CENTRAL ASIA Briefing

Osh/Brussels, 28 September 2001

international crisis group

CENTRAL ASIAN PERSPECTIVES ON 11 SEPTEMBER AND THE AFGHAN CRISIS

OVERVIEW

In response to the terrorist attacks in New York, Washington and Pennsylvania on 11 September 2001, the United States and a broad though informal coalition of allies and like minded states are building up a military capability in Central Asia that will in all likelihood strike inside Afghanistan. The ruling Taliban and Osama bin Laden, who has taken refuge in Afghanistan since 1996, are expected to be primary targets.

The five Central Asian nations – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan – are now at the centre of a major diplomatic and military effort against terrorism. This will have an enormous impact on a region that is already showing worsening signs of instability. Precisely what that impact eventually proves to be will depend importantly on a number of factors that cannot yet be adequately weighed. These include whether the anticipated military action proves to be of long or short duration, whether it is relatively surgical and precise in its conduct or produces many innocent casualties and refugees, and whether or to what degree U.S. forces remain in the region after conclusion of their primary mission. Managing the impact and minimising the risks of instability across the region, however, will have to be a prime consideration of the United States and the other coalition participants.

The leaders of all the Central Asian nations quickly condemned the attacks in America. Anti-terrorism is a concept to which the Central Asian states are sympathetic in principle. Before 11 September, they were already attempting to mobilise against what they considered to be their own regional terrorist threats through a series of summit meetings, international agreements, and even a joint anti-terrorist centre to be established in Bishkek, the capital of Kyrgyzstan. The main vehicle for this activity is the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), which includes both Russia and China as well as Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, and has as its central platform anti-terrorism and opposition to radical Islam. Authoritarian tendencies in the member governments, however, have given a quality to some of the rhetoric and action taken by SCO states in the name of anti-terrorism and supervision of Islamic activity that is not consistent with the values of the societies that now seek their assistance.

So far the responses to calls for specific cooperation against terrorism have varied. Uzbekistan has been the most enthusiastic as it would welcome a strike at the Afghanistan-based Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), which it considers its own deadly enemy[1] and sees the situation as an opportunity to extract economic and political concessions from the West. U.S. aircraft and personnel are reported to be in the country already.

Tajikistan has offered support but remains concerned about the impact on the shaky secular-Islamic coalition that rules the country. Like Uzbekistan, it is anxious about the risk of refugees fleeing across the border with Afghanistan.

Kazakhstan will allow use of its air space but is otherwise somewhat removed from the possible conflict. Kyrgyzstan has been lukewarm about

[1] The IMU has long advocated the overthrow of President Karimov's government and the establishment of Islamic law in Uzbekistan, but its political objectives beyond that have been poorly defined.

supporting the U.S., again considering the possible impact of refugees on its faltering economy.

Turkmenistan operates under a system of neutrality and isolation that precludes overt cooperation with the West.

Two decades of conflict in Afghanistan have already had a major impact on Central Asia. During the Soviet period, Central Asia bore a heavy burden of casualties from the war in that country. In more recent years, the IMU, which is supported by the Taliban, has carried out incursions into Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan from bases in Afghanistan. Refugees from the Afghan civil war have been a major problem for Tajikistan. Indeed, all the countries are concerned that war may spill over into their territory.[2] Moreover, much of Afghanistan's drug production flows to Europe through Central Asia.

While Central Asian cooperation in the current highest priority efforts against terrorism is welcome, the political, social and economic situation in these countries suggests that the international community should consider carefully the long-term impact of its diplomatic and military efforts in the region. These nations were in a precarious state even before the current crisis. Economic development has lagged, democratic reforms have been mostly stillborn, and the governments are often viewed by their overwhelmingly Islamic populations as deeply corrupt, unrepresentative, and repressive. The region has been dangerously destabilised by drug trafficking, is riven with ethnic rivalries and divided by disputes over borders and resources.

Central Asian governments have been inclined to repress even moderate and non-violent religious groups for fear that they will become a significant source of opposition. By forcing most political opposition underground, however, nations like Uzbekistan have made extremism more attractive to broader sections of their populations. It is also easy to understand that societies dominated by corruption, crime and Mafia-like economic elites might find attractive the message of discipline and order carried by Islamist groups.

All of these countries continue to struggle with widespread poverty and difficulties in implementing market reforms. The 55 million people of Central Asia have shown themselves increasingly dissatisfied with their political and economic circumstances. In this environment, strategic partnerships between the international community and the current governments in the region may produce dangerous and unintended consequences.

Any military action by the United States-led anti-terrorism coalition in or from the region thus needs to be accompanied by concerted long-term efforts to stabilise Central Asia politically and economically. This will require a delicate balancing act between the demands of authoritarian regional leaders and the aspirations of the people. It will also involve juggling the interests of the four nuclear-armed countries – Russia, China, India and Pakistan – that surround the region as well as other players such as Iran. It will certainly require considerably more diplomatic and financial resources than have been committed in the decade since these countries became independent from the Soviet Union.

This briefing considers regional concerns and, in particular, the individual perspectives of each of the five states and the potential impact of the current crisis on their societies. Consideration is also given to the role of Russia in the region, its take on dealing with the current terrorism challenge, its strategic stake in Central Asia and how it has responded to U.S. efforts to more closely engage the Central Asian states in a military response against Afghanistan.

