

RELATIONS BETWEEN AFGHANISTAN AND CENTRAL ASIAN STATES AFTER 2014

Incentives, Constraints and Prospects

NARGIS KASSENOVA



STOCKHOLM INTERNATIONAL PEACE RESEARCH INSTITUTE

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Preface

Discussions among regional actors and within the international community about the implications of the planned withdrawal of international forces from Afghanistan have inspired the search for regional solutions to the challenge of stabilization in the country, and created opportunities for new dialogues on relations between Afghanistan and Central Asian states.

SIPRI launched the Wider Central Asia (WCA) initiative in January 2012 with the express purpose of promoting and facilitating dialogue on security in Afghanistan's neighbourhood, building on the clear need for cooperative policy approaches based on a better understanding of the interests and worries of Afghanistan and its neighbours. The initiative has brought together experts and officials from Iran, Pakistan and five Central Asian states—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan—as well as from Afghanistan, China, Europe and the United States. It has also complemented structured dialogue with independent analysis.

While cooperation between Central Asian states and Afghanistan will most likely be stalled by growing insecurity, new opportunities could emerge in the form of relationships with other actors, including adjacent states, regional powers and multilateral frameworks. In this sense, Central Asian states will continue to play an important role as mediators and interlocutors.

I would like to congratulate Nargis Kassenova for her excellent and thorough analysis of relations between Afghanistan and Central Asian states. Gratitude is also due to the anonymous referees for their feedback on the paper as well as the numerous regional officials and experts who have contributed their insights and energy to the WCA initiative. I would also like to thank the Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs, which generously funds the initiative. Finally, thanks to those within and outside SIPRI who helped in the development of this report, in particular Dr Neil Melvin, Dr Bruce Koepke, Theresa Höghammar, and the SIPRI editors, especially Dr David Prater.

Professor Tilman Brück
Director, SIPRI
Stockholm, May 2014

Summary

All Central Asian states are concerned about the potential spillover of insecurity from Afghanistan. The impending withdrawal of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) is seen as potentially leading to destabilization, with negative consequences for the region, including the potential impact of militant activities, the spread of radical Islamist ideas, increased drug trafficking and refugee crises. Despite these common fears, there are many differences in the policies of Central Asian states toward Afghanistan, and a variety of views in the region on the future of international stabilization efforts and further prospects for increasing ties and trade with Afghanistan.

In order to fully understand the interconnected relationships between Afghanistan and Central Asian states, it is first necessary to explore the broader geopolitical context, including Central Asian states' involvement in collective security arrangements in the post-Soviet space, the importance of ethnic affinities, and the extent of each state's vulnerability to spillovers of instability from Afghanistan. Central Asian experts generally explain protracted armed violence in Afghanistan as having been caused by a combination of factors including the failure of political centralization and state-building processes; ethnic, religious and tribal divisions; the meddling of external actors; and the criminalization of society.

Central Asian states have made use of international organizations and platforms to address their Afghanistan-related security challenges. These frameworks allow Central Asian states to draw on external resources and also initiate dialogue and increase coordination among themselves. However, Central Asian states do not have sufficient capacity to significantly influence the processes in Afghanistan. Another obstacle to their positive contribution is the lack of trust and cooperation in the region. Furthermore, Central Asian states are constrained by complex geopolitics of place and intra-regional rivalries.

Nevertheless, it can be argued that the connection between Central Asia and South Asia, which began with the collapse of the Soviet Union, is growing stronger. The Soviet-era isolation of Central Asian states from their traditional neighbours has ended, and opportunities for business, educational and people-to-people links will only increase.

Abbreviations

CASA-1000	Central Asia–South Asia electricity grid
CBM	Confidence-building measure
CIS	Commonwealth of Independent States
CPF	Collective Peacekeeping Force
CRDF	Collective Rapid Deployment Force
CRRF	Collective Rapid Reaction Force
CST	Collective Security Treaty
CSTO	Collective Security Treaty Organization
IMU	Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan
ISAF	International Security Assistance Force
MFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NDN	Northern Distribution Network
OEF	Operation Enduring Freedom
OSCE	Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
SCO	Shanghai Cooperation Organisation
TAPI	Turkmenistan–Afghanistan–Pakistan–India gas pipeline
UN	United Nations
UNHCR	UN High Commissioner for Refugees
UNODC	UN Office on Drugs and Crime

1. Introduction

A rich array of publications on relations between Afghanistan and Central Asian states have appeared over the past several years, triggered by concerns about the implications of the planned withdrawal of international forces from Afghanistan as well as the search for regional solutions to the problem of stabilization in the country. Studies have primarily focused on potential spillovers resulting from the 2014 security transition, particularly the risk of increased terrorist and drug trafficking activities, the roles that the European Union (EU), Russia and the United States can play, and the effects of military and financial assistance to Afghanistan on domestic and regional politics in Central Asia.¹ Discussions and estimates of the security and wealth-creation potential of developing more ties and trade between Central Asia and South Asia by using Afghanistan as a bridge continue, although the level of scepticism about the feasibility of these plans has been growing.

This paper uses a comparative approach to argue that there are many commonalities and differences in the policies of the five Central Asian states—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan—towards Afghanistan, and a variety of views in the region on the security situation in Afghanistan, the future of international stabilization efforts, the implications of the withdrawal of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and further prospects for increasing ties and trade with Afghanistan.² The approaches and policies of each Central Asian state can be explained by referring to factors such as its proximity to and existing links with Afghanistan, its own vulnerability and capacity as a state, its perspectives and attitudes, and its foreign-policy style, along with complex intra-regional politics and the geopolitical context.

The analysis of commonalities and differences and underlying causes allows tentative answers to the following questions: Is a more or less cohesive regional response to Afghanistan-related challenges possible, and if yes, who can assist its shaping and how? Which Central Asian states can best contribute to stabilization efforts in Afghanistan? Does the withdrawal of ISAF from Afghanistan signal a new geopolitical shift in Central Asia? Is the trend towards connectivity between Central Asia and its neighbourhood in South Asia, which began with the collapse of the Soviet Union, growing stronger?

¹ See e.g. S. Blank (ed.), *Central Asia after 2014* (US Army War College Strategic Studies Institute: Carlisle Barracks, PA, 2013); Laruelle, M., Peyrouse, S. and Boonstra, J., *The Afghanistan-Central Asia Relationship: What Role for the EU?*, Europe Central Asia Monitoring (EUCAM) Working Papers no. 13 (2013); Kucera, J., *US Military Assistance to Central Asia: Who Benefits?*, Open Society Foundations (OSF) Central Eurasia Project Occasional Paper series no. 7 (OSF: New York, 2012); and the Afghanistan Regional Forum series published within the Central Asia Program of the Elliott School of International Affairs at George Washington University, <<http://centralasiaprogram.org/category/publications/afghanistan-forum>>.

² A similar comparative approach was used in McDermott, R. N., *Central Asian Security Post-2014: Perspectives in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan*, Danish Institute for International Studies (DIIS) Report no. 12 (DIIS: Copenhagen, 2013). See also the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung project *Envisioning a Secure and Independent Afghanistan Post 2014: Perspectives and Strategies for Constructive Conflict Resolution from the Neighborhood*, <<http://www.fes-asia.org/pages/reinforcing-peace-and-security.php>>.

The starting point for this paper was a two-day workshop in September 2012 in Almaty, Kazakhstan, organized by Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), in collaboration with KIMEP University and with support from the Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs and the Bosch Foundation, as part of the SIPRI Wider Central Asia (WCA) initiative. The workshop, the second in a series of regional dialogue meetings on conflict and security issues related to Afghanistan and its neighbourhood, brought together experts from China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan to share their insights on how Afghanistan and the wider region are likely to evolve following the expected Western military drawdown in 2014.³

Chapter 2 provides a brief overview of the factors shaping Central Asian states' policies towards Afghanistan, as well as Central Asian states' contributions to the military campaign and to the reconstruction of Afghanistan. Chapter 3 discusses Central Asian perspectives on conflict resolution and stabilization in Afghanistan and outlines Central Asian states' security concerns about the ISAF withdrawal. Chapter 4 summarizes the regional security frameworks they are using to meet these threats, as well as the regional economic projects they would like to benefit from. Chapter 5 provides a brief overview of a series of Central Asian initiatives and their possible contributions to peace in Afghanistan. Chapter 6 presents conclusions.

³'Afghanistan and Central Asia in the evolving regional order', SIPRI roundtable, Almaty, 9–12 Sep. 2012. On SIPRI's WCA initiative see <<http://www.sipri.org/research/security/afghanistan>>. This paper has also greatly benefited from the contributions of Central Asian scholars Parviz Mullojanov and Farkhod Tolipov, and SIPRI Researcher Ekaterina Klimenko.

2. Afghanistan and the Central Asian states since 1992

In order to fully understand the separate but interconnected relationships between Afghanistan and the five Central Asian states it is necessary to provide an overview of the factors shaping Central Asian states' policies towards Afghanistan. Broadly speaking, these factors include the broader geopolitical context, Central Asian states' involvement in collective security arrangements in the post-Soviet space, the importance of ethnic affinities and the extent of each state's vulnerability to spillovers of instability from Afghanistan. An examination of these factors also needs to be accompanied by a summary of Central Asian states' contributions to military and reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan.

Factors shaping Central Asian policies towards Afghanistan

On the eve of the military campaign in Afghanistan, led at first by the United States and then by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the states of Central Asia had complex attitudes towards Afghanistan. On the one hand, they were concerned about the potential spillover of already existing instability from Afghanistan, which had materialized in the form of incursions by the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) into Tajikistan in 1999 and Kyrgyzstan in 2000.⁴ On the other hand, Turkmenistan—and, to some extent, Uzbekistan—had sought some kind of accommodation with the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, attempting at the same time to gain economic benefits from the stabilization of Afghanistan and the building of a gas pipeline to South Asian markets.

Kazakhstan

Kazakhstan does not share a border with Afghanistan and is, therefore, less vulnerable than some of the other Central Asian states to security threats and challenges coming from Afghanistan. This, coupled with the lack of ethnic affinity between people in Kazakhstan and Afghanistan, has allowed a calmer and less biased approach to developments in Afghanistan. Kazakhstan has always been a major supporter of the 1992 Collective Security Treaty (CST) arrangements, and could be said to be reliant on the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) for its security needs.⁵ Nevertheless, it has sought deeper cooperation with both the USA and NATO as part of its multi-vector foreign policy.

⁴ International Crisis Group, 'Recent violence in Central Asia: causes and consequences', Central Asia Briefing no. 3 (18 Oct. 2000), <<http://www.crisisgroup.org/-/media/Files/asia/central-asia/B%20Recent%20Violence%20in%20Central%20Asia%20Causes%20and%20Consequences.pdf>>.

