve local capacity in counternarcotics and border control.⁷ The European defence industry has also become the preferred alternative for Central Asian states seeking to diversify their sources of military equipment.⁸ Turkey has sought to use its cultural ties with the region to establish a role as a senior partner, albeit with mixed success. India has made an effort to hedge against China and Pakistan, its traditional rivals, by seeking to establish a military presence in Tajikistan, although this effort has met with little success to date. China's role, while limited, has been most significant from a strategic point of view. While China has quickly come to dominate regional economic life, it has limited its role in Central Asian military and security affairs in order to avoid alienating both Russia and local populations.⁹

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Overall, external military assistance to Central Asian states is unlikely to have a serious negative impact on regional stability and security. With the end of the NATO operation in Afghanistan, the region's decade-long position of prominence on the international arena is likely to fade. In its place, the states of the region will increasingly be left to their own devices, with internal instability the most serious threat that they face.

While external military assistance to Central Asia is likely to decline in the near future, it will not disappear. In this context, it is important to ensure that the assistance that is provided is not wasted and helps to improve the security situation in the region. In particular, steps will have to be taken to ensure that any such assistance does not enhance the ability of internal security forces to harm civilians. The following recommendations

⁶ Kucera, J., 'The Tajiks who fight their own government', *The Atlantic*, 28 June 2013; Kucera, J., 'What were American Humvees doing in Zhanaozen?', *The Bug Pit*, 24 Jan. 2012, <<http://www.eurasianet.org/node/64896>>; and Oliker, O. and Shlapak, D. A., *US Interests in Central Asia: Policy Priorities and Military Roles* (RAND Corp.: Santa Monica, CA, 2005).

⁷ 'Foreign partners to allocate \$1.5 mln to automate Kyrgyz border control system', *Interfax*, 13 Feb. 2012; and Lewis, D., *Reassessing the Role of OSCE Police Assistance Programming in Central Asia*, Occasional Paper no. 4 (Open Society Foundations: New York, Apr. 2011).

⁸ Kucera, J., 'Kazakhstan eyes foreign partnerships', *Jane's Defense Weekly*, 9 June 2010. See also Holtom, P. and Bromley, M., 'The limitations of European Union reports on arms exports: the case of Central Asia', SIPRI Insights on Peace and Security no. 2010/5, Sep. 2010, <http://books.sipri.org/product_info?c_product_id=411>.

⁹ Weitz, R., 'Kazakhstan–China military exchanges continue', *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 9 Nov. 2012.

are targeted at changing the nature of security assistance in order to focus on improving human security in Central Asia.

Emphasize training

Training needs to be emphasized over the provision of military equipment. This is a lesson that the US Government has already learned to some extent, as it has in recent years shifted away from equipment donations and towards providing training in areas ranging from language instruction to combat operations. Shifting towards training will also help to avoid situations where equipment provided through foreign assistance is used against unarmed civilians, resulting in embarrassment or worse for the country providing the assistance.

Shifting to training will not entirely solve the issue of complicity in repressive activities, since forces trained through foreign assistance programmes have already been implicated in human rights violations in Central Asia. Human security in the region could be improved by shifting the focus of security training programmes from special forces units to policing work, and especially teaching internal security forces how to handle large groups of protesters without resorting to excessive violence.

As part of an effort to reduce smuggling of people, narcotics and weapons, both US and European security assistance programmes have emphasized border security initiatives. While these efforts are laudable, they have often focused on technical assistance, such as the donation of scanners and other detection equipment. Such equipment may not be useful when the bulk of cross-border smuggling in the region is sanctioned by local intermediaries with government ties or by government officials themselves. Training may help to ameliorate this problem to some extent, but it will not be solved without breaking the link between smuggling and high-level corruption. Assistance providers must recognize that, given local incentive structures, corruption-reduction initiatives will not eliminate corruption. However, the nature of local smuggling networks means that providing technical assistance for border security is a waste of money.

Multilateral initiatives

In order to improve human security in Central Asia, coordination among assistance-providing states is necessary. The effectiveness of security assistance to Central Asia is undermined by the perception among outside powers that other powers are providing this assistance as part of an effort to increase their influence in the region. The zero-sum nature of this competition is encouraged by local leaders, who play off outside powers against each other in an effort to preserve their own freedom of manoeuvre. While coordination will be difficult to achieve because of long-standing suspicions among assistance providers about each other's intent, it is not an impossible goal. The key is to start with areas of mutual interest.

Such cooperation has the greatest chance of success in counternarcotics. All of the governments in the region are worried by the rapid increase in drug addiction in their countries. They also face relatively similar issues in their efforts to reduce drug smuggling and the corruption that it breeds.

Existing regional information-sharing institutions provide a starting point for cooperation on the issue. As interaction leads to greater trust, more involved regional cooperation, such as multinational training events with Russian and US participation, may become acceptable to governments that now studiously avoid multilateral engagement. Eventually, these states may become willing to organize multinational counternarcotics exercises and operations.

If cooperation on counternarcotics is successful, planners can work to encourage Central Asian states to cooperate on critical energy infrastructure protection. Given existing sensitivities about sharing information with neighbours on potential security weaknesses, this effort should begin slowly. A good start would involve regional seminars on best practices in countries that have extensive experience with energy production in potentially vulnerable environments such as the United Kingdom, Saudi Arabia or the USA. If this type of interaction leads to greater trust, regional collaboration could expand to include information-sharing about best practices and eventually joint projects to protect shared infrastructure such as pipelines, tankers transiting the Caspian Sea and offshore platforms located near borders. However, given the existing political relationships in the region, such efforts should be seen as a long-term target at best.

These recommendations are deliberately limited in their scope. Security assistance efforts by outside powers are unlikely to lead to significant improvements in regional security, given perceptions within and outside the region that these powers are engaged in a geopolitical competition for influence rather than a sincere effort to improve local conditions. Furthermore, the likely decline in attention paid to the region by outside powers after the completion of NATO's withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2014 will reduce the extent to which outside powers remain interested in the region. Other priorities will inevitably make it more difficult to change assistance policies toward the region. Recognizing these limitations, the relatively small steps described above would help to improve the impact of outside military assistance on human security in the region.

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**STOCKHOLM INTERNATIONAL
PEACE RESEARCH INSTITUTE**

Signalistgatan 9
SE-169 70 Solna, Sweden
Telephone: +46 8 655 97 00
Fax: +46 8 655 97 33
Email: sipri@sipri.org
Internet: www.sipri.org

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224 West 57th Street
New York, New York 10019, USA
+1 212-548-0600
www.opensocietyfoundations.org