[2] The fear is well grounded. Swedish researchers Peter Wallensteen and Margareta Sollenberg report that ten out of fourteen recent major armed conflicts eventually spilled over into neighbouring states. Taylor B. Seybolt. *Major Armed Conflicts* SIPRI Yearbook 2001 http://www.sipri.se

REGIONAL CONCERNS

The Central Asian states have almost no leverage with the Taliban.[3] While several have made cautious diplomatic overtures in recent times, none recognise the Taliban, and several actively support their enemies – the government that is still widely recognised internationally and is led by President Burhanuddin Rabbani (an ethnic Tajik) or the anti-Taliban political coalition, the United Front, and its military allies, the Northern Alliance.[4]

A wider conflict in Central Asia would exacerbate the current problems of drug trafficking as well as the smuggling of arms and consumer goods. These have already had a major impact on economic and social conditions across the region. The economic situation in most of these countries is perilous – currently half the population of Tajikistan, for example, faces famine due to a prolonged drought.[5]

One of the concerns shared most widely in the region has been the threat of large-scale refugee movements, particularly as the Afghan population includes large minorities of the same ethnic groups as those in Central Asia.[6] Around one million Afghans are believed to be on the move in the country as they flee towns ahead of expected military action. [7]

However, given the commitment of Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan to seal their borders, and the fact that the Taliban are strongest in southern Afghanistan, the vast majority of Afghan refugees continue to work their way toward the Pakistani border.[8] Only protracted fighting or the collapse of the Taliban's civil war opponent, the Northern Alliance, would seem likely to trigger a major exodus toward Central Asia.

There is also widespread concern that cooperation with the U.S. and its allies could make these states more vulnerable to reprisals from the Taliban or other extremist movements – most particularly the IMU.[9] The Central Asian states have generally avoided the spread of extreme Islamist views. Even the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT), which has advocated the establishment of an Islamic government, has not supported the extreme Deobandi interpretation of Islam espoused by the Taliban.

The people of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan are considered to be more religious than the populations in the other states, but the majority in all five generally support secular governance. Only Tajikistan allows any religious party, and only one in its case – the IRPT, which has been very moderate since the 1997 power-sharing agreement that ended that country's civil war and acts much like any other political party.

While there is a general convergence of interest among the five Central Asian states in seeing the Taliban removed from power, and for promoting a

[3] The Taliban movement arose in 1994 in Qandahar when religious students, led by Mullah Omar, launched an anti-crime campaign. Their spread across much of the country through military means was facilitated by Pakistan, but was also based on popular appeal, as a law and order movement. Beyond the more committed religious adherents, their base has three broad components: Pashtuns (Afghanistan's largest ethnic group); members of the former Khalq faction, a dissident element of the old Communist party; and fighters from a variety of Arab and other Muslim countries who have joined Osama bin Laden or identify with his anti-U.S. 'jihad'. See testimony before the U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, 8 October 1998, by Barnett R. Rubin, Director, Center for Preventive Action, Council on Foreign Relations, available: http://www.cfr.org/public/pubs/rubin3.html

[4] The Northern Alliance, a coalition of military or militia forces loyal to the United Front controls a small portion of northern Afghanistan. It is made up of ethnically (though mainly non-Pashtun) and religiously disparate, rebel movements united by their opposition to the Taliban. It relies on a core of some 15,000 ethnic Tajik and ethnic Uzbek troops. See BBC News, 19 September, 2001, 'Analysis: Afghanistan's Northern Alliance', available: http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/english/world/south_asia/newsid_1552000/1552994.stm, and Federation of American Scientist Intelligence Resources Program, available: http://www.fas.org/irp/world/para/northern_alliance.htm.

[5] Statement from The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. 19 September 2001.

[6] Afghanistan's population of 26 million includes about 200,000 ethnic Kazakhs, 3.5 million ethnic Tajiks, 1.6 million ethnic Uzbeks and smaller groups of ethnic Kyrgyz and Turkmen. The rest of the population is mostly Pashtun or Hazara with a few other smaller ethnic minorities such as the Nuristani and Baluchi.

[7] Statement from the International Rescue Committee. 24 September 2001.

[8] As noted below, Pakistan and Iran, which in the past have taken in very large numbers of Afghan refugees, have also closed their borders.

[9] See ICG Asia Report No. 14, *Central Asia: Islamist Mobilisation and Regional Security* (Osh/Brussels, 1 March 2001).

lasting peace in Afghanistan, circumstances unique to each make it unlikely that they will respond in a united way to the U.S. over the Afghan problem.

UZBEKISTAN

Uzbekistan, which served as an important staging area for the Soviet invasion in the 1970s, is probably the most important country in the region with respect to capacity for military cooperation against Afghanistan. It has good transport facilities, including air bases, and the most significant military capabilities.

President Islam Karimov, who has long been the most inclined regional leader to take foreign policy positions independent of Russian perspectives, may sense a unique opportunity in the current crisis. Because of U.S. eagerness to gain access to airbases, Karimov may anticipate that under the banner of anti-terrorism he can both blunt rising international criticism of his government's record on economic reforms and human rights[10] and encourage an international military operation against his enemy, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU). Uzbekistan blames the IMU for a series of bomb blasts in Tashkent in 1999 that killed thirteen persons and injured more than 100, although there have been a variety of competing conspiracy theories regarding culpability.

Uzbekistan would also be well positioned to argue for greater financial and military assistance despite its consistent failure to embrace effective economic or democratic reform. The arrival of U.S. troops in Uzbekistan, and President George W. Bush's identification of the IMU as one of the terrorist organisations that the U.S. will target, suggest a bargain has already been struck between Washington and Tashkent. The government of Uzbekistan has kept a tight control on the media during this period, hoping to minimise the public backlash against cooperation with the United States.[11]

Moscow as well seems to have given at least tacit approval to Uzbekistan's cooperation with an attack in Afghanistan. President Karimov is certainly well aware of the strategic benefits he stands to reap as a result of cooperation. Whether this arrangement is as beneficial in the long-term to

[10] See ICG Asia Report No. 21, *Uzbekistan at Ten: Repression and Instability* (Osh/Brussels, 21 August 2001).