⁵ The CSTO was formally established in 2002–2003 by 6 signatories of the CST. Its current members are Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia and Tajikistan. It aims to promote cooperation among its members and provide a more efficient response to strategic problems such as terrorism and narcotics trafficking. See the CSTO website, <<http://odkb-csto.org/>>.

Kyrgyzstan

Kyrgyzstan does not share a border with Afghanistan but has weak, porous borders with Tajikistan. While it is, therefore, moderately exposed to Afghanistan's security dynamics, it is not immune to external threats, as shown by the IMU's incursions into southern Kyrgyzstan in 1999 and 2000. The Kyrgyz population has a negligible ethnic affinity with the Afghan population.⁶ Kyrgyzstan has participated in CST arrangements and could be characterized as being dependent on Russian military and economic assistance. It has expressed an interest in further developing its CSTO capabilities and a preference for a strategic partnership with Russia.⁷

Tajikistan

Tajikistan shares a 1200-kilometre-long border with Afghanistan and could, therefore, be described as the Central Asian state most vulnerable to spillovers of instability from Afghanistan. It also has the strongest ethnic affinity, with ethnic Tajiks of Afghanistan comprising more than a quarter of the population. In addition, there are significant links between Tajikistan's complex domestic politics—including the suppression of the political opposition and drug trafficking—and Afghanistan. There remain multiple connections to Afghanistan that were developed during the 1992–97 civil war in Tajikistan, although at the level of political elites they have been weakened by growing distrust and a decline in mutual understanding in the 2000s.⁸

Overall, in addressing Afghanistan-related concerns, Tajikistan is mostly dependent on Russian military and economic assistance and interested in developing CSTO capabilities. However, like Kazakhstan, Tajikistan is trying to maintain a multi-vector foreign policy to retain autonomy and benefit from multiple assistance sources.⁹

Turkmenistan

Turkmenistan shares a 700-kilometre-long porous border with Afghanistan. In the 1990s Turkmenistan was the only Central Asian state that refused to officially recognize any threat coming from Afghanistan. It insisted on a policy of neutrality and attempted to develop business ties with the Taliban, primarily focusing on

⁶ Dzhuraev, E., 'Reflection on the problem of "not knowing" Afghanistan: the case of Kyrgyzstan', Central Asia Program of the Elliott School of International Affairs at George Washington University, Afghanistan Regional Forum Series, no. 4, Jan. 2013, <<http://centralasiaprogram.org/afghanistan-regional-forum-no-4-january-2013>>, p. 2.

⁷ Tuzov, A., 'Erlan Abdylidayev: Vazhno naraschivat voennyi potential ODKB' [Erlan Abdylidayev: it is important to increase the CSTO's military potential], *Vecherny Bishkek*, 23 May 2013.

⁸ Olimov, M. and Olimova, S., 'The withdrawal of NATO forces from Afghanistan: consequences for Tajikistan', Central Asia Program of the Elliott School of International Affairs at George Washington University, Afghanistan Regional Forum Series, no. 6, Mar. 2013, <<http://centralasiaprogram.org/afghanistan-regional-forum-no-6-march-2013>>, p. 3.

⁹ Parshin, K., 'Tajikistan: Dushanbe keeping Russia at arm's length', Eurasianet.org, 1 Aug. 2011, <<http://www.eurasianet.org/node/63978>>; and Vinson, M., 'Rahmon appoints new ministers of defense and foreign affairs', *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, vol. 10, no. 225 (16 Dec. 2013).

development of the Turkmenistan–Afghanistan–Pakistan–India (TAPI) gas pipeline project.¹⁰

Over the past several years, Turkmenistan's sense of vulnerability to spillovers of instability from Afghanistan has increased.¹¹ There has also been a certain shift away from isolationism in Turkmenistan's foreign policy and it has joined several regional cooperation frameworks, including the Istanbul Process and the Almaty Process. While there is very little affinity between Turkmens in Turkmenistan and those in Afghanistan, the Turkmen Government recently reached out to Turkmen leaders across the border.¹²

Uzbekistan

While Uzbekistan shares a relatively short 210-kilometre-long border with Afghanistan and has considerable border protection capacities, it has also internationally publicized its concerns about security threats coming from Afghanistan. The Uzbek Government is particularly worried by the activities of the IMU and its determination to transform Uzbekistan into an 'Islamic Khalifat'.¹³ The government has unsuccessfully sought to draw on CST arrangements in dealing with threats coming from Afghanistan. It has twice suspended its membership of the CSTO, in 1999 and 2012, and has also sought deeper cooperation with the USA and NATO.

Although ethnic affinity between Uzbeks in Uzbekistan and those in Afghanistan is low, there are well-established ties at the level of the elites.¹⁴ For example, the Uzbek Government has supported General Abdul Rashid Dustum, the leader of the Uzbek community in Afghanistan. In the 1990s Uzbekistan provided assistance to Dustum and the anti-Taliban United Front (often referred to as the Northern Alliance), and at the same time made attempts to develop business relations with the Taliban by joining the TAPI project (see chapter 4).

Central Asian states' contributions to military and reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan since 2001

In 2001, when the USA's 'global war on terrorism' commenced, Central Asian states quickly agreed to contribute to the US-led Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) and later the NATO-led ISAF operations in Afghanistan.¹⁵ The suppression

¹⁰ Kassenov, O., 'Perspektivy uregulirovaniya vnutriafganskogo konflikta' [Prospects for a resolution of the Afghan conflict], *Bezopasnost' Tsentral'noy Azii* [Security of Central Asia] (Kainar University: Almaty, 1998), pp. 132–33.

¹¹ Bagirov, T., 'Afghan border security becomes Turkmen priority', Central Asia Online, 23 Sep. 2010, <http://centralasiaonline.com/en_GB/articles/caii/features/main/2010/09/23/feature-03>.

¹² Tahir, M. and Pannier, B., 'Turkmenistan: the Achilles heel of Central Asian security', Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Qishloq Ovozi [Village Voice] Blog, 16 Feb. 2014, <<http://www.rferl.org/content/turkmenistan-achilles-heel-central-asian-security/25265841.html>>.

¹³ Yuldasheva, G., 'Uzbekistan and the Afghan reconciliation process', *Vatandosh*, 9 July 2012, <<http://vatandosh.uz/2012/07/09/professor-guli-i-yuldasheva-uzbekistan-and-the-afghan-reconciliation-process/>>.

¹⁴ Chayes, S., 'A forgotten player in a post-2014 Afghanistan: Uzbekistan', *The Diplomat*, 8 Aug. 2012.

¹⁵ Nichol, J., *Central Asia: Regional Developments and Implications for US Interests*, Congressional Research Service (CRS) Report for Congress RL33458 (US Congress, CRS: Washington, DC, 20 Nov. 2013), pp. 6–7.

of Islamic radicalism was in line with the interests of the secular authoritarian states in Central Asia. They also saw the sudden interest of the USA and its allies in the region as providing an opportunity from which they could benefit, both geopolitically (in the promotion of their multi-vector foreign policies) and in material terms (in the form of payments for transit and use of infrastructure).

Since that time, all five Central Asian states have contributed to the international intervention in Afghanistan. Kyrgyzstan allowed US and coalition forces to use the Manas airbase outside Bishkek. Uzbekistan provided a base for US operations at Karshi-Khanabad (K2), a base for German units at Termez and a land corridor to Afghanistan for humanitarian aid via the Friendship Bridge at Termez. Tajikistan permitted use of its international airport in Dushanbe for refuelling and hosted a French force. Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan provided overflight rights and other support.¹⁶

However, while mutually beneficial, cooperation between NATO and the Central Asian states has been hindered by political and geopolitical pressure from China and Russia. In July 2005 the Uzbek Government, in reaction to US criticism of its heavy-handed actions during the Andijan uprising, demanded that the USA vacate the K2 base.¹⁷ This move was preceded by a declaration—signed by the presidents of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan three weeks earlier at the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) summit—which stated that ‘as large-scale military operations against terrorism have come to an end in Afghanistan, the SCO member states maintain that the relevant parties to the anti-terrorist coalition should set a deadline for the temporary use of ... infrastructure facilities of the SCO member states and for their military presence in these countries’.¹⁸ This temporary cooling of relations was partly due to growing fears of Western democratization agendas and the promotion of ‘colour revolutions’ in the former Soviet space, but also to pressure from Russia, which was anxious about US and NATO troops in its ‘backyard’.

It took some time for US–Uzbek relations to normalize. In early 2008 Uzbekistan allowed US military personnel under NATO command to transit through the German-run Termez airbase. In April 2008 Uzbek President Islam Karimov attended the NATO Summit in Bucharest, Romania, and stated that Uzbekistan was ready to discuss the transit of non-lethal goods and equipment by NATO to Afghanistan through Uzbekistan. In May 2009 the USA and NATO were permitted to use the Navoi airport in east-central Uzbekistan for transporting non-lethal supplies to Afghanistan.¹⁹

The Manas airbase was also in danger of closing. In 2009, during a visit to Moscow, Kyrgyz President Kurmanbek Bakiyev announced the closure of Manas, allegedly in exchange for substantial Russian loans and grants. However, later that year the Kyrgyz Government agreed to continue leasing the base to the USA

¹⁶ Nichol (note 15), p. 36.

¹⁷ Nichol (note 15), p. 39.

¹⁸ Declaration by the heads of states of members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, Astana, Kazakhstan, 5 July 2005, <<http://www.mid.ru/ns-rasia.nsf/3a0108443c964002432569e7004199c0/432569d80021985fc32570350038d121?OpenDocument>> [unofficial translation].

¹⁹ Nichol (note 15), p. 40.

as a 'transit center' after negotiating increases in various payments. According to Kadyrbek Sarbayev, the Kyrgyz Minister of Foreign Affairs, the Kyrgyz Government agreed to the lease as part of an annually renewable five-year agreement because of growing alarm about 'the worrying situation in Afghanistan and Pakistan'.²⁰ In May 2012 the new Kyrgyz President, Almazbek Atambayev, stated that the US transit centre lease would not be renewed after the expiry of the current agreement in 2014. In his election campaign, Atambayev had argued that the presence of a foreign military base on the territory of Kyrgyzstan put the country in danger and also referred to a possible missile strike by Iran.²¹ Unlike his predecessor, Atambayev kept his promise, and in November 2013 the US Ambassador to Kyrgyzstan received official notice of the termination of the lease agreement, effective from July 2014.

Central Asian states have also played an important role in the transportation of supplies to support NATO and US operations in Afghanistan, as part of the Northern Distribution Network (NDN). In 2009 the USA was able to acquire permission from Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan to use their territories to transport non-lethal supplies.²² This route became particularly important in November 2011 when Pakistan blocked the southern route in response to NATO attacks on Pakistani border checkpoints.²³ Consequently, in 2011 three-quarters of the non-lethal surface shipments to Afghanistan were transported via the NDN.²⁴ In 2012 Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan gave permission for the reverse movement of NATO supplies and troops from Afghanistan to support the ISAF withdrawal. As of June 2013, the route was providing 80 per cent of all sustainment operations in Afghanistan and accounted for 4 per cent of the retrograde flow of equipment.²⁵ Kazakhstan is currently enhancing the capacity of its Caspian Sea port at Aktau to handle NDN traffic.

