

Spinning the Spillover

WHY NATO WITHDRAWAL FROM AFGHANISTAN DOES NOT POSE A THREAT TO CENTRAL ASIA

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Scott Radnitz
University of Washington

As the war in Afghanistan winds down, the United States is at a turning point in fashioning policy toward Central Asia. If the 10 years beginning in 1991 focused broadly on issues of “transition,” or support for economic and political reform, since late 2001 policy toward the region has revolved around the Global War on Terror (GWOT), during which time domestic issues have been subordinated to security concerns. Due to the impending NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan and the probable closing of the last U.S. base in Central Asia, 2014 marks the end of this second phase in U.S. policy. What comes next? The potential vectors of future U.S. policy in Central Asia are already clear, articulated in two grand strategic visions for the region: the New Silk Road (NSR) and the Spillover.

The NSR has received more attention to date, as the concept has been operative in policy circles since at least 2006, in anticipation of a non-GWOT world in which Russia, China, and, to a lesser degree, Iran—rather than Islamic extremists—are the primary threat to U.S. interests in the region. The phrase refers to a network of trade, open borders, and improved infrastructure extending from Kazakhstan to India, sparking a self-reinforcing dynamic of better interstate relations, shared prosperity, and, perhaps someday, improved governance.¹ There is a strong geopolitical component, as the region’s largest trading partners, Russia and China, are left out of the network, while Afghanistan, which produces little of value to Central Asian states (besides narcotics) and has a small domestic market, is an integral part of it. One suspects, in reading the rationales behind it, the NSR is designed more to facilitate U.S. interest in salvaging stability in Afghanistan and reducing the influence of local hegemons than to aid the

¹ See S. Frederick Starr, ed., “The New Silk Roads Transport and Trade in Greater Central Asia,” Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program, 2007.

political transformation or economic development of Central Asia.² Nonetheless, this approach represents a rare vision—an optimistic counterfactual—for a region the potentialities of which are often overlooked.

The Spillover, by contrast, is a worst-case scenario that requires intensive planning merely to stave off disaster. It envisions a chain reaction beginning with the withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2014 and triggering a civil war between a weak Afghan government and a resurgent Taliban. Afghanistan becomes a training ground for insurgents, and Islamist militants and war refugees stream across borders, some winding up in Central Asia, a region plagued with corrupt and repressive governments and aggrieved citizens. Afghan chaos thereby infects Central Asia, leaving failed states, violence, and extremism in its wake.

The Spillover is the “evil twin” of the NSR. Whereas the NSR sees Afghanistan as an opportunity—a buyer of Central Asian electricity and a transit country for oil and gas—the Spillover sees it as a fount of extremism and anarchy. Whereas the NSR sees borders as a hindrance to trade and emphasizes the benefits of cross-border exchange, the Spillover sees borders as a necessary defense against unwanted incursions and in need of strengthening. Finally, while the NSR imagines how Central Asia’s natural and human resources can be put to productive use to the benefit of the region as a whole, the Spillover focuses on the sources of instability and imagines regimes to be so fragile that the introduction of malevolent influences from Afghanistan could cause them to collapse.

Because the NSR has been critiqued elsewhere, while the Spillover has not been subject to extensive scrutiny, I focus on the latter in the remainder of this memo: why it is a seductive narrative to buy into, why it is flawed, and how policymakers might use different assumptions to prepare for neither the most fanciful nor dire scenario, but instead the most likely.

The Thrill of Spill

The idea of a Spillover has proponents in several camps. In fact, it is not only an American vision; Russian and Central Asian officials have done even more to promote the same theme. In Russia’s case, the putative Spillover provides a pretext for symbolically reasserting dominance in the region, which was (in the view of some) disrupted dramatically by the U.S. military presence in southwest Asia. Thus, Russia has an interest in emphasizing the notion of a new threat to justify its role as a security guarantor for the Central Asian states. This enables Russia to strengthen the Collective Operation Reaction Force of the Collective Security Treaty Organization, which also involves Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan.³ It also helps Russia justify its continued military presence in the latter two states.

² Richard A. Boucher, “U.S. Policy in Central Asia: Balancing Priorities (Part II),” Statement to the House International Relations Committee Subcommittee on the Middle East and Central Asia, April 26, 2006.