[11] Government statements on cooperation with the United States were given to the foreign media but not to the local press.

the international community and to the stability of Uzbekistan is another matter.

The crisis has given the IMU new international prominence. It was the only other organisation besides the Egyptian Islamic Jihad, the Taliban and bin Laden's own al-Qaeda specifically singled out in President Bush's address to a joint session of Congress on 20 September 2001.

While the IMU has developed close ties to the Taliban, and there have been reports that its military leader, Juma Namangani, now serves as a lieutenant to bin Laden, there does not appear to be any public evidence that the IMU specifically has been involved in terrorist operations of a global scope. The IMU has focused its efforts most directly on overthrowing the government of Uzbekistan and has made military incursions into both that country and Kyrgyzstan (through Tajikistan) in recent years. The Pakistani journalist and expert on Afghanistan Ahmed Rashid estimates the number of IMU fighters currently in Afghanistan at 3,000, mostly in Mazar-i-Sharif and Qunduz.[12] It is difficult to imagine that the IMU would be singled out so directly by the United States if it were not for the urging of Uzbek authorities.

Uzbekistan, along with Russia, Iran, and the U.S., has long supported Afghanistan's Northern Alliance as a buffer against the Taliban and instability emerging from Afghanistan. Despite this approach, the government also explored during the last two years changing its position if the Taliban would cease its support for the IMU. The Afghan side of the border is currently Taliban-controlled territory, and has particular potential to produce a refugee problem since there is an ethnic Uzbek population in this part of Afghanistan. However, that border is closed and relatively well controlled, making it difficult for refugees to enter. In addition, President Karimov has demonstrated in the past that he has little willingness to accept ethnic Uzbeks from neighbouring states, even deporting ethnic Uzbeks who fled Tajikistan during that country's civil war.

Within Uzbekistan, there is a great deal of concern that the Afghan crisis will give President Karimov c*arte blanche* to crack down on legitimate political opposition and religious groups. The long-term concern for the U.S. must be that if it ties its interests too closely to a fundamentally anti-democratic government, it may eventually find itself viewed as the enemy by reform-minded Uzbekistanis. This would endanger U.S. credibility as a promoter of human rights, rule of law and economic development. While the regimes in Uzbekistan and neighbouring states might gain temporary international legitimacy, Central Asia's heavy reliance on authoritarian forms of governance are likely in the long run to threaten regional stability and could compromise the West's relations with eventual successor governments.

There are many indications that the U.S. at least risks courting considerable unpopularity with wide segments of the Uzbekistan population if it is perceived as tying itself too closely to President Karimov. Comparing U.S. support for President Karimov to U.S. support for the Shah of Iran during the 1970s, for example, the chief imam of a mosque in the capital, Tashkent, cautions: "Our government wants to use the American anti-Taliban campaign in its own interest. [It believe[s] there are three major benefits for Uzbekistan in collaborating in military operations with American troops against Afghanistan ....The major interest of Uzbekistan is to destroy the IMU. The second benefit is that Uzbekistan's participation in a military operation will soften America's stand toward violations of human rights in our country. The third important factor is the economic benefits that Uzbekistan will expect from the United States for supporting American troops."[13]

An Uzbek government official, who wished to remain anonymous, noted, "The U.S. government will fight the Islamic terrorists, and our government will get full support from the West to fight against those our government declares terrorists. Since the West has little understanding or interest in distinguishing between devoted Muslims and extremists or terrorists, all opponents of the government will be easily jailed".[14] He also warned that "a new wave of repression in Uzbekistan against Muslims is a dangerous prospect."

Representatives of the Independent Human Rights Society of Uzbekistan and the Human Right

[12] Ahmed Rashid on NRK Dagsrevyen (Norwegian National Television News), 15 September at 7:35 p.m.

[13] ICG interview, September 2001.

[14] Ibid.

Society of Uzbekistan also expressed their anxiety about any shift in U.S. policy toward Central Asia and particularly regarding human rights and persecution of Muslims in Uzbekistan. Mikhail Ardzinov, the chairman of the former organisation, argued that the Bush administration should not align itself with anti-Islamic campaigns conducted by the government of President Karimov: "If the Uzbek government is not given an explicit picture of what it can expect out of the anti-terrorist cooperation, it could abuse its authority and reinforce its oppressive policies".[15]

A member of the Hizb-ut-Tahrir[16], an Islamist organisation which says it is dedicated to establishing non-violently a region-wide Islamic caliphate, expressed his condolences to the American people over the recent attacks, which, he argued, were not in keeping with the tenets of Islam. But he added a common explanation among Moslems in Central Asia for such violence: "People go for such extreme self-sacrifice due to terrible conditions Palestinians have been living in. And even if Americans kill Osama or destroy Afghanistan it will not make America safer".[17]

There is no simple or certain formula by which to avoid the risks suggested by these observers. Unless the immediate and justified desire of the United States and its coalition partners to respond to terrorism and its sources within Afghanistan also incorporates a broader strategy for promoting stability, democracy and the rule of law within Uzbekistan, however, there is a possibility that today's problem will be solved while creating tomorrow's.

TAJIKISTAN

Despite a raft of contradictory press reports and government statements, it appears that Tajikistan is willing to provide access to its airbases for U.S. planes involved in military operations in Afghanistan. This is a remarkable step for a country that relies heavily on Russia to directly meet its security needs and is still recovering from a bitter civil war and coping with a severe drought.