In addition to the fees for the use of their infrastructure, Central Asian states have also stood to gain surplus military equipment. The US Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs, Robert O. Blake, reported in August 2012 that discussions were underway within the US Government on how much and what types of equipment removed from Afghanistan might be declared excess defence articles and then given to regional governments.²⁶ Other NATO

²⁰ Nichol (note 15), p. 41.

²¹ Almazbek Atambayev: Prisetstvie v Kyrgyzstane amerikanskoj voennoj bazy opasno dlya strany' [Almazbek Atambayev: Presence of an American military base in Kyrgyzstan is dangerous for the country], K-News, 24 Dec. 2012, <<http://www.knews.kg/ru/politics/25975>>; and Vatutin, A., 'American base in Kyrgyzstan poses threat to country', *Eurasia Review*, 29 Dec. 2011.

²² Kuchins, A., Sanderson, T. and Gordon, D., *The Northern Distribution Network and the Modern Silk Road: Planning for Afghanistan's Future* (Center for Strategic and International Studies: Washington, DC, 2009), p. 8.

²³ Coleman, J., 'Pakistan halts NATO supplies after attack leaves soldiers dead', *The Guardian*, 26 Nov. 2011.

²⁴ Nichol (note 15), p. 46.

²⁵ Miles, D., 'Centcom undertakes massive logistical drawdown in Afghanistan', American Forces Press Service, 21 June 2013, <<http://www.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=120348>>.

²⁶ Nichol (note 15), p. 46; and Gorenburg, D., 'External support for Central Asian military and security forces', SIPRI-OSF Policy Brief, Jan. 2014, <<http://www.sipri.org/research/security/afghanistan/central-asia-security>>.

countries, including Germany and the United Kingdom, are also considering what to leave behind in the region.²⁷ These plans have led to controversy due to the repressive nature of Central Asian regimes and regional tensions.²⁸ However, it is likely that this equipment will be limited to items such as night-vision goggles, trucks, mine-detection equipment and unmanned aerial vehicles, and will not change the regional military balance.²⁹

While Central Asian states have been generally ready to make logistical contributions to OEF, they were not willing to join the military effort. In October 2010 Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev announced that Kazakhstan would send some officers to ISAF headquarters in Afghanistan. However, the Kazakh Senate rejected the related legislation, referring to public opposition to sending soldiers to Afghanistan.³⁰ The Senate's action indicated a change of mind in Kazakhstan, probably caused by a reassessment of the costs and benefits of attracting the attention of the Taliban and other radical Islamists versus advancing relations with the USA and NATO.

Central Asian states have also provided humanitarian aid and economic and technical assistance to Afghanistan. Of the five Central Asian states, Kazakhstan is the major contributor. It has financed the building of a school in Samangan province and a hospital in Bamyan province, as well as repairs to the road between Kunduz and Talukan.³¹ It has also provided grain and other foodstuffs and allocated \$50 million in university scholarships for 1000 Afghan students in 2010–20.³² Uzbekistan has constructed 11 bridges on the route between the cities of Mazar i Sharif and Kabul, ensuring an uninterrupted link between the north and east of the country. With funding from the Asian Development Bank it has also built an electric transmission line and a 75-kilometre-long railway connecting Termez in southern Uzbekistan with Hayraton and Mazar i Sharif in northern Afghanistan. Uzbekistan has also supplied Afghanistan with fuel, construction materials, metal-roll, fertilizers and foodstuffs.³³

²⁷ McDermott, R., 'NDN "reverse transit", Uzbekistan and the failure of grand strategy (part 2)', *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, vol. 10, no. 61 (2 Apr. 2013).

²⁸ Kucera, J., 'What military equipment should the US give Uzbekistan', *The Bug Pit*, 10 Mar. 2013, <<http://www.eurasianet.org/node/66667>>.

²⁹ Gorenburg, D., 'Central Asian military and security forces: assessing the impact of foreign assistance', Program on New Approaches to Research and Security (PONARS) Eurasia Policy Memo no. 297, Sep. 2013, <http://www.ponarseurasia.org/sites/default/files/policy-memos-pdf/Peprn_297_Gorenburg_Sept2013.pdf>.

³⁰ 'Senatory RK ne stali ratifitsirovat soglasheniye s NATO ob otpravke voennyh v Afghanistan' [Senators of the RK did not ratify the agreement with NATO on sending the military to Afghanistan], *Zakon.kz*, 9 June 2011, <<http://www.zakon.kz/page,1,2,218715-senatory-rk-ne-stali-ratificirovat.html>>.

³¹ Kazakh Embassy in the United States, 'Speech by H. E. Kairat Umarov, Ambassador of Kazakhstan to the US', Central Asia and Caucasus Institute, 9 Apr. 2013, <<http://www.kazakhembus.com/sites/default/files/documents/Istanbul%20Process%20Speech%2004%2008%2013.pdf>>.

³² Kazakh Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 'Uregulirovaniye situatsii v Afghanistane' [Regulation of the situation in Afghanistan], 27 Aug. 2012, <http://www.mfa.kz/ru/#!/foreign-policy/kazakhstan_i_voprosyi_globalnoy_i_regionalnoy_bezopasnosti/uregulirovanie_situatsii_v_afganistane>.

³³ Uzbek Embassy in Azerbaijan, 'Uzbekistan takes active part in international efforts to ensure development in Afghanistan', Press release, [n.d.], <<http://www.uzembassy.az/?lang=3&id=153>>.

3. Central Asian perspectives on the future security of Afghanistan

Central Asian states have expressed a wide range of security concerns in relation to the withdrawal of ISAF from Afghanistan, including the possibility of greater instability both within Afghanistan itself and in the wider region. The views of Central Asian commentators in relation to the prospects for conflict resolution and stabilization in Afghanistan are mostly similar, with a widely held view that the situation is unstable and highly likely to deteriorate further. However, the ISAF withdrawal, while seen as a source of security challenges, also presents opportunities, and experts emphasize the need for international assistance focused on economic recovery.

The withdrawal of the International Security Assistance Force and related security concerns

Central Asian policymakers and experts believe that a complete withdrawal of ISAF forces from Afghanistan will lead to a new phase of instability in the country.³⁴ The Afghan Government and the Afghan armed forces are not seen as capable of independently confronting a Taliban insurgency. There is also general agreement that the situation in Afghanistan has serious security implications for Central Asian states. However, the degree of an individual state's concern depends on its level of exposure and perceived vulnerability to security challenges coming from Afghanistan, with Tajikistan being viewed as the most fragile and Kazakhstan as the most remote and, therefore, the most secure.

A common concern is that an Afghan Government influenced by the Taliban would allow the creation of a network of training camps, foothold areas and supporting bases for Central Asian Islamic radicals along Afghanistan's borders with Central Asian states. Such a situation would seriously threaten the stability of Central Asian states since there is already a considerable potential for radicalization in the region.³⁵

Tajik and Uzbek officials argue that militants are already attempting to penetrate their territories. According to Tajik officials, over the past four years a series of violent events and military clashes have occurred in Tajikistan that are related to Islamic extremism in Afghanistan.³⁶ For example, these officials claim that in 2009–10 several groups of Islamic radicals entered Tajikistan via the

³⁴ Olimova, C. K. and Olimov, M. A., 'Problema 2014 goda: vzglyad iz Tsentralnoi Azii' [Problem of 2014: A view from Central Asia], *Vyzovy bezopasnosti v tsentralnoi Azii* [Challenges to Security in Central Asia], Conference proceedings, Institute of World Economy and International Relations, Russian Academy of Sciences (IMEMO RAS) and Foundation for Prospective Studies and Initiatives (PSIF), Moscow, Nov. 2012, <<http://www.imemo.ru/files/File/ru/publ/2013/13002.pdf>>, pp. 77–82.

³⁵ [Challenges to Security in Central Asia] (note 55), pp. 69–70.

³⁶ 'Amirkul Azimov: reshenie problem Afgahnistana siloi—oshibochnyi podhod' [Amirkul Azimov: Using force to solve the problems of Afghanistan is the wrong approach], RIA Novosti, 25 Jan. 2010, <<http://ria.ru/interview/20100125/206126066.html>>.

Tajik–Afghan border. Such official interpretations are challenged by some independent experts who stress the political purposes of official discourses, arguing that they are aimed at suppressing internal opposition and dissent by linking it to national security concerns.³⁷

The question of whether the Taliban have expansionist plans, and would present a direct threat to Central Asian states if they reached the borders, as was the case in the mid-1990s, is debated. As one former senior Tajik Ministry Of Foreign Affairs (MFA) official has stated:

We have been closely dealing with various Afghan factions throughout the 1990s and until the present day. We have a flow of data and materials—through our official and unofficial connections—about the Taliban movement’s ideology, plans and composition. Therefore we don’t believe in a moderate Taliban. We do not share the illusions of our Western and some post-Soviet partners that today’s Taliban are interested only in internal issues. On the contrary, we believe that they won’t stop on the Tajik–Afghan border.³⁸

However, the majority of experts view the Taliban as a local movement that would not be interested in going beyond the borders of Afghanistan.³⁹ Tajik experts also argue that there is no threat of a Taliban incursion into Central Asia given the tacit understanding that NATO and the USA will continue to maintain their military presence in Afghanistan after 2014.⁴⁰

Opinions also diverge on the capacity of the Northern Alliance to offer resistance to a resurgent Taliban and recreate the buffer zone between the Taliban-dominated part of Afghanistan and Central Asian states that existed in the 1990s. Some experts believe that the Northern Alliance has grown weaker, that its strongest leaders have been eliminated and that it is riven by infighting.⁴¹ Others suspect that it could in fact amass considerable financial and political resources if required, and that any increase in perceived uncertainty or sense of danger would force it to mobilize.⁴²

Another major concern is cross-border drug trafficking. According to the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), every year around 90 tonnes of heroin produced in Afghanistan are transported through Central Asia.⁴³ While it is acknowledged that the Taliban effectively reduced drug production when they were in power, there is no guarantee that this will be repeated should they come to power again. In the case of a civil war, both sides would continue to use the drug trade as a source of income. Increased drug trafficking is also linked to arms trafficking. The proximity of the conflict zone in Afghanistan to functioning drug-

³⁷ Balci, B., ‘The myth of rising Islamic extremism in post-2014 Central Asia’, *World Politics Review*, 30 Dec. 2013.

³⁸ Former senior Tajik MFA official, Interview with author, Dushanbe, 22 Dec. 2012.

