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Don't Oversell 'Overspill': Afghanistan and Emerging Conflicts in Central Asia

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The drawdown of the International Security Assistance Forces (ISAF) in Afghanistan by 2014 has raised concerns in the international community and the countries of Central Asia over the potential 'spillover' of activity and violence by Islamist and criminal armed groups. In anticipation of the risk of a bleeding of the Afghanistan conflicts into Central Asia, an effort is underway to recast security arrangements in Central Asia to resist destabilization from the south.

While the security transition in Afghanistan is likely to bring with it renewed uncertainty for the states and societies of Central Asia, including a heightened threat from transnational-armed groups and criminal networks, the emerging conflict challenges in the region go far beyond the fallout from the conflict in Afghanistan.

Key Points

A new approach to Central Asia is required to promote regional security stabilization.

There is an attendant risk that the disorder and possible violence likely to accompany political transitions in Central Asia could see the emergence of a set of interlinked conflicts.

The regimes of Central Asia constitute a key element in their own right in the emerging instability in the region.

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As the Western community seeks to recast its security role in the region, a new approach to Central Asia is required to promote regional security stabilization.

Afghanistan Conflict Overspill

In October 2012 a report released by the Commonwealth of Independent States warned that the pullout of international forces from Afghanistan may turn northern areas of Afghanistan into a bridgehead of terrorist activity against Central Asian countries.¹ The report's authors noted that amid the global geopolitical transformations, Central Asia displayed a steady trend in terms of the radicalization of religious groups and mounting religious extremism. They pointed to a close linkage between international terrorist organizations and transnational organized criminal groups in the region.

Such assessments are also increasingly being taken up by leading Russian officials as they step up their contacts with the countries of West Asia and Central Asia. On a recent visit to India, Deputy Prime Minister Dmitri Rogozin noted that following the withdrawal of major international military forces "thousands of terrorists and fundamentalists will seek refuge in Afghanistan as well as the region around the country. It may change the situation drastically around the region and for countries like Tajikistan, Kazakhstan and Central Asia."²

The central security challenge to the region seems to be less about a significant incursion from Afghanistan by a single organization and more about the emergence of complex patterns of radicalization and insurgency based upon diffuse and decentralized networks rooted in domestic developments

Indeed the Russian Federation has explicitly identified the increased threats of drug trafficking and radical groups emerging from Afghanistan to challenge Central Asia as the justification for strengthening the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), as well as agreeing a new military basing agreement with Tajikistan—the largest Russian Army base abroad, with between 6,000 to 7,000 personnel. Central Asian leaders

have also raised such concerns in meetings with Western officials.³

Despite the concerns being expressed by some key international actors, to date the overspill of violent instability from Afghanistan into Central Asia has been limited. During the civil war in Tajikistan in the 1990s, parts of the opposition gained support from groups in Afghanistan, but the conflicts in Afghanistan and Tajikistan remained essentially separate. At the same time, while both Tajikistan and Uzbekistan (together with the Russian Federation) were backers of the Northern Alliance, such assistance was aimed at creating a buffer zone in Afghanistan against the advance of the Taliban, rather than reflecting Central Asian ethno-territorial ambitions. Later in the decade, when the Taliban took control of much of northern Afghanistan, their advance stopped at the border and they showed no indications of seeking to cross into Central Asia.

If Central Asia and Afghanistan have operated as distinct security environments for much of the past two decades, today there are concerns that transnational groups may be aiming to change this situation. The main focus is upon a return of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) to the region. Originating in Central Asia, in 1999 and 2000 the group launched devastating raids from Tajikistan into Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. Over the past decade much of the original group has been destroyed—by coalition forces in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and by the actions of tribes in Pakistan, while a splinter group broke away in 2004.

Today there is evidence, however, that some form of the IMU has been reconstituted and is active in northern districts of Afghanistan and in northwest Pakistan. Over recent years, authorities in Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan have claimed that the IMU has been involved in terrorist events in their countries, although the evidence presented to back these claims is thin. While the IMU remains a force in parts of Afghanistan and Pakistan, the group appears to be small. It is also far from certain that Central Asia is a principal target for current or future operations.⁴

Whereas the activities of armed groups in Afghanistan may well be a factor in the future re-

gional stability, it is also important to put the threat that such groups pose to Central Asia into perspective. Looking ahead, the evidence from the region indicates that the central security challenge to the region seems to be less about a significant incursion from Afghanistan and more about the emergence of complex patterns of radicalization and insurgency in Central Asia based upon diffuse and decentralized networks rooted primarily in domestic developments. Such networks are increasingly intersecting with the growing instability in the countries of Central Asia, and providing opportunities for transnational radical groups. This trend suggests a need to move beyond the idea of ‘overspill’ from Afghanistan and to look instead at the sources for the development of conflict complexes in the region.