Whereas Uzbekistan can act relatively independently of Russia, Tajikistan has less room for manoeuvre. It is the only Central Asian country in which Russian ground forces and border guards are stationed (around 20,000 according to some sources). There is an infantry division, the 201st (12,000 troops), headquartered in Dushanbe, which deploys on rotation to various rear areas of the frontier with Afghanistan, which its border guard units patrol. A large percentage of the personnel in the latter units, however, are actually Tajikistan nationals. Only 70 km of the 1,300 long Tajik-Afghan border is patrolled by Tajikistan's own units. [18]

Tajik President Emamali Rahmanov has long been one of the most ardent supporters of the struggle against terrorism within the Commonwealth of Independent States[19] and is, therefore, not likely to oppose American action in Afghanistan – though he may be less willing to be seen as an active accomplice.[20] Tajikistan would not have signed off on the decision to allow U.S. forces to use Tajik airfields without Russian approval.

Tajikistan has not endorsed the Taliban regime largely because the Taliban is primarily an ethnic Pashtun movement, while Afghanistan's Tajik and Uzbek minorities form the backbone of the Northern Alliance. The Northern Alliance has an embassy in the capital, Dushanbe, and Tajikistan has been a frequent conduit for supplies to it. On

[15] ICG interview, 19 September 2001.
[16] The Hizb-ut-Tahrir (Party of Liberation) is a transnational Islamist movement originating in the Middle East. It has become popular in Central Asia in recent years although it is illegal and operates underground. Although it says it is peaceful and does not espouse violence, its rhetoric is often highly charged against the governments and strongly anti-Semitic.
[17] ICG interview, 19 September 2001.

[18] Some two-thirds of the border guards serving under Russian command are actually citizens of Tajikistan. See the Federation of American Scientists' military web-site: http://www.fas.org/irp/world/russia/fps/ops.htm
[19] The largely ineffective grouping of former Soviet republics that was established after the collapse of the Soviet Union.
[20] Ole Ludvig Nymoen, NTB. 'Soker nye allianser mot Afghanistan', *Stavanger Aftenblad* (Stavanger), 20 September 2001, p. 2.

the other hand, Tajikistan has been interested in keeping good relations with Afghanistan. Some Tajik politicians had concluded before the current crisis that establishing official links with the Taliban might be worthwhile because they were winning the Afghan civil war.[21]

Tajikistan's opposition to the Taliban regime is also religiously motivated. Tajikistan is the only country in Central Asia where those wishing to establish an Islamic state have joined mainstream politics. The Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan pursues its aims through established political channels and democratic means. Many Tajik imams are also against the Taliban. The Chairman of the Ulema of the Kölab district of the Khatlon province of Tajikistan noted, "the Taliban knows perfectly well that their ideology would never be accepted in Tajikistan".[22] Religious radicalism is confined largely to the segment of the population which had been forced out of their homes in south-western Tajikistan and into exile in Afghanistan during the civil war. Most people ICG has spoken with tend to favour secular government.

Views are divided within Tajikistan as to the influence of Afghanistan on domestic politics. Some argue that with Russian troops patrolling the border, the Taliban would not try to expand into Tajikistan.[23] These people point out that most violations of the border have taken place along the stretch controlled by the Northern Alliance, not the Taliban.[24] Others argue that as long as Afghanistan is torn by war, the Tajik economy will remain badly depressed and isolated.[25] Further, without peace in Afghanistan, the country will continue to be a key transit point for drugs and Islamist extremists. Although Russian guards are stationed along the Tajik-Afghan border, large quantities of drugs still make it across. Many reports suggest that collaboration between drug traffickers in Afghanistan and the Russian border guards enable this.

The deputy chairman of the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan notes of the likely U.S. military operations: "For Tajikistan, which is directly in the path of the sources of such actions, this is a very important issue and because of that, our party has expressed deep concerns and asked for further investigation about the action itself and who is responsible. The guilty must be brought to justice".[26]

An independent analyst working in the region, who did not wish to be named, underscored the risks involved in cooperating with the United States. "The American presence will be temporary, whereas Afghanistan will always be on the other side of the border".

Tajikistan, like Uzbekistan, would stand to benefit if the IMU is also a target of U.S. military action. Members of the IMU entered Kyrgyzstan through Tajikistan in 1999 and 2000. Until January this year, a considerable number of IMU fighters were present in eastern parts of Tajikistan and relations between Uzbekistan and Tajikistan have soured as a result. If the threat from the IMU were diminished, this would not only improve relations between Tajikistan and other Central Asian states, but possibly also improve Tajikistan's political image abroad, which is crucial to encouraging investment in the ailing economy.

In managing the current crisis, President Rahmanov must strike a careful balance between competing interests that range from dealing with Moscow and Washington to considering the impact of cooperation on a fragile peace accord within his own country. The presence of American soldiers could cause tensions between the authorities and religious groups. It could also cause a split of the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan and further radicalise those elements that did not accept the 1997 Tajik peace agreement, thus contributing to the destabilisation of Tajikistan. The extent to which the presence of Russian troops in Tajikistan may, to some extent, act as a deterrent against destabilisation is an open question. When asked if

[21] ICG interview with a high-ranking member of the Democratic Party, Dushanbe, 16 July 2001.
[22] ICG interview with Khoji Mulla Haidar Sharifzada, Chairman of the Ulema of the Kölab District of Khatlon Province, Kölab, 20 July 2001.
[23] ICG interview with Mahmad Shobadov. Head of the Finance Department of the Kölab City Administration. Kölab, 20 July 2001.
[24] ICG interview with Sukhrob Shofarukhshoev, Director of Kölab TV, Kölab, 20 July 2001.
[25] ICG interview with Umar Kamolov, Director, and Makhmudjon Alizoda, Chief Editor, Qörghanteppa TV, Qörghanteppa, 19 July 2001.
[26] Muhiddin Kabiri, Deputy Chairman of the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan, quoted in Jeremy Bransten, "Central Asia: Afghanistan's Neighbours Face New Concerns", *RFE/RL Magazine, 14 September 2001*.