³⁹ Mukhametrakhimova, S., ‘Central Asia at risk from post-2014 Afghanistan’, Institute for War and Peace Reporting, 20 Aug. 2013, <<http://iwpr.net/report-news/central-asia-risk-post-2014-afghanistan>>.

⁴⁰ Olimova and Olimov (note 3455), p. 77.

⁴¹ Olimova and Olimov (note 34), p. 2.

⁴² Avazbek Atakhanov, Head of Department of Eastern States, Kyrgyz Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Interview with Ekaterina Klimenko, SIPRI Researcher, on behalf of the author, Bishkek, 26 Dec. 2012.

⁴³ UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), *Opiate Flows Through Northern Afghanistan and Central Asia: A Threat Assessment* (UNODC: Vienna, May 2012), p. 9.

trafficking routes increases weapons trafficking. This results in an influx of money and arms, and associated criminality, into Central Asian states.⁴⁴

It is generally acknowledged that Central Asian borders are highly porous and therefore susceptible to drug trafficking. In Tajikistan some of the border areas, such as Shurabad district in the south-west of the country, are barely controlled, and illegal cross-border trade is reportedly increasing. According to unofficial sources, the July 2012 large-scale military clashes in Tajikistan's Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region were partly caused by competition over cross-border trade and smuggling routes.⁴⁵

Central Asian states, particularly Tajikistan, are also worried that the deterioration of the security situation in Afghanistan could result in waves of refugees.⁴⁶ With the help of the Central Asia office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), Central Asian states launched the so-called Almaty Process to start preparations for handling mixed migration—that is, the movement of 'legitimate' refugees as well as militants and criminals (i.e. drug and weapons smugglers) disguised as refugees—from Afghanistan to the wider Central Asia region.⁴⁷ At the same time, government-affiliated Uzbek experts insist that Uzbekistan, unlike its neighbours, is prepared to deal with the refugee situation and is able to protect its borders.⁴⁸

While there are concerns about the consequences of the ISAF withdrawal, there is also a widespread conviction on the part of Central Asian officials and experts that the USA will maintain its military presence in Afghanistan even after 2014.⁴⁹ According to this view, the USA has invested too much in Afghanistan to simply leave and will continue to regard the region as geostrategically important, given that it is situated between China, Iran and Russia. Consequently, Afghanistan could be used as a launch pad for military projection to the southern frontiers of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS).⁵⁰

One school of thought holds that the USA is actually interested in the destabilization of the Middle East, Central Asia and Afghanistan. According to this view, US policymakers are orchestrating 'managed chaos' in various parts of the world

⁴⁴ Atakhanov (note 42).

⁴⁵ 'Tajikistan: Will cease-fire end deadly conflict in Gorno-Badakhshan?', Eurasianet.org, 25 July 2012, <<http://www.eurasianet.org/node/65705>>.

⁴⁶ *Vyzovy bezopasnosti v tsentralnoi Azii* (note 34), p. 69.

⁴⁷ In Mar. 2011 representatives from 4 Central Asian states—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan—signed the Almaty Declaration on refugee protection and international migration, aspiring to create a regional cooperation framework for mixed migration. UN High Commissioner for Refugees, Almaty Declaration, adopted by participating states at the Regional Conference on Refugee Protection and International Migration, Almaty, 16 Mar. 2011, <<http://www.unhcr.org/4ddfb7cd6.html>>. On the Almaty Process see Ministerial Conference on Refugee Protection and International Migration, 'The Almaty Process: concept note', 5 June 2013, Almaty, Kazakhstan, <<http://www.unhcr.kz/eng/mixedmigration/conceptnote/>>.

⁴⁸ *Vyzovy bezopasnosti v tsentralnoi Azii* (note 34), p. 69.

⁴⁹ Sultanov, B. (ed.), *Tsentrlnaya Aziya i Kaspiiskiy region: riski, vyzovy, ugrozy* [Central Asia and the Caspian Region: risks, challenges, threats] (Kazakhstan Institute for Strategic Studies: Almaty, 2012).

⁵⁰ Kosichenko, A. et al., 'Afganskiy faktor v sisteme regionalnoi bezopasnosti' [The Afghan factor in the regional security system], K. Syroezhkin (ed.), *Central Asia Today: Challenges and Threats* (Kazakhstan Institute for Strategic Studies: Almaty, 2011), p. 390.

in order to keep other rising powers from challenging the USA's supremacy.⁵¹ Other experts point to the ongoing shift of US attention away from Afghanistan and Central Asia, and towards the Asia-Pacific and the current upheavals in the Middle East. This scenario raises the prospect of a US withdrawal from and neglect of the Central Asia region, leaving it at the mercy of regional powers.⁵² In general, there is uncertainty with regard to the USA's future policies. As one Tajik expert has put it:

The overall impression is that today Americans try to cope with a contradicting dilemma. On the one hand, they have to control further developments in Afghanistan and apparently would like to expand their influence to the Central Asian countries. On the other hand, they still are not really active in Central Asia and apparently have problems with budget restrictions. Probably, they are still in the process of making the final decision.⁵³

Importantly, the ISAF withdrawal is seen in the region not only as a source of security challenges but also as a considerable opportunity. In this context, the NDN connecting Afghanistan with Europe via Central Asian states and the Baltic and Black Seas is acquiring more and more strategic and geopolitical importance and is, therefore, increasing the profile of Central Asian states in international and regional affairs. The NDN also brings significant material benefits to transit countries that already receive hundreds of millions of dollars in fees.⁵⁴

Perspectives on conflict resolution and stabilization in Afghanistan

Central Asian perspectives on the prospects for conflict resolution and stabilization in Afghanistan are mostly similar with regard to the causes of the conflict in Afghanistan, with some differences resulting from ethnic solidarity. Central Asian experts generally explain protracted armed violence in Afghanistan as having been caused by a combination of factors, including (a) the failure of political centralization and state-building processes, which has led to a weakened state; (b) ethnic, religious and tribal divisions, which have funnelled tensions and the struggle for power; (c) the meddling of external actors, whose promotion of their own interests has come at the expense of unity and stability in Afghanistan; and

⁵¹ Malikov, K., 'Protivostoyaniye SSHA i Rossii v Tsentralnoi Azii ne tolko prodolzhitsya, no budet nosit raznoplanovyi i gde-to zhestkiy harakter' [Confrontation between USA and Russia in Central Asia will not only continue but will have a multifaceted and somewhat tough character], AKIpress, 24 Apr. 2012, <<http://www.akipress.org/comments/news:12411>>; Interview with Aleksandr Knyazev, 'Glavnoe uslovie – anglosaksonskiye voiska dolzhny pokinut Afghanistan' [The main condition: Anglo-Saxon troops should leave Afghanistan], Information Agency REX, 14 Nov. 2012, <<http://www.iarex.ru/interviews/31098.html>>; and Interview with Bulat Sultanov, Director of the Kazakhstan Institute of Strategic Studies, 'Ispytaniye Afganistanom' [A trial by Afghanistan], *Vecherniy Almaty*, 6 Sep. 2011.

⁵² Opinions expressed at the SIPRI roundtable, 'Afghanistan and Central Asia in the evolving regional order', Almaty, 9–12 Sep. 2012. On Uzbek fears that the USA will abandon Afghanistan see McDermott (note 2), p. 55.

⁵³ Khadi-zade, F., Tajik analyst, Interview with Parviz Mullojanov, Central Asian scholar, on behalf of author, Dushanbe, 23 Dec. 2012.

⁵⁴ Tynan, D., 'Central Asia: Who's the big winner in the NDN sweepstakes?', Eurasianet.org, 7 Feb. 2012, <<http://www.eurasianet.org/node/64969>>.

(d) increased criminalization, which has been aggravated by the problem of drug trafficking.⁵⁵

Both officials and experts characterize the security situation in Afghanistan as unstable and highly likely to deteriorate. In the words of one senior Kazakh MFA official, explosive 'latent processes' in this country are waiting for a 'detonator', and one such potential detonator could have been provided by the April 2014 presidential elections in Afghanistan.⁵⁶ It was expected that since the current Afghan President, Hamid Karzai, could not be re-elected, and there were no obvious alternative candidates, the situation in the country would be unpredictable.⁵⁷ However, the relatively successful first round of elections seems to give hope that the worst-case scenario can be avoided. Central Asian experts state that their governments will accept the choice of the Afghan people and will adapt to it. They are also sure that whoever is elected will be interested in having good relation with Central Asian states.⁵⁸

Central Asian officials and the expert community have been generally mildly critical of the current stabilization approach and view the international efforts with respect to the security problems in Afghanistan as inadequate. For example, there are doubts regarding the military aspect of stabilization. Central Asian officials speaking at international meetings often state that there is no military solution to the Afghan problem.⁵⁹ At the same time, ISAF is criticized for not paying enough attention to enhancing the capacity of the Afghan armed forces, which lack heavy armament and ammunition, thus considerably limiting their ability to conduct independent and large-scale military operations.

The political component of the stabilization of Afghanistan is also questioned. When discussing political solutions for Afghanistan, Central Asian experts do not bring up democratic instruments. The general view is that Afghan society is too traditional and not ready for the imposition of Western-style democracy. So far, efforts to promote democracy have only aggravated the inter-elite and inter-ethnic divides in the country and weakened the state.⁶⁰ While such views were common before the 2014 presidential elections, the successful conduct of the elections suggests that scepticism in this regard might decrease.

As for the international aspect of stabilization, the official line of Central Asian states is the necessity of keeping the process under the aegis of the United Nations.⁶¹ According to one Kyrgyz MFA official, the permanent members of the

⁵⁵ See e.g. Kosichenko et al. (note 50), pp. 357–99; and Olimova and Olimov (note 34), p. 386.

⁵⁶ Senior Kazakh MFA official, Interview with author, Almaty, 27 Dec. 2012.

⁵⁷ Atakhanov (note 42).

⁵⁸ Panfilova, V., 'General Dustum Syezdil na Istoricheskuyu Rodinu' [General Dustum visited historical homeland], *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, 21 Jan. 2014; 'Kto by ne pobedil na vyborah v Afghanistane, on budet iskat druzhby s Dushanbe' [Whoever wins in the elections in Afghanistan, he will seek friendship with Dushanbe], *Radio Ozodi*, 23 Apr. 2014, <<http://rus.ozodi.org/content/article/25324168.html>>.

⁵⁹ 'President of Kazakhstan Nursultan Nazarbayev: fate and outlook for OSCE. Kazakhstan is assuming chairmanship in this international organization', *Kazakhstanskaya Pravda*, 29 Jan. 2010; and 'No military solution for Afghan problem, says Karimov', *New Europe Online*, 26 Sep. 2010, <<http://www.neurope.eu/article/no-military-solution-afghan-problem-says-karimov>>.