³ “CSTO to assist in stability efforts of Afghan authorities,” Voice of Russia, May 28, 2013 (http://english.ruvr.ru/news/2013_05_28/CSTO-to-assist-in-stability-efforts-of-Afghan-authorities/).

Central Asian leaders also have an interest in highlighting the potential threat from Afghanistan. They have consequently invoked two tropes that have a long pedigree in Central Asia's short history as independent states. The first, *We are threatened and therefore need help*, has been instrumental in obtaining security assistance from external powers; even if the U.S. military presence comes to an end, it argues for the continued flow of aid.⁴ The second, *All bad things come from abroad*, helps to distract from problems of governance while also justifying repression against domestic opponents by linking them to foreign threats. Thus, Kyrgyzstan's 1990 Osh riots were believed to be a KGB plot to keep the republic dependent on Moscow, the 2010 violence was blamed on Tajik mercenaries,⁵ and Uzbekistan's 2005 massacre of protesters in Andijan pinned on Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Hizb ut-Tahrir, and al-Qaeda.⁶

These two claims, despite their self-serving nature, coincide with U.S. bureaucratic interests. The foreign policy bureaucracy is designed for officials to collaborate with their counterparts in other states on an equal basis and presupposes common interests, in this case stability in Central Asia. U.S. officials have little to gain professionally by considering whether their counterparts' actions may serve to undermine, rather than promote, stability, or vocalizing suspicions that politicians exaggerate threats purely for financial benefit.

Furthermore, the programs that stem from the Spillover narrative serve political, as well as bureaucratic, interests. Technical programs like border security and military training conform to a worldview in which righteous states defend themselves from nefarious adversaries. And because defense-related programs require no political concessions of a state's leaders, as is often the case with other foreign policy instruments like democracy promotion, they can be touted as successful episodes of cooperation in an otherwise fraught relationship.

The Spillover also appeals to strategic thinkers because it acts as a template that explains otherwise complex regional dynamics. Under the rubric of geographic proximity, the diffusion of Afghan chaos beyond its borders has a surface plausibility. After all, Afghanistan and post-Soviet Central Asia have a common religious identity and similar languages and cultures, and they are all weak and corrupt states. However, facile assumptions based on maps overlook important historical, political, and cultural factors that complicate the Spillover narrative upon closer inspection.

⁴ For example, according to Uzbek President Islam Karimov: "We have serious concerns [about] the withdrawal of troops...and it cannot be denied that, first, terrorist and extremist activity, drug trafficking, their size and scale, will grow, and second, terrorist and extremist activity will not remain only within Afghanistan—it will spill out of Afghanistan." "Visit in Uzbekistan," June 4, 2012 (<http://kremlin.ru/news/15548>).

⁵ "Kyrgyzstan: Fergan.Ru sources confirm the involvement of Tajik contractors in the Osh massacre," fergananeews.com, June 15, 2010 (<http://enews.fergananeews.com/news.php?id=1739&mode=snews>).

⁶ Erica Marat, "Karimov Accuses Kyrgyzstan of Assisting Terrorists," Eurasia Daily Monitor, September 20, 2005 ([http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews\[tt_news\]=30874#.Ues0Dm37ZaE](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews[tt_news]=30874#.Ues0Dm37ZaE)); "Uzbekistan Presses Information Cleansing Campaign on Andijan Events," September 12, 2005 (<http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav091205.shtml>).

Shock and Flaw

First, state failure does not spread organically like a virus. Instead, diffusion depends on the receptivity of neighboring states. Recently, fears have risen that the Sahel region of Africa is susceptible to militancy as a result of instability in Libya. As evidence, some have pointed to the Islamist takeover of northern Mali. Yet Mali suffered from instability to begin with: a Tuareg insurgency, coupled with a weak regime at odds with a politicized army. By contrast, Algeria, which has had a stable political regime for 15 years, has weathered uprisings in neighboring states and potential “spillover” from militants. The seizure of a gas refinery in January 2013 is the lone exception that appears to prove the rule.