the 201st division could be used to quell domestic unrest, an official of the Russian Embassy in Dushanbe declined to comment.[27]

Civil peace in Tajikistan is indeed fragile. From 1992 to 1997 the country was embroiled in a civil war that pitted the Communist elite against an Islamic pro-democratic group – the United Tajik Opposition (UTO). Some 50,000 people were killed during the war, and another 500,000 fled the country.[28] As part of the 1997 peace agreement, the large majority of those who had fought were integrated into the Tajik armed forces. However, some refused to submit to the authorities. In November 1998 one of these groups, under the command of Colonel Mahmud Khudaiberdiyev, invaded Tajikistan's Northern Sughd province from Uzbekistan. Several political assassinations, kidnappings and armed uprisings have taken place this year. The Deputy Minister of the Interior, Habib Sanginov, was murdered in April 2001. The same fate befell the administrator of the Jabbarasulov District of the Sughd Province in May and one of President Rahmanov's advisors in late July 2001. Two prominent rebel leaders, Rakhmon Sanginov (known as "Hitler"), and his associate, Mansur Muakkalov, were killed in August this year in a government action. They had taken seven police officers and fifteen German relief workers hostage and demanded the release of four of their men, arrested on suspicion of being involved in the assassination of Habib Sanginov.

A decision made on 23 June 2000 to demobilise 4,000 former United Tajik Opposition soldiers who had been integrated into the Tajik Army by 1 August 2000 has been sharply criticised by members of the opposition. The demobilisation was not particularly successful: only 1,500 people were actually demobilised, some 600 of whom remain without a job. The Tajik minister of employment and social protection told ICG that measures were being taken to provide for these men, though the ministry is short of funds. "If we do not provide them with a job, they may be tempted to join an armed gang", he said.[29]

A former commander of the United Tajik Opposition, currently an employee of the ministry of emergency situations, told ICG that unemployment among those who fought in the civil war is much more widespread than official figures indicate. He said that in the Mountain Badakhshan Province alone, only 400 of the 2,500 men who were demobilised after the civil war have found proper jobs. He thought the authorities had no choice but to demobilise former UTO fighters from the Tajik Army as the army does not have the money to keep them on.[30]

A power struggle is currently taking place between circles loyal to the president and those loyal to the speaker of the parliament, who is also the mayor of Dushanbe. There is considerable discontent within the Tajik opposition to President Rahmanov's rule. The 1997 peace accord committed the Tajik president to give 30 per cent of government positions at all levels to the opposition and also to arrange free and democratic presidential elections.[31] Neither requirement has been fully observed. Since the two major political opposition parties – the Islamic Renaissance Party and the Democratic Party – accepted the outcome of the February-March 2000 parliamentary elections and did not take action against President Rahmanov's failure to observe the 30 per cent quota, however, many people consider that part of the opposition leadership has sold out in return for government positions.

So far the established political parties have avoided confrontation, largely in the name of preserving the peace. The peace, however, is by no means stable. Poverty, severe drought, corruption, drug trafficking, unemployment, regional factionalism and a failure to integrate some of the former commanders of the civil war all pose a threat.

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[27] ICG interview with Viktor Viktorovich Andrianov, Second Secretary, Embassy of the Russian Federation, Dushanbe, 17 July 2001.

[28] Vladimir Davlatov, "Tajik poverty trap: Tajikistan shows no sign of recovering from its devastating civil war", Reporting Central Asia (London: IWPR), No. 9, 30 June 2000, available: http://www.iwpr.net/index.pl?archive/rca/rca_200006_09_02_eng.txt

[29] ICG interview with Rafika Ganievna Musaeva, Minister of Employment and Social Protection, Dushanbe, 3 August 2001.

[30] ICG interview, Dushanbe, August 2001.

[31] For an assessment of the parliamentary elections, see OSCE-ODIHR. The Republic of Tajikistan. Elections to the Parliament. 27 February 2000. Final Report. Warsaw 17 May 2000, at http:// www.osce.org/odihr/election/taji00-1-final.htm.

Much of the Tajik reaction to Western military action in Afghanistan will be determined by the conduct of those operations. The Soviet-Afghan war, in which large numbers of Tajiks, as well as ethnic Tajik citizens of Afghanistan, died was not popular in Tajikistan. A new war in Afghanistan – with Tajik involvement – would probably also be unpopular – though it may be somewhat more acceptable if U.S. action is seen as bolstering the cause of the Northern Alliance while avoiding indiscriminate attacks on civilians.

There is also some fear that IMU fighters could simply flee to Tajikistan to avoid U.S. attacks. During the Tajik civil war, the IMU fought with the United Tajik Opposition against the government. The current Tajik Minister of Emergencies, Ziyoyev, for instance, fought alongside Juma Namangani, the military leader of the IMU. This put Ziyoyev in a difficult position in January 2001 when he had to deport some 250 members of the IMU from the Tavildara region in Eastern Tajikistan.[32]. Parts of Tajikistan's border are relatively easy to penetrate due to its harsh terrain, and if the IMU fighters link up with their former allies from the civil war, it could be a recipe for trouble. At the least, it would probably be difficult to refuse such fighters shelter should they flee to Tajikistan as a result of U.S. bombing

The biggest threat to Tajik security if the U.S. takes military action against Afghanistan, however, is the potentially huge influx of refugees. Pakistan and Iran have closed their borders to Afghanistan. One of the few escape routes left to Afghans is thus north into Tajikistan. The Badakhshan stretch of the border is controlled by the Northern Alliance, the remainder by the Taliban. The Badakhshan area is difficult to patrol, given that much of the border is mountainous and hard to access. The Taliban-controlled part of the border, on the other hand, has easier terrain and is patrolled more effectively. Earlier this year when the Northern Alliance was being hard pressed, 10,000-15,000 refugees appeared on the border along the Panj River. But given that the Northern Alliance has recently been doing relatively well militarily, it seems unlikely that its territory will see large refugee flows in the short-term.