⁶⁰ Kosichenko et al. (note 50), pp. 364–65.

⁶¹ Uzbek Government, 'Address by H. E. Mr. Islam Karimov, President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, at the Plenary Session of the UN Millennium Development Goals Summit', New York, 21 Sep. 2010, <<http://>

UN Security Council—and in particular China, Russia and the USA—need to come to a common understanding of Afghanistan’s problems and their solutions, since any reconstruction project is destined to fail unless these countries adopt a common strategy.⁶² However, there is a clear recognition that the USA is ‘calling the shots’, and that much depends on the USA’s ability to negotiate with the Taliban, as well as with Pakistan, Iran and other important actors. In the opinion of Central Asian experts, the USA’s ‘allergy’ to negotiations with Iran seriously hinders the stabilization process.⁶³

While the necessity of an intra-Afghan political solution is emphasized, there is no clear common vision on how it should be achieved. For example, Tajik experts tend to believe that the policies of the USA and NATO favour and promote the dominance of the Pushtun people in Afghanistan at the expense of ethnic minorities. Such policies are considered potentially dangerous, as the weakening of the Northern Alliance would make it easier for the Taliban to return to power in Afghanistan, and would lead to another wave of confrontation between the Pushtun-dominated south and the north of the country, where ethnic minorities—including Tajiks, Uzbeks and Hazaras—dominate.⁶⁴

Most experts view the status quo—which is characterized by a balance of power among ethnic groups in the government—as unsustainable in the long run. Tajik and Uzbek experts argue that, unless the interests of minorities are taken into account, any peace agreement will not be durable. Consequently, some experts believe that only the introduction of the principles of federalism would ensure long-term stability in Afghanistan. According to a prominent Tajik expert, the dilemma facing Tajikistan in this regard can be summarized as follows:

On the one hand, Tajikistan is not interested in realization of federalism principles in Afghanistan—this a way for separatism and further to the civil war . . . On the other hand, Tajikistan is not interested in the complete political domination of Pushtuns in Afghanistan. It could happen in case of the return of the Taliban to power and as a result of the NATO activities. Therefore, Tajikistan prefers the existing status-quo situation in which Pushtuns share power with representatives of other non-Pushtun ethnic groups.⁶⁵

www.gov.uz/en/press/politics/6612; Tuzov, A., ‘Interview with Kyrgyz Foreign Minister Erlan Abdyldayev’, *Vecherny Bishkek*, 23 May 2013; Kazakh Embassy in the United States, ‘Almaty Ministerial Conference of the Istanbul Process on Afghanistan’, Almaty, Kazakhstan, 29 Apr. 2013, <<http://www.kazakhembus.com/article/almaty-ministerial-conference-of-the-istanbul-process-on-afghanistan>>; President of Turkmenistan, ‘Address at the 65th session of the UN General Assembly’, New York, 20 Sep. 2010, <<http://www.turkmenistan.ru/en/node/14143>>; and [Amirkul Azimov: Using force to resolve the problems of Afghanistan is the wrong approach], (note 36).

⁶² Atakhanov (note 42).

⁶³ Yuldasheva, G., ‘Uzbekistan and the Afghan reconciliation process’, Central Asia Program of the Elliott School of International Affairs at George Washington University, Afghanistan Regional Forum Series, no. 1, June 2012, <<http://www.centralasiaprogram.org/afghanistan-regional-forum-no-1-june-2012>>.

⁶⁴ Mullojanov, P., ‘Prospects and challenges of the national reconciliation process in Afghanistan: development scenarios’, Central Asia Program of the Elliott School of International Affairs at George Washington University, Afghanistan Regional Forum Series, no. 9, June 2013, <<http://www.centralasia-program.org/afghanistan-regional-forum-no-9-june-2013>>.

⁶⁵ Olimov, M. A., ‘Vyvod SII NATO iz Afghanistana i posledstvia dlia Tajikistana’ [The withdrawal of NATO forces from Afghanistan and its consequences for Tajikistan], *Centrasia.ru*, 2 May 2012, <<http://www.centrasia.ru/newsA.php?st=1335957360>> [author’s translation].

Although ethnic solidarity is an important factor in shaping the policies of Tajikistan and Uzbekistan towards Afghanistan, it is not the decisive one. Rather, the main drivers are security and economic interests. Both countries have a strategic interest in developing alternative trade routes via Afghanistan to South Asia to help decrease their dependence on their northern neighbours (Uzbekistan for Tajikistan, and Kazakhstan and Russia for Uzbekistan). One representative of a leading Tajik trade company articulated this interest as follows:

For me personally it doesn't matter who is in power in Afghanistan—Tajiks or Pushtuns. For my company it is much more important to get access to transportation routes through Afghanistan to Karachi, India and Iran. Today we have to deliver all needed goods via Russia and Uzbekistan, passing through numerous bureaucratic and corruption obstacles; in addition it is very expensive. The way through Afghanistan would be much shorter (two days instead of six or seven) and cheaper.⁶⁶

There is no consensus on the issue of negotiations with the Taliban. On the one hand, experts believe that an intra-Afghan political process and peace settlement with the Taliban is a prerequisite for the stabilization of Afghanistan. On the other hand, the way in which this intra-Afghan dialogue should be organized remains unclear. Tajik experts tend to doubt the existence of 'moderate' elements within the Taliban.⁶⁷ They also express scepticism with regards to the usefulness of negotiations with moderate Taliban members, viewing the Taliban as using the opportunity to accumulate forces and resources for a future offensive. According to one senior Kazakh Government official, while negotiation is necessary, it is important to negotiate with Taliban representatives who have influence, rather than with 'moderate' Taliban members.⁶⁸ Kazakh experts generally take a less biased position, with some even tending to sympathize with Pushtuns attracted to tribal culture, including Pushtunwali (the informal code of honour).⁶⁹

Experts and government officials agree that international forces have not made sufficient efforts to reduce drug production in Afghanistan. For example, Kyrgyz President Almazbek Atambaev recently criticized the USA and ISAF for insufficient efforts in this regard.⁷⁰ According to Kazakhstan's Foreign Minister, Yerzhan Kazykhanov, while various assistance programmes for border management are necessary, the main focus needs to be on Afghanistan as a source of opium production.⁷¹ This is in line with the Russian position on the matter. More generally, official statements on stabilization in Afghanistan emphasize the necessity of making the Afghan economy viable by reviving its various sectors and integrating Afghanistan within regional trade networks. In this context,

⁶⁶ Tajik trade company representative, Interview with author, Dushanbe, 20 Dec. 2012.

⁶⁷ Khaidarov, R., 'Osoboye mnenie: mira ne budet' [Special opinion: there will be no peace], *Asia-plus*, 3 Nov. 2011.

⁶⁸ Senior Kazakh MFA official (note 56).

⁶⁹ See e.g. Amanzholov, I., 'Afghanistan: ocherk neusvoennoi istorii' [Afghanistan: review of unlearned history], *Kazakhstan-Spektr*, Kazakhstan Institute for Strategic Studies, vol. 1 (2012).

⁷⁰ 'Atambaev: My podgotovimsya k vyvodu vojsk SSHA iz Afganistana' [Atambaev: We are preparing for US troops' withdrawal from Afghanistan], Radio Azzattyk, 24 Dec. 2012, <<http://rus.azattyk.org/content/news/24807110.html>>.

⁷¹ Kazykhanov, Y., 'Stabilizing Afghanistan: the view from Kazakhstan', Real Clear World, 18 May 2012, <http://www.realclearworld.com/articles/2012/05/18/stabilizing_afghanistan_the_view_from_kazakhstan.html>.

Kazykhanov argues that the starting point should be agriculture, and that international assistance should be concentrated in areas where intensive agricultural growth can be achieved. In his opinion, encouraging Afghans back into productive employment on the land will have a major economic impact and improve the security situation.⁷²

⁷² Kazykhanov (note 71).

4. Cooperation among Central Asian states

Participation in multilateral regional security frameworks

All five Central Asian states have made use of international organizations and platforms—including the CIS, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the Istanbul Process on Regional Security and Cooperation for a Secure and Stable Afghanistan, the High Level Security Dialogue with the European Union (EU) and the NATO Partnership for Peace programme—to address their Afghanistan-related security challenges.⁷³ The benefits of such frameworks are twofold. First, Central Asian states can draw on external military, political and financial resources. Second, in the absence of a stand-alone Central Asian platform, these states can use these frameworks to initiate dialogue and increase coordination among themselves. However, it remains to be seen how the geopolitical shifts caused by the confrontation over Ukraine will affect these opportunities.

The Istanbul Process

Of the organizations and platforms mentioned above, the Istanbul Process is the only one in which Central Asian states share membership with Afghanistan. The Istanbul Process was launched in 2011 with the goal of improving the regional framework through dialogue and confidence-building measures (CBMs).⁷⁴ Uzbekistan, which is generally not enthusiastic about multilateral initiatives, did not participate in the first ministerial conference, which was held in Istanbul, Turkey, in November 2011. However, in June 2012 it took part in the second ministerial conference in Kabul.⁷⁵ Uzbekistan's initial reluctance can be explained by the lack of success of its own international initiatives for the settlement of the conflict in Afghanistan (see chapter 5) and by the Uzbek Government's general preference for bilateralism in its foreign policy.⁷⁶

As part of the Istanbul Process, Central Asian states have joined various CBM groups, with Kazakhstan agreeing to lead implementation in the Disaster Management CBM group and the Chamber of Commerce CBM groups, and Turkmenistan agreeing to lead the Regional Infrastructure CBM group.⁷⁷

⁷³ On the High Level Security Dialogue with the European Union see European External Action Service, 'First EU-Central Asia Security Dialogue held in Brussels. Agreement to hold next round in Tajikistan', 14 June 2013, <http://www.eeas.europa.eu/top_stories/2013/14062013_eu_central_asia_sec_dial_en.htm>. On the NATO Partnership for Peace programme see <http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_50349.htm>.

⁷⁴ Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 'Istanbul Process on Regional Security and Cooperation for a Secure and Stable Afghanistan', Istanbul, 2 Nov. 2011, <<http://www.mfa.gov.tr/istanbul-process-on-regional-security-and-cooperation-for-a-secure-and-stable-afghanistan.en.mfa>>.

⁷⁵ Afghan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 'Istanbul Process: a new agenda for regional cooperation in the heart of Asia', 12 June 2012, <<http://mfa.gov.af/en/news/10569#>>.

⁷⁶ Ergashev, B., 'Politika Uzbekistana v otnoshenii Afganistana v kontekste obespecheniya regionalnoi bezopasnosti v Tsentralnoi Azii' [Uzbekistan policy toward Afghanistan in the context of regional security in Central Asia], *Vyzovy bezopasnosti v tsentralnoi Azii* (note 34), p. 99.