In Central Asia, regimes are repressive but states do not face ongoing insurgencies or possess a reservoir of potential recruits for would-be militant proselytizers. With the exception of Kyrgyzstan, there has been no serious contestation for power in Central Asia since 1994 (in Tajikistan), armies are under civilian control, and regimes have the ability to shut borders to most traffic when they are motivated to do so.⁷ Tajikistan, whose government is only weakly in control of the provinces, may be the exception, but there a natural boundary—the Pamir Mountains—prevents large-scale incursions from Afghanistan.

A second flaw in the Spillover narrative is the exaggerated ability of the NATO contingent of 100,000 troops to guard the border—ostensibly holding back the deluge of militancy with its proverbial finger in the dike. If militants were intent on undermining Central Asian regimes, they could do so now, just as thousands of fighters crossed into Iraq during the U.S. occupation despite the efforts of U.S. troops to police the border.⁸ NATO troops are dispersed around the country, with the vast majority located in the south and east, so 2014 is not a magic date after which Afghanistan’s neighbors suddenly become vulnerable. If Taliban fighters were headed across the Amu Darya, we would see credible evidence of it now, but we do not. And in the unlikely case that the Taliban were to take power in Afghanistan, it would find Pakistan a more attractive target, what with its long, porous border, personal and family connections, and an army that has waged a brutal but unsuccessful campaign against Taliban-affiliated groups.

A third flaw in the narrative is the assumption that ethnic and (superficial) religious affinities will aid in the spread of extremism. Yet Central Asians are little enamored with either Taliban ideology or Afghanistan itself. During the Afghan Civil War (1992-96) and the reign of the Taliban, Central Asians did not try to import Taliban ideology, and the domestic repression of Islamists did not lead to the further radicalization of the population. Neither did the mujahedeen in the 1980s inspire Soviet Central Asian soldiers to defect or take up the cause of jihad against the USSR. Today’s Central Asians, dissatisfied as they may be with their governments, are unlikely to be

⁷ “Kazakh-Kyrgyz Border Remains Closed, Despite Nazarbaev Promise,” RFE-RL, May 6, 2010 (http://www.rferl.org/content/KazakhKyrgyz_Border_Remains_Closed_Despite_Nazarbaev_Promise/2033942.html).

⁸ Jim Garamone, “Border Police Take on Mission of Securing Iraq's Frontier,” defense.gov, May 7, 2006 (<http://www.defense.gov/News/NewsArticle.aspx?ID=15842>).

inspired by a bloody civil war next door. On the contrary, the specter of anarchy followed by the resumption of severe Taliban Islamic law will only discredit Central Asian Islamists and strengthen the case for secular dictators, the devils people already know.

Trouble Begins at Home

In fact, there is a threat to Central Asian stability, but it comes from within. Compared with the 1990s, Central Asian regimes today are more well-entrenched—better protected *from* society—and yet less legitimate, as the “founding fathers” of the republics are now seen more as predatory than heroic. This decreases the likelihood of spillover from abroad but heightens the risk of internal challenges. For a glimpse of a dire future with domestic roots, one need only look at ethnic violence in Kyrgyzstan or violent struggles over narcotrafficking routes in Tajikistan. If the worst-case scenario came to pass, Afghanistan might come into play as a haven for refugees or a staging ground for combatants in a Central Asian civil war, as it did during the Tajik Civil War. If elements of Afghan society then became involved, the result would be *suck-in* rather than *spill-over*.

The United States has an interest in preventing such an eventuality. This is best accomplished not from containment of notional Afghan threats but through efforts to halt state erosion culminating in failure during the rule of the second generation after independence (as some African states experienced). A high return on investment can come from prosaic programs to develop human capital, in order to ensure that a cohort of competent personnel is capable of running the state after the last generation of Soviet-educated professionals retires. This would involve educational exchanges, training programs, and a focus on strengthening the quality of educational institutions. In a similar vein, humanitarian aid and infrastructure development can address issues of long-term human and physical capital without necessarily strengthening illegitimate regimes. More generally, a healthy dose of skepticism at the self-serving proclamations of Central Asian regimes can help shift scarce aid dollars from simplistic short-term fixes to more sustainable programs that address serious long-term challenges—challenges that stem from the mundane scourge of poor governance, not from the chimera of foreign Islamists.

**Elliott School of
International Affairs**

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