

## Central Asian Military and Security Forces ASSESSING THE IMPACT OF FOREIGN ASSISTANCE

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As the drawdown of U.S. and coalition forces in Afghanistan has accelerated in preparation for the end of Operation Enduring Freedom in 2014, media attention has come to focus on the extent to which equipment being withdrawn from the region will be left behind for Central Asian states to use. At the same time, recent extensions of Russian military base agreements in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan have underlined Russia's own provision of military equipment and other forms of security assistance to the region. Central Asia has been receiving external military assistance since the mid-1990s, and the amount of such assistance has grown substantially in the last decade due to a combination of U.S. interest in using the region to provide access to Afghanistan and the Russian desire to ensure its continued predominance in regional security affairs.

Local leaders sense that the heightened interest in the region by foreign powers may fade once the withdrawal of NATO forces from Afghanistan is complete. They are therefore using the current situation to highlight the potential threats to the region and how these might affect the rest of the world. The goal is to ensure that outside powers provide the maximum possible amount of assistance in the short term, before their focus shifts to other parts of the world. This memo examines the extent of external support for military and security forces in Central Asia and analyzes the possible effects of such support on the security situation in the region. Since the vast majority of military assistance to the region comes from Russia and the United States, I focus on these countries in this memo. Other sources include Turkey, Israel, and several West European states. China, on the other hand, provides very little military assistance to the region.

### **Russia**

Russia has been the primary source for military equipment and training for Central Asian states since the breakup of the Soviet Union. Because the Central Asian states in large part retain Soviet legacy forces, which are stocked with Soviet equipment and still

largely follow Soviet doctrine, military personnel are familiar with Russian equipment and with Russian training methods. However, Russia does not have a real strategy in its military assistance policy toward the region beyond seeking to keep the Central Asian states in its orbit while making sure that U.S. and NATO forces leave the region after the completion of the operation in Afghanistan. As one Russian interlocutor put it recently, "If the price of stability in Central Asia is [continued] U.S. presence, that price is too high for Russia." To ensure that the situation does not deteriorate to the point where that choice has to be made, Russia has been shoring up Central Asian regimes as best it can, through efforts to modernize their military forces and security services to improve their capabilities both to take on externally-based insurgents and to suppress potential domestic revolts. By providing assistance, Moscow has also sought to ensure that the region's governments remain relatively pliable. The entire policy was described by one Moscow observer as "playing preemptive defense."

Russian military assistance to the weaker Central Asian states can be described as a *quid pro quo* arrangement, whereby Russia provides political and military support for ruling regimes in exchange for basing rights and a certain level of acquiescence to Russian foreign policy priorities in the region. Kyrgyzstan provides the clearest case of this type of arrangement, with the institutionalization of a major Russian military presence in the country coming in conjunction with Russian expressions of support for the government of President Almazbek Atambaev. Tajikistan's reluctance to give final approval to its recent military base agreement with Russia may be related to Russia's refusal to provide guarantees of continued support for President Emomali Rahmon's rule. Moscow has been highlighting the potential danger of instability spreading from Afghanistan to Central Asia as a means of ensuring that local states feel the need to maintain close ties with Russian security forces. At the same time, Central Asian leaders use Russian foreign policy priorities to meet their own goals, including the development of more capable military and security forces.

There is less to Russian military assistance than meets the eye, however. Both Russia and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) have made numerous promises of assistance and expanded cooperation to Central Asian states. Only some of these promises have been met. In part, Russian military assistance is constrained by the limited capacity of the Russian defense industry. Exports to Central Asia remain the lowest priority for Russian defense corporations, behind both domestic military procurement requirements and exports to countries that pay full price for weapons and equipment. Most Central Asian states pay the lower prices charged on the Russian domestic market for equipment, while repercussions to the Russian defense industry for delays in the fulfillment of export contracts are not as serious as when dealing with the Russian Ministry of Defense. As a result, most military equipment provided to Central Asia consists of older used systems, primarily armored vehicles and helicopters, that are being replaced by more modern weapons and are therefore no longer needed by the Russian military.

## United States

For much of the last decade, assuring continued access for transferring supplies and personnel to Afghanistan has been the highest priority for the United States in Central Asia. Other goals, including counterterrorism, counternarcotics, and democracy promotion, have been pursued but only rarely have they been allowed to infringe on the priority of the Afghanistan mission. In a period of reduced budgets and limited resources, the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan will inevitably result in a decreased emphasis on all forms of assistance to Central Asia. The region will once again become a relatively low priority for the U.S. Department of Defense. Security assistance budgets for states in the region have already been cut in recent years and are likely to be cut further in years to come.

Central Asian leaders sense that the withdrawal period presents a final opportunity to receive significant amounts of military assistance from the United States. Several Central Asian states have developed so-called wish lists of military equipment that they would like to receive from the United States and its NATO allies through the donation of equipment left behind as NATO forces leave Afghanistan. The countries that are most interested in such equipment include Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan have the financial wherewithal to buy new equipment and are less interested in donations of used armaments.