⁷⁷ 'Heart of Asia' Ministerial Conference Declaration, Kabul, 14 June 2012, <<http://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/cae/servlet/contentblob/620128/publicationFile/169405/120612-HeartOfAsia-Konferenzklaerung.pdf>>.

In April 2013 Kazakhstan hosted the third ministerial conference in Almaty.⁷⁸ It used the occasion to promote its earlier initiative to establish a UN hub in Almaty that would coordinate regional projects for Afghanistan (see chapter 5). In September 2013 Turkmenistan hosted the meeting of the Regional Infrastructure CBM group to discuss the implementation of the action plan adopted in Almaty. Kazakhstan's active participation in the Istanbul Process can primarily be explained by its ambition to play a more important role in international politics and its preference for multilateral frameworks. In the case of Turkmenistan, a generally less internationally engaged country, its participation stems from a combination of its desire to become more visible internationally and its economic interest in regional infrastructure projects promoted by the process.

The inclusion of all Central Asian states—especially the normally reclusive Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, which is sceptical of multilateral arrangements—in the Istanbul Process is a good sign both for international efforts in Afghanistan and developments in the region of Central Asia. However, tellingly, there are very few discussions among Central Asian experts on the potential of this process.

The Collective Security Treaty Organization

Among the other regional frameworks, the Russia-led CSTO is of particular relevance to Central Asian security, as Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are members. Originally created for collective defence purposes, the CSTO has over the years developed a broader security agenda that includes drug trafficking, human trafficking, organized crime, environmental security and information security. As a response to the 1999–2000 IMU incursions into Central Asia, in 2001 the CSTO created the Collective Rapid Deployment Force (CRDF) for Central Asia with the goals of countering terrorism and averting external aggression. In 2007 CSTO member states announced the expansion of the organization and its readiness to create its own Collective Peacekeeping Force (CPF). In 2009, in order to strengthen the military muscle of the organization and make it more relevant to the national security of member states, a Collective Rapid Reaction Force (CRRF) was set up. Modelled on the CRDF, the purpose of the CRRF is to tackle threats to sovereignty and other crises (e.g. terrorist attacks, and natural and technological disasters) within CSTO member states.⁷⁹

There is general consensus among Central Asian experts that the CSTO, despite its announced aspiration to become an international peacekeeper, will not actively engage in the settlement of the conflict in Afghanistan, since neither Russia nor the Central Asian states are interested in such direct involvement. Some Kazakh experts argue that the Afghan people consider all foreign troops as

⁷⁸ Kazakh Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 'On June 5 Minister of Foreign Affairs of Kazakhstan, Erlan Idrissov, took part in the Ministerial Conference on Refugee Protection and International Migration: The Almaty Process', 6 June 2013, <<http://m.mfa.gov.kz/en/article/10435>>.

⁷⁹ Collective Security Treaty Organization, 'Vooruzheniye dlya zaschity: Stranam, vkhodyaschim v ODKB, pomogut otrazit agressiyu' [Armament for the protection of countries, members of the CSTO will help withstand the aggression], 16 Feb. 2009, <http://odkb-csto.org/news/detail.php?ELEMENT_ID=756&SECTION_ID=92&spphrase_id=5804>.

occupiers.⁸⁰ Russian scholars also point to legal constraints on the CSTO's participation in peacekeeping operations in Afghanistan, which could only be carried out under the aegis of the UN and at the request of conflicting parties.⁸¹

The activities of the CSTO will be mostly focused on the security of the Central Asian states, increasing their capacity to fight drug trafficking, strengthening their borders, and improving their armies. In line with these goals, in September 2012 Russia signed an agreement with Kyrgyzstan for the use of the military airbase at Kant until 2032. The airbase provides air support for the CSTO's CRRF operations on the ground. In October 2012 a similar agreement was reached with Tajikistan. Under the agreement, Russia is allowed to retain and expand its 201st military base in Tajikistan until 2042. At present, both bases are being expanded and upgraded in preparation for the 2014 withdrawal of ISAF from Afghanistan. Russia also promised to provide \$1.1 billion in military assistance to Kyrgyzstan and \$200 million to Tajikistan, with the first shipments of military equipment to start at the end of 2013.⁸²

According to one CSTO advisor, CSTO member states have considered at least three scenarios with regard to the 2014 ISAF withdrawal. First, if former citizens of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan who had previously fled to Afghanistan or Pakistan sought to return to their home country by making incursions across the border, then the CSTO would be unlikely to send its troops since the armed forces of the individual countries would be capable of meeting this challenge. Second, if armed gangs composed of northern Afghans numbering in the hundreds committed acts of aggression, then the CRDF (and possibly the CRRF) would be engaged. Third, if there was a full-scale attack (e.g. by gangs from northern Afghanistan or the Taliban), then both the CRDF and CRRF would be engaged, along with additional collective forces.⁸³

Since 2007 the CSTO has made proposals to NATO on cooperation on a number of issues, including the stabilization of Afghanistan and the neutralization of threats emanating from its territory.⁸⁴ NATO prefers to work with CSTO member states bilaterally in order not to strengthen Russia's hand in post-Soviet security arrangements. The significant worsening of relations between Russia and the West makes such NATO–CSTO cooperation in the future even more unlikely, given the absence of other effective regional security mechanisms in Central Asia.

⁸⁰ Kosichenko et al. (note 50), p. 394.

⁸¹ Nikitina, Y., 'How the CSTO can (and cannot) help NATO', Program on New Approaches to Research and Security (PONARS) Eurasia Policy Memo no. 285, Sep. 2013, <http://www.ponarseurasia.org/sites/default/files/policy-memos-pdf/Pepm_285_Nikitina_Sept%202013.pdf>.

⁸² 'Rossiya postavit Kyrgyzstanu i Tajikistanu vooruzheniya na \$1.3 milliarda' [Russia will provide Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan with military equipment for \$1.3 billion], *Kazakhstan Today*, 2 Oct. 2013.

⁸³ Nikiforov, A., 'ODKB: ee rol, potential i vozmozhnye mery pri negativnom razviti obstanovki v Afganistane posle 2014 goda' [CSTO: Its role, potential and possible measures in case of a negative development of situation in Afghanistan after 2014], *Vyzovy bezopasnosti v tsentralnoi Azii* (note 34), p. 137.

⁸⁴ Nikitina (note 81).

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization

The China-led SCO ostensibly has significant potential to assist with the stabilization of Afghanistan, given that all Central Asian states except Turkmenistan are members. However, the SCO's possible role with regard to the situation in Afghanistan is less clear. On the one hand, it has established a special contact group on Afghanistan, signalling its interest and relevance in this regard, and its member states welcome and encourage Afghan participation in regional projects. On the other hand, the SCO is probably unable to play a significant role due to its members' lack of political will to seriously engage in Afghan affairs. According to one Kazakh expert, it is virtually impossible to organize an intra-Afghan political process with the help of the SCO, since the organization does not possess mechanisms for financing economic projects and cannot effectively tackle the drug trafficking problem either. However, the SCO could create a better environment for Afghanistan by blocking the importing of precursor chemicals used to produce heroin into the country and increasing economic investments.⁸⁵

Regional economic projects

While Central Asian states are concerned about security threats emanating from Afghanistan, they also hope to benefit from a number of emerging economic opportunities, including the enhancement of trade links with Afghanistan and South Asia, and from gaining access to the Arabian Sea. The involvement of the international community in the reconstruction of Afghanistan has magnified the scale of these opportunities. However, growing doubts about both the security situation in Afghanistan and the sustainability of foreign interest and assistance have since dampened Central Asian states' initial enthusiasm.

The three Central Asian states bordering Afghanistan—Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan—are understandably more enthusiastic about regional economic projects, although this enthusiasm is tempered by security concerns. Tajikistan in particular is eager to end its transportation isolation and is unreservedly positive about economic opportunities.⁸⁶ Uzbekistan has already taken advantage of a number of important strategic opportunities but is cautious about possible negative influences coming from South Asia.⁸⁷ Kazakhstan is ready to invest in Afghanistan and is interested in developing trade links with South Asia.⁸⁸ However, Kazakh experts remain sceptical about the prospects of such links, fearing that reconnecting with Afghanistan and South Asia could bring not just benefits but serious challenges as well.

⁸⁵ Laumulin, M., 'Central Asia–Afghanistan: in search of solutions to regional security problems', Presentation at the round table organized by the Carnegie–Al Farabi Center, Almaty, 12 Nov. 2012.

⁸⁶ Rahmon, E., 'Vystupleniye na konferentsii regionalnogo ekonomicheskogo sotrudnichestva po Afghanistanu (RECCA-V)' [Address at the Fifth Regional Economic Cooperation for Afghanistan conference (RECCA-V)], Dushanbe, 26 Mar. 2012, <<http://www.president.tj/ru/node/863>>.

⁸⁷ Uzbek Embassy in the United States, Address by Uzbek Foreign Minister Abdulaziz Kamilov at the NATO Summit, Chicago, 21 May 2012, <<http://uzbekistan.org/news/archive/1260/?print=1>>.

⁸⁸ Kazykhanov (note 71).

Two high-profile projects are the TAPI gas pipeline and the Central Asia–South Asia electricity grid (CASA-1000). The TAPI gas pipeline is an ambitious project to connect Central Asia with Afghanistan and South Asia. Initiated in the 1990s by Turkmenistan and Taliban-ruled Afghanistan, it was temporarily put on hold at the beginning of the US-led military campaign in Afghanistan. In 2002 the leaders of Afghanistan, Turkmenistan and Pakistan made a new agreement, and in 2005 the Asian Development Bank submitted a pipeline feasibility study, opening the way for further deals. In 2008 India joined the project by signing the framework agreement to buy Turkmen natural gas. In 2011 Russia, which had earlier opposed the project, decided to back the pipeline, making it politically more feasible. In 2012 Turkmenistan announced that it would start building its part of the pipeline in 2017. The Turkmen Government is enthusiastic about the potential of TAPI as an outlet for its giant southern gas field, Galkynysh, which commenced operating in September 2013. However, experts in the region remain sceptical about TAPI, pointing to the low chances of its implementation in the near future given the instability in Afghanistan.⁸⁹

Apart from security concerns, some projects are also mired in complex regional rivalries. The CASA-1000 electricity grid, which envisages the export of electricity from Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan to Afghanistan and Pakistan, is hindered by tensions between Uzbekistan and Tajikistan and competition among Central Asian states as electricity suppliers. Uzbekistan is strongly critical of CASA-1000, claiming that it is in breach of international law because Tajikistan had not consulted its neighbours on an impact assessment report. According to Uzbekistan, Tajikistan's construction of the Rogun dam, reservoir and power plant would deprive Uzbekistan of much needed water for irrigation.⁹⁰

The practical realization of CASA-1000 also depends on securing international financial support. Despite earlier reservations, in March 2014 the World Bank agreed to grant \$526.5 million for the project (with the total cost estimated at \$1.17 billion).⁹¹ It remains to be seen whether this major boost can help the project.