At the moment, the Tajiks are refusing entry to some 17,000 Afghans located on islands in the Panj[33] – despite a request from the UNHCR to accept the refugees. President Rahmanov has justified his refusal by suggesting that among this group are "several men armed to their teeth".[34] The president has said that he does not want to accept any refugees that might result from the current crisis. Igor Sattarov, head of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Department of Information, argued that if Tajikistan allowed the refugees to enter, this would facilitate a resurgence of Islamic militancy and drug smuggling and "increase the possibility of using Tajikistan for subversive operations" against neighbouring states.[35] It should be noted that the majority of the refugees are ethnic Tajiks – not Pashtuns – from Imam-Sahib, Qunduz, Dashti Archi and Khojagar.[36]

Humanitarian aid to Afghanistan's northern territories is currently distributed through Tajikistan. The major donor, the Aga Khan Foundation, ships its assistance across the Panj River. Should the border between Tajikistan and Afghanistan be closed, this would have severe repercussions for the people of Northern Afghanistan, who are experiencing a draught for the second year in a row. One precondition the Aga Khan Foundation put forward before committing itself to providing humanitarian aid to Northern Afghanistan was that the production of drugs cease. According to Aga Khan Foundation representatives in Tajikistan, this demand resulted in a sharp reduction in the production of drugs in the North.[37] Should a conflict between Afghanistan and the United States be lengthy, locals who choose not to try to flee the country may be forced to revert to growing drugs to make ends meet.

Ultimately, Tajikistan would obviously prefer a stable Afghanistan – whatever its form – as this would make it easier to stabilise its own society and develop its beleaguered economy. Tajikistan would like to see an Afghanistan in which the Tajik minority enjoys widespread rights and is not

[32] RFE/RL Newsline, vol. 5, no. 21, part I, 31 January 2001.

[33] Saida Nazarova, "Afghan refugees abandoned", Reporting Central Asia (London: IWPR), No. 51, 11 May 2001.

[34] RFE/RL Newsline, vol. 5, no. 4, part I, 8 January 2001.

[35] RFE/RL Newsline, vol. 5, no. 17, part I, 25 January 2001.

[36] Saida Nazarova, "Afghan refugees abandoned", op. cit.

[37] The Taliban also issued decrees forbidding drug production.

oppressed by the ethnically dominant Pashtuns. While some people have called for a "greater Tajikistan" incorporating those parts of Afghanistan that are populated by ethnic Tajiks, these individuals are a decided minority. Most simply want a war-free and economically stable Afghanistan, while being less clear about how that can best be achieved.

KYRGYZSTAN

Kyrgyzstan, with a host of its own internal problems,[38] has little desire to become embroiled in the Afghan crisis. Militarily weak and subject to diplomatic pressure from Uzbekistan, Russia, the United States and China, Kyrgyzstan will likely do its best to steer clear of any entanglements that it considers unnecessary. That said, Kyrgyzstan has suffered from military incursions by the IMU over the last several years. As a result of those incursions, Uzbekistan has mined much of its border with Kyrgyzstan and made it clear that it will send its forces into Kyrgyz territory in hot pursuit. If the United States were to effectively deal with the IMU, it would be a great relief to the government in Bishkek.

As a member of the Collective Security Treaty,[39] Kyrgyzstan is also inclined to defer to Russia over issues of military cooperation. It has announced that it will allow its airspace to be used for operations by the U.S. Like Kazakhstan, the country does not share a border with Afghanistan so it faces less of a refugee threat. However, it would be unlikely to welcome any people fleeing Afghanistan since, like Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, it fears they would include undesirable elements such as drug smugglers and Islamist extremists.

The chairman of the Parliamentary Committee on Defence and Security, Ismail Isakov, said that if it was proved bin Laden financed and organised the terrorist acts of 11 September, military strikes against his bases in Afghanistan would be in the interest of Kyrgyzstan since he also financed terrorist organisations such as the IMU.[40]

Colonel Oleg Chechel, Kyrgyzstan's Chief of International Military Cooperation, noted that the Defence Ministry and the country as a whole

[38] See ICG Asia Report No. 22, *Kyrgyzstan at Ten: Trouble in the Island of Democracy* (Osh/Brussels, 28 August 2001).

[39] The current members of the Collective Security Treaty, originally concluded in 1992 within the framework of the Commonwealth of Independent States as part of the effort to maintain certain links and mutual benefits between former Soviet republics, include Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Russia. Uzbekistan, Georgia and Azerbaijan withdrew when the treaty was renewed in 1999.

