

# The International Community's Elusive Search for Common Ground in Central Asia

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## Introduction

At a closed-door, high-level gathering in Paris in 2008, the United Nations' special representative to Afghanistan urged ministers from Eurasia, the Middle East, and South Asia to jointly tackle common security challenges and identify achievable projects to assist Afghanistan and improve the security of the broader region. Officials from Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan enthusiastically proposed a series of win-win projects and resolved to work together to fight the drug trade, share intelligence to combat terrorism, and build roads, rails, pipelines, and bridges to Afghanistan.

After the conference, Central Asian officials did a unilateral about-face. The Uzbek ambassador publically complained about Afghanistan's "narco-aggression." Tajik officials expressed continued willingness to help Afghanistan so long as that meant that the international community would fund bridges, electric grids, dams, and roads in Tajikistan. Since the Paris gathering, Afghanistan has further deteriorated and the Central Asian states are arguably no more and no less cooperative when it comes to so-called "win-win" regional projects.

A good look at such regional initiatives demonstrates modest returns on donor investment. Indeed, these returns are overshadowed by Central Asian governments' resilient resistance to cooperating with one another even in the face of mutual security threats. The particular interests of Central Asian regimes largely drive how security assistance is absorbed, channeled, and used. Officials in Central Asian capitals have managed to secure funding and participate in hot-button regional security initiatives while maintaining mistrust and severe cooperation deficits with one another.

It is time for international stakeholders to rethink their approach to security assistance to Central Asia. This policy memo briefly discusses the status and stakes behind internationally-sponsored initiatives in Central Asia on counter-terrorism, trafficking, and Afghanistan's recovery and proposes ways to retool policy for more

effective results. It suggests ways to better coordinate and implement international security assistance. More importantly, it argues that security-sector aid should be diverted to the Central Asian governments most likely to put it to good use.

### **Counter-Terrorism**

On paper, Central Asian states appear to be vigilant and well-coordinated in the fight against global terrorism. The UN Counter-Terrorism Committee notes that Central Asian republics have near-perfect ratification records for international counter-terrorism conventions. In the case of UN conventions, states are obligated to enhance cooperation in matters of extradition, mutual legal assistance, and prosecution of suspected offenders. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization's Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) in Tashkent also creates the appearance of a coordinated, region-wide attempt to prevent extremism. In exchange for participating in global and regional anti-terror compacts, the Central Asian republics receive a wide range of lucrative assistance, including funds for judicial training, law enforcement, and border control.

In practice, the republics have performed poorly in implementing international counter-terrorism programs. Few states that are parties to counter-terrorism instruments cite them as the basis for extradition requests. The states as a rule do not share lists of terror suspects even at crucial border crossings. Instead, Central Asian officials have resorted to ad hoc arrangements for political expediency (e.g., extraditing suspects to China upon Beijing's request or, in more extreme cases, using agents to kidnap wanted persons ensconced in neighboring countries). Officials are little inclined to document how they expand counter-terrorism assistance funds, and key donors and international counter-terror officials privately express frustration at the lack of transparency. As one anonymous, high-level UN official neatly summed up the situation to the author, "we spend and spend on these programs year after year and have nothing to show for it at the end of the day."

### **Counter-Narcotics**

Central Asian diplomats regularly complain that the international community is indifferent to Central Asia's drug-trafficking woes, and they insist that more funding is necessary for region-wide programs to combat Afghan opium. In reality, there is no shortage of initiatives and many of them are well funded. The United States, European Union, and UN have extended counter-narcotics assistance to Central Asian republics that cumulatively totals in the hundreds of millions of dollars so that recipient states can overhaul drug enforcement agencies, train border agents and police, and equip authorities with interdiction equipment. Additionally, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crimes (UNODC) has sponsored a series of initiatives designed to encourage the Central Asian states to cooperate with one another to suppress the drug trade, most recently by inaugurating the Central Asian Regional Information and Coordination Center (CARICC).

While Central Asian diplomats unflinchingly describe anti-drug efforts as a win-win endeavor for the region, not all Central Asian states are inclined to actively combat

the drug trade. Tajikistan's impoverished economy relies on a much-needed injection of illicit revenue, especially related to the drug trade. But being a drug-smuggling conduit pays in more ways than one, as Tajikistan simultaneously benefits from the anti-drug money that the international community disburses. By contrast, Uzbekistan is much more vigilant in counter-narcotics measures. Autarchic and highly authoritarian, the Uzbek government is less interested in receiving aid for counter-narcotics measures and more in using the problem of the drug trade to justify its closed-borders policies. Central Asian states care about counter-narcotics initiatives but for very different reasons.