Less ambitious and costly projects may have a greater chance of success. For example, the Turkmenistan–Afghanistan–Tajikistan railway project that would connect Turkmenistan's east with the city of Pianj in southern Tajikistan via Mazar i Sharif in Afghanistan is already under construction. In June 2013 the presidents of the three countries officially inaugurated the construction of the 400-km railway that is to be put into operation by 2015. It has also been reported that China, Iran and Kyrgyzstan might join the project.⁹²

⁸⁹ 'Turkmenistan talks up TAPI, not pipeline to Europe', EurasiaNet.org, 19 Nov. 2012, <<http://www.eurasianet.org/print/66197>>.

⁹⁰ 'Uzbeks try to head off Tajik power plans', Institute for War and Peace Reporting, News Briefing Central Asia, 1 Apr. 2011, <<http://iwpr.net/report-news/uzbeks-try-head-tajik-power-plans>>.

⁹¹ World Bank, 'World Bank Group invests in energy trade between Tajikistan and South Asia', Press release, 27 Mar. 2014, <<http://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2014/03/27/world-bank-group-invests-in-energy-trade-between-tajikistan-and-south-asia>>.

⁹² Jafarova, A., 'Turkmenistan–Afghanistan–Tajikistan railway project may have new participants', Azernews, 1 July 2013, <<http://www.azernews.az/region/56128.html>>.

Both the TAPI gas pipeline and CASA-1000 are central to the New Silk Road vision promoted by the USA.⁹³ The fact that their chances of implementation in the near future remain slim indicates that the USA needs to revise its policies towards Central Asia and Afghanistan. While the prospect of bridging Central Asia and South Asia through Afghanistan is losing its lustre, other opportunities may come to the fore. Successful negotiations on the Iranian nuclear programme and the removal of sanctions levelled against Iran could make it an attractive link connecting Central Asia to its southern neighbourhood and the Gulf.⁹⁴

⁹³ US Department of State, 'US support for the New Silk Road', [n.d.], <<http://www.state.gov/p/sca/ci/af/newsilkroad/>>.

⁹⁴ There is already infrastructure connecting Turkmenistan and Afghanistan, including gas pipelines. Kazakhstan sends some of its oil to the Iranian port of Neka across the Caspian Sea. In 2013 the Kazakhstan-Turkmenistan-Iran railway was inaugurated and is set for completion in 2014. Jafarov, T., 'Kazakhstan-Turkmenistan-Iran Railway to be commissioned soon', Trend, 15 Feb. 2014, <<http://en.trend.az/capital/business/2242457.html>>.

5. Initiatives on Afghanistan proposed by Central Asian states

One major obstacle to Central Asian states' positive contributions to the processes in Afghanistan is the lack of trust and cooperation in the region. Conflicts between upstream and downstream states over water management, unresolved border disputes between Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan in the Fergana Valley, and other regional rivalries prevent effective joint actions. However, Central Asian states do have some capacity to contribute to the stabilization of Afghanistan. Tajikistan and Uzbekistan have traditionally close ethnic and political links with northern Afghanistan. Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan have the ability to host intra-Afghan and international dialogues. Tajik experts also point out the possible value of the Tajik peacebuilding experience and its application to Afghanistan. The five Central Asian states have all put forward their own initiatives for stabilization in Afghanistan, which are described in the following sections.

Kazakhstan's United Nations hub for Afghanistan

In March 2012 the Kazakh Foreign Minister, Yerzhan Kazykhanov, proposed the creation of a special UN centre in Almaty for the coordination of regional projects that would also include Afghanistan. He asked UN agencies to share their ideas on the implementation of such a project. In June that year, Kazakh President Nazarbayev met with the head of the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, Jan Kubis, and announced the plan to establish a UN hub in Almaty that would facilitate better cooperation among Central Asian states in terms of their aid to Afghanistan.⁹⁵ In April 2013, at the third ministerial conference of the Istanbul Process in Almaty, Nazarbayev reminded participants of this initiative and stressed the city's advantages including its convenient location, its well-developed transport infrastructure and the presence of many international organizations.⁹⁶

The strengths of this initiative are that Kazakhstan has sufficient resources and experience to make it a reality, and that the UN hub will help stimulate Kazakhstan's participation in the international efforts to stabilize Afghanistan. Furthermore, it has the potential to improve Central Asian cooperation on Afghanistan and other regional problems. However, if the project is not pushed through quickly, other alternative locations for such a hub could emerge.

⁹⁵ 'Kazakhstan offers to host UN hub for Afghanistan aid', Central Asia Online, 26 June 2012, <http://centralasiaonline.com/en_GB/articles/caii/newsbriefs/2012/06/29/newsbrief-07>.

⁹⁶ Kazakh Embassy in the United States, 'Main points of Kazakhstan President Nazarbayev's speech at the Istanbul Process Ministerial Conference', 26 Apr. 2013, <<http://www.kazakhembus.com/sites/default/files/documents/MAIN%20POINTS%20OF.pdf>>.

Kyrgyzstan's Bishkek Initiative and other proposals

In 1998 the Kyrgyz Parliament decided to establish a working group for the preparation of a peace conference on Afghanistan under UN auspices. The move was inspired by the success of diplomacy in contributing to the settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and the civil war in Tajikistan. Kyrgyz Government officials believed that Kyrgyzstan would be a suitable host for a dialogue between the various Afghan groups since it does not share a border with Afghanistan and does not have any vested interests in the country. Additionally, Kyrgyzstan enjoyed a reputation as a stable and neutral country which was not striving for leadership in the region and which could therefore act as a mediator between Afghanistan and other Central Asian states. However, the initiative did not receive much support from the international community, and Kyrgyzstan was not included in the circle of peacemakers in Afghanistan at that time.

In 2009 President Kurmanbek Bakiyev revived the idea and proposed the so-called Bishkek Initiative, which involved holding an annual international conference on security and stability in Central Asia; establishing an international analytical centre that could monitor the situation in the region and develop recommendations for preventive conflict measures for Afghanistan and Central Asia; and hosting negotiations between interested parties to the Afghanistan conflict.⁹⁷ However, the initiative was never implemented due to a lack of resources.⁹⁸ Specifically, the international community did not grant financial resources because of decreased interest in this type of initiative. According to Tokon Mamytov, the Head of the Security and Defence Committee of the Kyrgyz Parliament, Kyrgyzstan had initially been approached by a number of countries to establish the dialogue platform, but these countries did not move forward with the proposal, and the Bishkek Initiative therefore remains on paper.⁹⁹ Kyrgyzstan continues to lobby the OSCE and the CSTO to support a similar idea, and Kyrgyz officials remain convinced that the country is capable of carrying out such an initiative. However, it would obviously require technical and financial assistance. If the UN, NATO and the SCO were to support a conference, it could create a good platform for dialogue.¹⁰⁰

Another idea that Kyrgyzstan has put forward is the restructuring of its own external debt in return for assistance to Afghanistan. Kyrgyzstan has sufficient resources—including construction materials, agricultural products and hydro-electric power—to help with the economic reconstruction of Afghanistan, and could also organize educational programmes for Afghan students in different

⁹⁷ Kyrgyz Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 'Bishkek Initiative', [n.d.], <http://www.mfa.kg/mews-of-mfa-kr/bishkekская-инициатива_en.html>.

⁹⁸ Joomart Ormonbekov, Programme Officer and Representative in the Kyrgyz Republic of the UN Regional Centre for Preventive Diplomacy for Central Asia (UNRCCA), Interview with Ekaterina Klimentko, SIPRI Researcher, on behalf of the author, Bishkek, 26 Dec. 2012.

⁹⁹ Tokon Mamytov, Head of the Security and Defence Committee of the Lower House of the Kyrgyz Parliament, Interview with Ekaterina Klimentko, SIPRI Researcher, on behalf of the author, Bishkek, 27 Dec. 2012.

¹⁰⁰ Mamytov (note 99).

spheres, such as technical education and medicine. Thus, it has been suggested that this type of assistance could be provided to Afghanistan on behalf of the countries that have provided loans to Kyrgyzstan. In return, these countries would then write off Kyrgyzstan's debt. However, to date no country has expressed interest in this initiative.¹⁰¹

Tajikistan's Dushanbe Four

In June 2009, at the SCO summit in Yekaterinburg, Russia, Tajik President Imomali Rakhmon proposed a meeting in Dushanbe with his Afghan, Pakistani and Russian counterparts in order to discuss quadrilateral cooperation in the spheres of security and stability, economic cooperation and trade, and cultural exchange.¹⁰² The initiative—referred to as the Dushanbe Four—has since led to four high-level meetings between the countries. According to scarce reporting in the Tajik media, the focus of the discussions is on infrastructure projects.¹⁰³ However, the scope of the initiative is low-key, and there have been no significant outcomes yet.

Turkmenistan's international high-level meeting on confidence building in Afghanistan

In 2010, at the 65th session of the UN General Assembly, Turkmen President Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov stressed his government's willingness to assist international efforts aimed at a settlement of the situation in Afghanistan and proposed to hold, under UN auspices, an international high-level meeting on confidence building in Afghanistan and the development of efficient institutions of state power. Turkmenistan's official neutrality status creates an advantage for such an initiative. Berdymukhamedov also stated that Turkmenistan was prepared to discuss issues of organizing such a meeting with Afghan partners, the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General for Afghanistan, other specialized UN structures involved in Afghanistan and all interested parties.¹⁰⁴

Another strength of this proposed initiative is that Turkmenistan already hosts the UN Regional Centre for Preventive Diplomacy for Central Asia in Ashgabat, and has the financial resources to support such a conference.¹⁰⁵ However,

¹⁰¹ Atakhanov (note 42).

¹⁰² 'Dushanbe Four takes on Afghan issue', RIA Novosti, 3 Aug. 2009, <<http://en.ria.ru/analysis/20090803/155714424.html>>.

¹⁰³ Mirzobekova, R., 'Dushanbinskaya chetverka; chto na povestke dne?' [Dushanbe Four: what is on the agenda?], *Asia-plus*, 1 Sep. 2011, <<http://news.tj/ru/newspaper/article/dushanbinskaya-chetvertka-chto-na-povestke-dnya>>; and 'Nachalas Vstrecha "Dushanbinskoi Chetverki"', ['Dushanbe Four' meeting started], Khovar News Agency, 2 Sep. 2011, <<http://khovar.tj/rus/president/29475-nachalas-vstrecha-dushanbinskoy-chetverki.html>>.

¹⁰⁴ President of Turkmenistan, Address at the 65th session of the UN General Assembly, 10 Sep. 2010, <<http://www.turkmenistan.ru/en/node/14143>>.