[40] Res Publica, No 32, 18 September 2001, p.7.

support the international community's intention to combat terrorism and religious extremism. "Future developments will depend on where and what kind of strikes will be conducted; if we talk about military operations against vast territories of Afghanistan, then we could see an inflow of hundreds of thousands of Afghan refugees into our region. As we know", he added, "Pakistan has blocked its border with Afghanistan, Iran will not accept any sizeable group of refugees, so the only direction for Afghans is north – Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. Besides problems with accommodating refugees we might face members of terrorist groups and intelligence organisations of various countries infiltrating Kyrgyzstan".[41]

TURKMENISTAN

Of all the Central Asian states, Turkmenistan's insular and autocratic government has maintained the closest ties with the Taliban. Turkmenistan's government continues to rely heavily on income from energy resources, and it has long eyed Afghanistan as a possible pipeline route that would result in a considerable economic windfall. Turkmenistan has remained willing to do business with whoever controls the Afghan countryside, and over the past several years that has increasingly been the Taliban.

Turkmenistan's current pipeline routes run through Russia, and Moscow has often diverted Turkmen gas to domestic and Commonwealth of Independent States customers, thus limiting Turkmenistan's exports to more lucrative western markets. As a result, Turkmenistan would like to build pipelines to China and India, which it considers hugely profitable potential markets. Afghanistan would be the most logical route for such a plan. That has induced Turkmenistan to take the lead in trying to bring the Taliban and United Front together to negotiate a peace settlement.

Despite links established through these diplomatic efforts, Turkmenistan is not entirely sympathetic to the Taliban. President Saparmurat Niyazov shares the aversion of other regional leaders to religious-political movements. He has repeatedly declared his country neutral, even, at the United Nations, "neutral in perpetuity". Turkmenistan was never a member of the Collective Security Treaty among the Central Asian states and Russia.

Turkmenistan has expressed general support for international steps against terrorism in the wake of the 11 September attacks. Despite official statements, it is possible that U.S. planes bound for Uzbekistan and Tajikistan were given permission to transit through Turkmen airspace. For the most part Turkmenistan has used its neutrality to avoid tying itself closely to any potential U.S. military actions in the region but the government has indicated that it would allow the U.S. to use its airspace for "humanitarian assistance" to the Afghans.. Of the five Central Asian states covered in this report, only Turkmenistan (which has an almost 800-kilometre border with Afghanistan) has stated clearly that its bases are not available for non-humanitarian military operations. Overall,

[41] ICG Interview, 19 September 2001.

Turkmenistan's security strategy has been to isolate itself. If President Niyazov were to abandon that policy, it would probably only be in exchange for massive assistance and willingness by Western leaders to desist in criticising his country's human rights situation.

KAZAKHSTAN

Geographically apart from Afghanistan, Kazakhstan has the fewest worries of the countries covered in this report regarding refugees or a direct spill over of an intensified conflict with Afghanistan. Nonetheless, several factors limit the extent to which it may be willing to cooperate with the United States. Kazakhstan remains allied to Russia through the Collective Security Treaty. Elements in the country's Slav population, which accounts for more than 30 per cent of its total, have been agitating for separatism. In order to appease Slav concerns, Kazakhstan has tried to maintain close relations with Russia and show unity with Moscow on many issues. Kazakhstan would thus be unlikely to acquiesce to a NATO or American military presence on its soil without Russian approval. Nevertheless, since Tajikistan was earlier given such a green light, it was not a surprise when the government announced that it would allow the U.S. to utilise its airspace.

On 15 September 2001, President Nursultan Nazarbaev said his country could be relied on to support measures the U.S. would carry out against terrorists. A week later he indicated that the United States would be allowed to fly through Kazakh air space.

Kazakh officials have also made clear that they feel the only long-term solution to the terrorism problem involving Afghanistan is a coordinated effort spearheaded by the U.S. to end the civil war there. Vice Foreign Minister Kairat Abuseitov told a security conference in Almaty on 20 September that the Kazakh government still wanted to see a negotiated solution in Afghanistan under the auspices of the United Nations. Like others in the region, Kazakhstan is also eager to keep civilian casualties to an absolute minimum. The influential magazine *Novoe pokolenie* ran an editorial pointedly headlined: "This is not our war."[42]

[42] Alima Bisenova. "Kazakhstan Backs U.S.; Takes Cautious Approach on Refugees", Eurasia Insight 25 September 2001, available: http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav092401b.shtml.

RUSSIA

Russia finds itself in a unique position regarding U.S. responses to the current Afghan crisis, and its actions to date reflect competing concerns. President Vladimir Putin quickly condemned the terrorist attacks in the strongest language possible, and suggested that the United States now understood the forces that Russia itself was struggling to contain. Russia has long been focused on the rise of Islamist extremism. It has frequently argued that the war in Chechnya has been fuelled by elements linked to bin Laden, and it announced that it was considering military strikes against terrorist positions in Afghanistan in 2000. For the United States to do the military "dirty work" of eliminating bin Laden, the Taliban and the IMU would be a welcome development for Moscow.

In the wake of the attacks, President Putin telephoned the leaders of the five Central Asian countries to discuss working together to combat terrorism and dispatched his National Security Advisor, Vladimir Rushailo, for intensive consultations. Senior diplomats from Russia, Iran, India and other states in the region met in Tajikistan on 13 September 2001 to discuss stepping up assistance to the Northern Alliance in the wake of the attacks in the U.S. and the assassination the previous week of the Alliance's military commander, Ahmad Shah Massoud. The Russian military has actively supplied arms without which the Northern Alliance would likely have collapsed. The Russian Embassy in Tajikistan claims the Northern Alliance is currently in a position to take Kabul – though it has chosen not to do so as it would not be able to care for the 1.5 million inhabitants.[43] Although the loss of Massoud has no doubt weakened the Northern Alliance, assistance from the United States may help compensate – especially if the U.S. attacked the Taliban frontline, thus making it easier for the Northern Alliance to move southward.