To date, the U.S. government has not agreed to transfer any excess defense equipment from Afghanistan to Central Asian states. Most equipment is currently being returned to the United States or scrapped onsite in Afghanistan. Nonetheless, it seems likely that at least some EDA equipment will be transferred to Central Asian states at some point in the future. The extent of the transfers will depend on whether the United States signs a bilateral status of forces agreement with Afghanistan. The terms of this agreement will determine the force posture in the region, which will in turn affect how much equipment will need to be removed from Afghanistan and how quickly. In any case, the equipment is not likely to include major weapons systems or even small arms. More likely, it will be limited to items such as night-vision goggles, trucks, mine detection equipment, or reconnaissance UAVs to be used for border surveillance.

The timing of these donations reduces the likelihood that they will be provided as a *quid pro quo* for Central Asian states' permission to allow the reverse transit of personnel and equipment leaving Afghanistan. At this point, agreements on transit have all been signed and the process of withdrawal from Afghanistan is well under way. Since no public announcements of equipment donations have been made so far, it appears that the two processes have been working in parallel, with limited linkage. It is of course possible that promises of assistance have been made secretly and will be announced at a later date. However, even if such announcements are made in the coming months, the security consequences of such donations will be limited.

Much of the discussion about the extent of such assistance has overstated both the amount and significance of equipment likely to be provided and the potential impact of such assistance on regional security. Legally, the U.S. military is obligated to declare equipment to be "excess" before it can be donated to other states. Excess Defense

Articles (EDA) then cannot be replaced with similar but new equipment back in the United States. This means that the EDA process cannot be used to avoid the expense of shipping equipment out of Afghanistan if the unit might still need such equipment in the future. Furthermore, states receiving EDA equipment would be responsible for its shipment from Afghanistan to their territory. Most Central Asian states would not be able to afford the cost of transferring and maintaining major weapons systems, even should the United States agree to such a transfer.

### **Impact on Regional Security**

As currently constituted, the military forces of Central Asian states are fairly limited in their capabilities. Local leaders have devoted more effort and resources to developing their internal security forces, since they see these forces as far more necessary for the survival of their regimes. Despite years of largely half-hearted reform efforts, Central Asian states' armed forces remain primarily based on Soviet-era equipment and doctrine. Efforts at modernization have progressed to some extent but have been limited in most states by a lack of financing (Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan) or a limited understanding of modern military strategy (Turkmenistan). Only Kazakhstan has begun to make some progress in transforming its military into a more modern force, and even there changes have been limited by continued adherence to Soviet legacy ideas.

Despite the extensive publicity generated by the deals for Russian military assistance in exchange for basing rights in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan and the possibility that the United States may be willing to donate excess military equipment as it departs from Afghanistan, the reality is that this assistance will at best have a modest impact on these states' military capabilities. Both Russia and the United States are likely to provide primarily non-lethal equipment. Given the limitations of the Russian defense industry, Russian assistance will consist primarily of older armaments and equipment that are being retired from the Russian armed forces. The United States will also donate used equipment that may have a limited lifespan. Furthermore, local military personnel are less familiar with Western military equipment, limiting its usefulness unless the receiving countries contract for training in its use.

External military assistance is unlikely to have much of an impact on regional security and stability, simply because none of the states in the region are receiving or are planning to receive in the future enough external support to shift regional power dynamics appreciably. The greater danger is in small arms and basic military equipment being provided to internal security agencies, either directly by donor states or through transfers from the relevant military forces. As seen in past events in Andijan, Osh, and Zhanaozen, relatively basic equipment can be used with great effect against domestic opponents, who are at most lightly armed and usually completely unarmed. The use of foreign equipment against unarmed domestic opponents has the potential to be highly embarrassing for the donor states, as shown by the extensive attention paid to the provenance of tear gas canisters used against protesters in Egypt during the Arab Spring.

Officials at the U.S. Department of Defense have highlighted that they do not provide lethal military equipment to internal security forces. They have also noted that any transfers of equipment provided by the United States from local armed forces to internal security services would be a violation of various agreements that could lead to a suspension of future assistance. The extent to which such safeguards would prove effective in a situation where local leaders feel that regime survival is at stake remains unclear.

U.S. officials argue that U.S. training has had a positive impact on the behavior of units in internal conflict situations. They say that units that had received such training are less likely to use violent means to disperse unarmed protesters. According to Defense Department sources, during the 2010 events in Kyrgyzstan, U.S.-trained units returned to their barracks rather than participate in the violence. Similarly, during the May 2013 unrest in Kumtor, Kyrgyzstani special forces units fell out of communications, possibly in order to avoid shooting their own civilians. While it is impossible to independently confirm the extent to which such training has had a positive impact on the behavior of special forces, Central Asian armed forces do receive training in non-violent crowd control and are taught international human rights standards by U.S. military trainers.

At the same time, there is little doubt that local authorities would be able to find units from the military or security forces that would be willing to use violence against regime opponents should the future of the regime be at stake. The success of the two uprisings in Kyrgyzstan had more to do with the unwillingness of key officials in the regime to order the use of force on a large scale than with the refusal of units to follow such orders. Furthermore, Russia is unlikely to have problems with transferring equipment to security services or to put conditions on the transfer of such equipment to security services from the armed forces.

External military assistance to Central Asian states is thus unlikely to have a serious negative impact on regional stability and security. With the end of the NATO operation in Afghanistan, the region's decade-long position of prominence on the international arena is likely to fade. Instead the states of the region will increasingly be left to their own devices, with internal instability the most serious threat. External military assistance will be limited and will do little to strengthen local armed forces.