Emergent Conflicts Within Central Asia

During and following the collapse of the Soviet Union there were significant instances of violent disorder in Central Asia: in 1986 in Kazakhstan, in the Ferghana Valley in 1989 against the minority Meskhetian community, in 1990 in southern Kyrgyzstan involving ethnic Kyrgyz and Uzbeks, and the Tajik civil war from 1992 to 1997 which claimed the lives of between 50,000 and 100,000 persons.

Despite these important events, in the first decades of independence the countries of Central Asia—with the exception of Tajikistan and its civil war, which was concluded with a peace agreement—appeared to have avoided the protracted conflicts that scarred Russia (North Caucasus) and the countries of the South Caucasus over this period. Critically, unlike much of the rest of the former Soviet Union, ethno-nationalism played only a minor role in the politics of independence in Central Asia, which came not as a result of developments in the region but because the rest of the Soviet Union disintegrated. Instead, in place of nationalist movements in the early 1990s Central Asia saw the emergence of consolidated authoritarian regimes built on powerful and kleptocratic elites as the basis for political order.

In recent years, there have been indications of growing violence in Central Asia fed primarily by domestic issues, with serious clashes in Tajikistan (2012 and 2010), the violent overthrow of presidents in Kyrgyzstan (2010 and 2005)—with Bakiyev’s ousting contributing to serious inter-ethnic violence in the south of the country—a massacre in Zhanaozen in Western Kazakhstan (2011), and a bloody suppression of an uprising in the city of Andijan in Uzbekistan (2005).

The overthrow of President Akayev in Kyrgyzstan in 2005 signaled the onset of a process to replace the post-Soviet generation of leaders that have ruled the countries of the region since the end of the Soviet Union—and in some cases earlier. As the subsequent events in Kyrgyzstan have highlighted, such changes can have far reaching consequences as powerful regional, business, and criminal groupings jockey for control of the state and its resources and a place in the new political order.

In Kyrgyzstan the political struggle unleashed by the leadership transition has brought ethno-nationalism to the fore, put pressure on minorities, and called into question the territorial cohesion of the country. The two leading countries of the region—Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan—have still to undergo a political transition and there is as yet a lack of clarity regarding the likely mechanism for transferring power to a new leader and no clear individuals in place to step into the leadership role. As the violence in Kyrgyzstan in 2010 and in Kazakhstan in 2011 has underlined, however, signs that there is a weakening of the ruling order in the Central Asian countries brings with it the attendant threat of conflict.

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In Uzbekistan, the risks of domestic violence have a strong regional significance given its shared borders with all other countries of the region as well as key cross border linkages (ethnic diasporas, water, energy, transport, and criminal networks). A particular challenge is represented by

the relationship between Uzbekistan and Tajikistan in regard to water-energy questions, an issue that has already caused significant tensions which have included a periodic transport blockade of Tajikistan over the last two years.

The breakdown and transformation of the political regimes that have dominated Central Asia for two decades is thus a key security challenge for the region and for the international community. At a time of rising radicalization and militancy in the region (at least in part driven by discontent with the ruling political regimes), there is an attendant risk that the disorder and possible violence likely to accompany political transitions in Central Asia could see the emergence of a set of interrelated conflicts. In such circumstances there would be a risk of a merging of these conflicts with the complex patterns of violence already in existence in west and south Asia as a result of the interlinking of local violence, national and regional conflicts and transnational actors.

The sources of domestic weakness and violence in Central Asia and the promotion of agendas of reform are being overlooked in favor of combating the future threat of external terrorism

The Risk of Conflict Intersection

The fast changing regional security environment as a result of the shifting Western engagement in Afghanistan compounds concerns about domestic instability in Central Asia spilling into regional relations. Since 2001, the presence of the large-scale U.S.-led international security force in Afghanistan has played a key role in stabilizing a wider region, beyond the borders of Afghanistan. The drawdown of Western forces has thus brought to the fore the role of regional security organizations, the engagement of major international powers in the region, and even questions about what constitutes the region (wider Central Asia, West Asia, the Greater Middle East, Greater Eurasia)—issues that have been held in abeyance for nearly a decade.