¹⁰⁵ United Nations, Security Council, 'Letter dated 7 May 2007 from the Secretary-General to the President of the Security Council', S/2007/279, 16 May 2007; and the website of the UN Regional Centre for Preventive Diplomacy for Central Asia, <<http://unrcca.unmissions.org/>>.

Turkmenistan lacks sufficient human resources and experience to make the initiative a lasting success.

Uzbekistan's '6 + 3' Contact Group for Afghanistan

In April 2008, at NATO's Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council meeting in Bucharest, Romania, Uzbek President Islam Karimov put forward a proposal for a '6+3' Contact Group for Afghanistan under the aegis of the UN.¹⁰⁶ The group would have included Afghanistan's six neighbours—China, Iran, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan—as well as NATO, Russia and the USA. However, representatives of the Afghan Government or armed groups would have been excluded from participation. The principal goals of the group would have included discussion of the main principles and approaches to the resolution of the Afghan problem; support for international efforts aimed at the economic revival of Afghanistan; the organization of conferences, roundtables and meetings aimed at finding mutual accommodation and solutions; and support for international efforts to combat the production of and trade in drugs.¹⁰⁷

In December 2012, at the 67th session of the UN General Assembly, Uzbekistan's Foreign Minister, Abdulaziz Kamilov, again proposed the 6+3 initiative, pointing out the deteriorating situation in Afghanistan and neighbouring countries due to the rise of extremism and increased drug trafficking, which constitutes the main source of financing for militants, and a threat to the security of Afghanistan and the region at large.¹⁰⁸ Kamilov stressed that the main purpose of the 6+3 Contact Group should be to achieve a compromise between rival groups in order to form a new Afghan Government representing the basic ethnic and religious factions involved in the conflict.

Experts have been generally sceptical about the initiative. Some argue that it is marred by its narrow view of what constitutes Afghanistan's neighbourhood and fails to include crucial external actors in the conflict resolution process. While Uzbekistan has the financial and human resources to support the initiative, the probability of its success has been further diminished by a lack of international support. In fact, the initiative is no longer mentioned by Uzbek officials at international meetings.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁶ 'Address by President of Uzbekistan Islam Karimov at NATO Summit', 3 Apr. 2008, Uzbekistan National News Agency, <<http://uza.uz/en/politics/197/>>.

¹⁰⁷ Uzbek Embassy in Ukraine, 'Kontakt'naya gruppa '6+3' po Afghanistanu' [Contact group '6+3' for Afghanistan], Press release, 6 May 2008, <<http://uzbekistan.org.ua/ru/uzbekistan/press-relezy/434.html>>.

¹⁰⁸ 'Ministr inostrannyh del Uzbekistana predlozhit sozdat pod egidoi OON kontakt'nuyu gruppu dlya Afghanistana' [Uzbekistan Foreign Minister proposed the creation of a Contact Group for Afghanistan under the UN aegis], UN News Centre, 28 Sep. 2012, <<http://www.un.org/russian/news/story.asp?newsID=18330>>.

¹⁰⁹ E.g. the Uzbek Foreign Minister did not mention it in his address to the UN General Assembly in 2013. Uzbek Embassy in Latvia, 'Address by the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Uzbekistan H. E. Mr. Abdulaziz Kamilov at the General Debates of the 68th Session of the UN General Assembly', 28 Sep. 2013, <<http://uzbekistan.lv/en/address-by-the-minister-of-foreign-affairs-of-the-republic-of-uzbekistan-h-e-mr-abdulaziz-kamilov-at-the-general-debates-of-the-68th-session-of-the-un-general-assembly/>>.

6. Conclusions

All Central Asian states are concerned about the security situation in Afghanistan. The rapid withdrawal of ISAF forces is seen as leading to destabilization, with negative consequences for Central Asia including the potential spillover of militant activities, the spread of radical Islamist ideas, increased drug trafficking and the likelihood of a refugee crisis. This is in contrast to the 1990s, when Turkmenistan stated that it did not perceive Afghanistan as a threat, and the other four Central Asian states could invoke their collective security treaty arrangements with Russia.

The general common ground allows for regional cooperation among states, as demonstrated by the ongoing Almaty Process, which is led by the UNHCR and which seeks to coordinate efforts to manage mixed migration from Afghanistan. In addition, the Istanbul Process has focused on confidence-building measures between Afghanistan and its neighbours. The participation of Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan in these processes is a welcome development for regional cooperation and coordination in Central Asia.

Incentives and constraints

While Central Asian states see developments in Afghanistan as potential challenges to their security, there are limitations on what they are ready to contribute to international efforts in Afghanistan. Central Asian states' record of participation in the military campaign led by NATO and in the reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan show that these states are motivated not only by the perceived need to help their neighbour, but also by potential opportunities to gain economic benefits, security assistance, good standing with the USA and other Western powers, and a chance to raise their international political profiles.

At the same time, Central Asian states are constrained by complex geopolitics and intra-regional rivalries. For example, the geopolitical tug-of-war between the Russia and the USA over control of the Manas airbase outside Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, illustrates geopolitical tensions in the region, while the controversies over the CASA-1000 electricity grid project demonstrate Central Asian states' own competing interests.

Furthermore, the incentives and constraints of geopolitical balancing between great powers have shaped Central Asian policies toward Afghanistan and have also created important variations in such policies. Uzbekistan has the capacity and determination to maintain an independent foreign policy, and it has pursued deeper security cooperation with the USA and suspended its membership of the CSTO. Kazakhstan has sufficient resources to allow it some room for geopolitical manoeuvre but remains intent on nurturing established bilateral strategic partnerships and multilateral arrangements, simultaneously enhancing relations with both NATO and Russia. Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have been trying to conduct multi-vector foreign policies but their weaknesses in terms of state capacity

make them more vulnerable to pressure from Russia. Meanwhile, Turkmenistan's self-imposed isolation has enabled it to retain maximum autonomy.

Affinities and alliances

Variations in the approaches and attitudes of Central Asian states towards Afghanistan stem from ethnic affinities. In addition, state capacities are inter-linked with each state's foreign policy direction and style. Tajikistan and Uzbekistan are predisposed to supporting and allying with the political force representing, respectively, Tajik and Uzbek minorities in Afghanistan. In contrast, Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan do not provide support to the ethnic Kyrgyz and Turkmen minorities, respectively, in Afghanistan. Kazakhstan is able to assume a 'non-biased' position due to its lack of ethnic connections. However, all countries would support an arrangement in Afghanistan that would reduce regional tensions and, ideally, create opportunities for the development of their economies.

While Central Asian states' lack of political weight prevents them from playing a major role in supporting the establishment of durable peace and security in Afghanistan, they are willing to contribute to multilateral frameworks such as the Istanbul Process and the SCO. For example, the participation of Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan in the Istanbul Process is a positive development for the enhancement of regional cooperation and coordination of efforts with regard to Afghanistan. The SCO has a smaller and more manageable structure and two heavyweights—China and Russia—in the driving seat, but it lacks the necessary political will. Another regional organization, the CSTO, is responsible for Central Asian security and has ambitions for a larger international role as a military-political alliance. However, it does not consider such a role for itself, preferring instead to focus on the protection of Central Asian borders with Afghanistan.

Local and regional initiatives

Central Asian states have also put forward a number of initiatives worth exploring. For example, one or more Central Asian states could potentially host both an intra-Afghan dialogue and talks among important external players. Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan—as countries with fewer vested interests in Afghanistan—might be suitable hosts for such an undertaking. In particular, Kazakhstan has significant experience in organizing high-level international forums and would like to raise its profile as an emerging regional power, while Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan would be appropriate choices due to their lack of regional leadership ambitions. Turkmenistan also has an officially neutral status and sufficient financial resources to provide a convenient platform for an Afghan peace and stabilization process. All three states have good relations with Afghanistan's neighbours, including Iran and Pakistan. They are also on good terms with the USA and NATO member states.

A number of other projects have been proposed, including the development of a United Nations regional hub in Almaty, the creation of a '6+3' contact group for

Afghanistan, the Bishkek initiative and an international high-level meeting on confidence building in Afghanistan. Of these proposals, the UN regional hub in Almaty is perhaps the most realistic and promising, but it is subject to a time limit and it remains to be seen whether the Kazakh Government will be able to move quickly enough to make it a reality.

Prospects

For more than a decade, the importance of Central Asian states to global politics and security has been largely defined by their proximity to Afghanistan, and these states have learned to draw benefits from this proximity. The withdrawal of ISAF from Afghanistan in 2014 promises to alter the geopolitical balance once again. Decreased interest on the part of the USA and EU member states, combined with a heightened sense of vulnerability due to a potentially worsening security situation—both within Afghanistan and across the region—has the potential to create a different geopolitical reality, with a greater role for regional powers such as China, Iran and Russia.

Another recent game changer is the worsening of relations between Russia and the West caused by the Crimea referendum and developments in Eastern and Southern Ukraine, which makes cooperative frameworks to support regional security difficult if not impossible. It remains to be seen how much freedom of manoeuvre in terms of security cooperation with Western states and NATO Central Asian states can retain in the future.

It can be argued that the trend towards greater connectivity between Central Asia and South Asia, which began with the collapse of the Soviet Union, is growing stronger. While cooperation between Central Asian states and Afghanistan—including the use of Afghanistan as a bridge between Central and South Asia—will most likely be stalled by growing insecurity, other opportunities might emerge in the form of better relations with Iran, particularly if international sanctions against Iran are lifted. The Soviet-era isolation of Central Asian states from their traditional neighbours has been broken, and opportunities for business, educational and people-to-people links will only increase.

Nevertheless, relations between Afghanistan and the states of Central Asia will continue to be influenced by the broader geopolitical context, including Central Asian states' involvement in collective security arrangements in the post-Soviet space, the importance of ethnic affinities, and the extent of each state's vulnerability to spillovers of instability from Afghanistan. It remains to be seen whether a regional response to Afghanistan-related challenges is possible, and whether such a response in the future will increase the effectiveness of Central Asian states' contributions to reconstruction in Afghanistan.

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**Relations between Afghanistan and Central Asian states after 2014:
Incentives, Constraints and Prospects**

All Central Asian states are concerned about the potential spillover of insecurity from Afghanistan. The impending withdrawal of international forces is seen as potentially leading to destabilization, with negative consequences for the region. This report explores the commonalities and differences in the policies of Central Asian states toward Afghanistan. The author argues that the Soviet-era isolation of Central Asian states from their traditional neighbours has been broken, and that opportunities for business, educational and people-to-people links will only increase.

This paper is published under the Wider Central Asia Initiative, a two-year SIPRI project to promote and facilitate dialogue among the main external stakeholders in Afghanistan's future. The project has included consultations with senior government officials and experts from Afghanistan, from Iran, Pakistan and five Central Asian states—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan—as well as from Afghanistan, China, Europe and North America. It is funded by the Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs.

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