However, Russia also appears concerned that any U.S. military operation in Afghanistan could come at the expense of its own influence in Central Asia. Defence Minister Sergei Ivanov announced on 14 September that he was opposed to U.S. attacks from bases in Central Asia. Moscow also quickly put its forces in Tajikistan on high alert. The next day, however, Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov insisted that no form of cooperation had been ruled out. Then, on 24 September, President Putin announced that Russia would support air corridors for U.S. humanitarian flights and suggested that Moscow had encouraged Central Asian leaders to be similarly cooperative. Putin also announced increased support for the Northern Alliance, while making clear that his country would not become directly involved in the conflict.

Ultimately, it appears that Moscow has decided that cooperation is in its best interests, although it is unclear at what cost Russian assistance will come. It seems likely that President Putin positioned himself to ask for U.S. support on a number of issues, at least for greater latitude in Chechnya, in exchange for acquiescing to Central Asian help in a U.S. military response.

Moscow appears eager to continue anti-terrorist rhetoric and willing to facilitate U.S. military access to Central Asia, while doing its best to ensure that its own forces do not become involved in military operations. Russia has traditionally enjoyed strong diplomatic relations with much of the Arab world and would prefer that these not be clouded as a result of direct military intervention. In any event, given Russia's difficult history with Afghanistan, involvement in military operations on Afghan soil would be politically difficult for all those involved.

[43] This is one of the more optimistic assessments of the military capacity of the Northern Alliance, which has almost certainly been weakened by the death of Massoud, its foremost commander. The Alliance is armed with a ragged variety of weapons that were captured or otherwise obtained during the fighting against the Soviet Union or provided more recently primarily by Russia and Iran.

CONCLUSION

The current political and strategic dynamic is complex. On the straightforward issue of being "for or against" terrorism", the Central Asian states give clear enough answers. However, in choosing partners and deciding on the concessions they are willing to offer for assistance, the United States and the West more broadly must exercise great care and foresight. Washington and other coalition participants must make clear that cooperation in a specific set of military operations will not substitute for a commitment to genuine economic and political reform in Central Asia over time. Engagement, in and of itself, with Central Asia is welcome and somewhat overdue in many aspects. But the international community will be making a serious strategic blunder if it allows Central Asian leaders to continue or intensify their autocratic ways as the price for cooperation in the fight against global terrorism. For example, if Uzbekistan had been more tolerant of legitimate religious practices, the IMU might not even exist today, at least not in its present relatively robust form.

The nature of the military phase of the current crisis will determine much about the compromises that will surely have to be made to secure needed help from Central Asian states. Given its lack of good transport links and its geopolitical uncertainties, Central Asia may in fact be of only limited usefulness in any military action against targets in Afghanistan. By limiting a Central Asia component of its military operations to a minimum – such as reconnaissance, search and rescue or direct supply of the Northern Alliance, as contrasted with the launching point for major offensives – and terminating them as quickly as possible, the U.S. and its coalition might limit both the domestic and international costs of doing business with some less than savoury governments. The West would then regain – and hopefully use – the freedom and leverage to encourage those governments to undertake badly needed reforms.

In the meantime, while the U.S. and other national governments are preoccupied for the moment with military considerations, it would be useful to encourage international institutions to take a more active role in addressing the political problems of the region that may well be exacerbated by the current crisis. For example, the United Nations should move to establish a political office in Kyrgyzstan, as requested by that government, and should seek agreement of Uzbekistan to expand that office's mandate to a regional one.

Obviously, any efforts by the international community to establish an Afghan government of "national reconciliation" in the wake of military operations – either through a Loya Jirga process that gathers tribal elders and religious leaders or by returning the exiled king to Kabul – would be extraordinarily complex and have a serious impact on the interests of all the states in the region. A solution that involved a prominent role for the Northern Alliance in a post-Taliban government would also be problematic given the unsavoury record of some of that movement's key elements when they held power. Restoring peace to Afghanistan is an immensely worthy enterprise, but its difficulty should not be underestimated. Attempts simply to impose a solution are likely to come to nothing.

The current situation in Afghanistan stems in part from the fact that although much energy and money went into fighting the Soviet invasion, little has been done by the West, at least since 1992, to deal with the chaotic aftermath. The United States and its allies should avoid making a similar mistake in Central Asia by rushing into the region militarily but then not doing enough to stabilise and develop it in the longer term. A coalition against terrorism should not be allowed to become toleration of authoritarianism. Likewise, effective action against terrorism must go beyond military strikes to tackle the economic and political conditions that breed instability and resentment. Failure to deal with these issues could result in the emergence of intense chaos and conflict in an area that is not only the size of Western Europe but is also surrounded by nuclear-armed nations.

Map No. 3763 Rev.4 UNITED NATIONS
October 1998

Department of Public Information
Cartographic Section


65°
70°
75°
Uzbekistan
Tajikistan
China
Turkmenistan
Dushanbe
Amu Darya R.
Pamir R.
Murgap R.
Sheberghan
Mazar-e Sharif
Konduz
Taloqan
Feyzabad
Yar Khun R.
Meymaneh
Samangan
Baghlan
Harirud R.
36°
Charikar
Asadabad
Qal'eh-ye Now
Bamian
Mehtarlam
Herat
Chaghcharan
Kowt-e Ashrow
Kabul
Jalalabad
Afghanistan
Baraki
Islamabad
Ghazni
Gardeyz
Indus R.
Farah R.
Zareh Sharan
Tarin Kowt
Arghandab R.
Farah
Khash R.
Qalat
Chenab R.
Lashkar Gah
Qandahar
Zaranj
Helmand R.
Ravi R.
30°
Pakistan
India
Iran
0
200km
0
100mi