Uncertainty over these issues has produced a flurry of diplomatic and security activity focused on bilateral, trilateral, and quadrilateral contacts as well as multilateral forums, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the CSTO. The Russian Federation has sought to build a powerful case and capacity for taking on the role of leading security provider—including with the signing of a new long-term lease on a military base in Tajikistan—based on the threat of conflict ‘spill over’ from Afghanistan-Pakistan post-2014. Moscow has, however, faced major obstacles to taking on the mantle of regional leader. This year Uzbekistan has suspended its membership of the CSTO, while Russia showed itself conspicuously unable to manage the violence in Kyrgyzstan in 2010.

China has built up a substantial economic interest in Central Asia and has, in large part, linked its energy security to the supply of hydrocarbons from the region, notably natural gas from Turkmenistan. Iran has increasingly viewed Central Asia as a potential means to break out of the international sanctions placed upon it, while India has strengthened its ties to the region to hedge against Pakistan’s role in Afghanistan.

This increased international activity is creating new dynamics in the region, notably in regard to the multivector foreign policies of the countries of Central Asia, which are aimed at balancing Washington-Moscow and Beijing and ensuring maximum latitude for the ruling groups in each country. Increasingly, the complex maneuvering between countries and regional security organizations is highlighting the risk of a security vacuum developing in the region and raising questions about the region’s stability.

At the same time, with the focus on building political groupings to bolster regional security alliances, the sources of domestic weakness and violence in Central Asia and the promotion of agendas of reform are being overlooked in favor of combating the future threat of external terrorism. For the Western community, intent on securing its military exit from Afghanistan along the Northern Distribution Network, maintaining good relations with the political regimes of the region appears to have trumped earlier concerns

about good governance, rule of law, and comprehensive approaches to security.

Central Asia's Security and Conflict Challenge

For over a decade, the question of Afghanistan has dominated the security arrangements of Central Asia. With attention focused to the south and fighting the Taliban, the emerging challenge of political transition and conflict risks that come with the transformation of Central Asia's authoritarian orders has been neglected. Significantly, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE)—the regional security organization best equipped to address the political, economic, and security elements that together constitute the sources of conflict in the region—has fallen into decay. Today a poorly prepared group of organizations are vying to take its place, while the Russian Federation is readying its traditional hard security 'peacekeeping' approach to maintain order—with it as the leading regional actor.

For the Western community, which has yet to settle on its own approach to Afghanistan post-2014, thinking about Central Asia remains linked to its military priorities. Even the European Union, which could play an important role in encouraging reform and developing a broader approach to security in Central Asia, has been distracted by the imperative of supporting military intervention in Afghanistan and other issues, notably energy.⁵

With the date for the significant reduction of Western military forces in Afghanistan fast approaching, there is an urgency in beginning to think more broadly about regional security around Afghanistan and in particular in regard to the stabilization of the states and societies of Central Asia. The U.S. Silk Road initiative may promote a degree of economic development but this approach falls far short of the political approach that will be required to address the sources of conflict risk in Central Asia. Crucially, there is a need to begin to rebuild security policy approaches in the region that broaden the focus from transnational armed groups to comprehensive understandings of conflict, and that recognize that the regimes of Central Asia constitute a

key element in their own right in the emerging instability in the region.

¹ "CIS Counter-Terrorism Center analyzes threats to Central Asia after ISAF pullout," *Interfax*, October 18, 2012,

<http://www.interfax.com/newsinf.asp?id=369113>.

² Russia warns of 'new wave' of terror, seeks India's cooperation, *The Times of India*, October 12, 2012, http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2012-10-14/india/34448304_1_afghanistan-afghan-security-personnel-nato.

³ "Security dominates EU talks in Central Asia ahead of Afghan drawdown as rights take back seat," *The Washington Post*, November 27, 2012,

http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/security-dominates-eu-talks-in-central-asia-ahead-of-afghan-drawdown-as-rights-take-back-seat/2012/11/27/f5c4929a-3897-11e2-9258-ac7c78d5c680_story.html.

⁴ Joshua Kucera, "What Are The IMU's Designs In Central Asia?" *Eurasianet.org*, December 11, 2012,

<http://www.eurasianet.org/node/66288>

⁵ Neil Melvin, "The EU Needs a New Values-Based Realism for its Central Asia Strategy," *EUCAM Policy Brief* No. 28, October 2012,

http://www.eucentralasia.eu/fileadmin/user_upload/PDF/Policy_Briefs/EUCAM-PB-28-EN-CA-Future.pdf.

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