### **Afghanistan**

Most recently, international stakeholders have called on the Central Asian republics to do more to engage with security, development, and infrastructure projects in Afghanistan. These calls took place at high-level conferences in Islamabad, Astana, London, and Istanbul. However, Afghanistan is a false common issue, unlikely to jump-start regional cooperation.

Central Asian states have fundamentally different ways of coping with their proximity to Afghanistan. Tajikistan maintains a largely porous border and is open to trade and cross-border infrastructure. By contrast, Uzbekistan has sealed off its border with Afghanistan and – with the exception of granting passage to the Northern Distribution Network and providing electricity to Kabul and north Afghanistan – allows little cross-border movement of people and trade. Central Asian regimes do not treat their proximity to Afghanistan as a mutual threat; instead, they see it as an opportunity to justify unilateral policies that ultimately prevent regional cooperation.

It is hard to see how this will change even if Afghanistan further deteriorates. While rhetoric of Taliban-driven extremism infecting Central Asia has been plentiful, the threat of spillover remains remote. Afghan-based extremists, after all, are a threat to Afghanistan's political incumbents, not to Central Asian regimes. A more realistic and less pressing concern is that Uzbek or Tajik militants will seek refuge in Afghanistan as they did in the 1990s during Afghanistan's last bout of civil war.

### **Retooling Policy**

Despite being spun as win-win opportunities, international initiatives and programs on counter-terrorism, counter-narcotics, and Afghan rebuilding have failed to spur cooperation across Central Asian governments. But is this the fault of international donors or recipients?

Assistance could certainly be improved on the donor-side in a number of ways. Many programs do not sufficiently coordinate on a regional level the activities of their individual country programs (the UN-implemented/EU-funded [Border Management Program in Central Asia](#) is a notable exception which emphasizes coordination across the region). More crucially, the institutional divide between Central Asia-based programs and Afghanistan-based programs is particularly deep. Despite repeated calls to engage the Central Asian region more with Afghanistan, there has been relatively

little joint initiative across UN programs in Central Asia and the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA).

To improve the donor side of assistance, international stakeholders should create mechanisms that disburse aid in a more comprehensive, coordinated manner. One option may be to create region-wide coordinating bodies for policy issue areas that span Central Asia and Afghanistan. Counter-narcotics is one particularly salient issue area where such a coordinating body would have perceptible effects and spark a more regional response. Recent UNODC initiatives are a good start (such as the Rainbow Strategy), but they are insufficient in the face of the region's massive trafficking woes.

The idea of creating a region-wide coordinating mechanism is neither impossible nor prohibitive. In West Africa, for example, a group of international and regional organizations adopted a fully coordinated approach to counternarcotics. The West Africa Coast Initiative was launched in 2009 to combat drug trafficking and organized crime in four West African countries and hinges on a partnership across a number of international and regional organizations that have expertise in law enforcement, judicial reform, policing, and border management. The initiative creates a smart division of labor: one agency serves as a focal point that mobilizes political support in regional capitals, another organization facilitates follow-up activities, another monitors implementation, and other organizations train police and legal officials. The initiative is unique and seems to be having early impact—a number of West African states that were not part of the pilot program lobbied heavily to be included in the next phase. A regional anti-trafficking initiative modeled on similar lines is suitable for Central Asia, where the volume and value of Afghan opiates far surpasses the value of cocaine trafficked from Latin America across West Africa to Europe.

However, the problem lies beyond coordination fixes that donors and international stakeholders can make. Central Asia's regional cooperation deficit on hot-button security issues may not be because of lackluster donor coordination or host ineptitude; rather, Central Asian governments have failed to cooperate on even well-funded security initiatives because of their diverging interests. Since international programs cannot necessarily alter a government's interest, donors must learn to work with the governments whose interests and orientations are most compatible with the policy goals they are trying to meet.

For example, Tajikistan's laissez-faire approach to the narcotics trade means that international funds to fight trafficking may see lackluster results. By contrast, Uzbekistan's zero-tolerance approach to the drug trade makes it more likely that aid will be channeled to drug-fighting efforts. On the other hand, Uzbekistan's highly authoritarian regime structure and no-tolerance approach toward domestic opposition create the very real prospect that counter-terrorism assistance will be used for further repression. Less authoritarian and still recovering from a devastating civil war, Tajik rulers may be more willing to show transparency in counter-terror efforts.

The challenge for sponsors of international initiatives is to tailor aid to the reality that Central Asian officials have pursued—and will continue to pursue—different policies on issues of common concern. For international stakeholders who have money

to spend but also wish to see results, this requires making tough policy choices. Donors will do well to repurpose and concentrate assistance to states that are most likely to put it to good use and to shut down security assistance to states whose governments are unlikely to implement it as it was intended.