

# A Dangerous Balancing Act: Karimov, Putin, and the Taliban

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Less than six months ago, several related events in Afghanistan suggested anything but an impending peace agreement among hostile neighbors in this war-torn region. Tensions among the relevant actors in the spring and early summer were clearly growing rather than dissipating. In April, the Afghanistan-based Taliban's activities in Central Asia (including drug trafficking and support for radical Islamic groups) were considered a significant enough threat that four Central Asian states (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan) signed a collective security agreement, which pledged to expand cooperation between their respective security agencies and to engage in joint military action if any one country was attacked. In June, some of the Taliban's harshest critics to date--including Russia, China, India, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan as well as the US--shared in a literal "chorus of condemnation" against its alleged attempts to export Islamic extremism into the Central Asian region and its support for international terrorists (such as Osama bin Laden). In July, renewed clashes between Taliban forces and the last vestige of domestic opposition (Ahmad Shah Massoud's Northern Alliance) resulted in the country's fiercest and bloodiest battles this year.

In light of these events and the general pattern of mutual suspicion and conflict between the Taliban and the Central Asian states over the last several years, the last thing one might expect is for one of Afghanistan's closest neighbors (and harshest critics) to begin "making peace" with the Taliban. Yet, this is in fact what Uzbekistan has been doing for the past few weeks. In a few short months, the Taliban has been transformed in the official rhetoric of Uzbekistan's President, Islam Karimov, from the "main source of fanaticism and extremism in the region" to "a partner in the struggle for regional peace." While the Uzbekistani government has not yet officially recognized the Taliban, President Karimov has strongly suggested that this is a desirable--and indeed honorable--course of action, and one that it is strongly considering.

Why has Karimov changed his stance toward the Taliban so dramatically in such a short period of time? In short, because he considers it the lesser of the two greatest threats to his future vision of Central Asia. The other is a strong--and possibly, strengthened--Russian military presence. How should the United States respond? Both covertly and overtly. Overtly, it should neither endorse nor condemn the Uzbekistani government's decision to make peace with the Taliban. Covertly, however, the US should reassure Karimov that the US is committed to maintaining Central Asian security and to keeping Russian influence in the region in check.

## **Brief Background**

The Taliban emerged in 1994 ostensibly to restore order and impose unity in Afghanistan, a country that has been divided into warring factions for decades, with the combined "assistance" of the Soviet Union and the United States. By summer 1998, it controlled approximately 80% of the country and thus established itself as the dominant force. Since then, it has imposed its own extremist version of Islamic theocracy on the country, one that blends two powerful orthodox strains of Islam: the Wahhabi of Saudi Arabia and the hard-line Deobandi school in Pakistan. Not surprisingly, it has also received official recognition from these two states as well as the United Arab Emirates. Most other countries are withholding any form of recognition until the Taliban holds free and fair elections, ends its alleged support for terrorism, and vastly improves its record on human rights, particularly concerning women.

The international community is not alone in its objection to the Taliban's views and tactics. Many within Afghanistan are also averse to the extremist version of Islam that the Taliban vigorously enforces, which is native only to Afghanistan's dominant Pushtun region in the east. Residents of Kabul and members of its many other ethnic communities, including Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Hazaras, are accustomed to a more relaxed version of Islam and thus regard the Taliban as nothing more than an occupying force of religious zealots from the countryside.

The regime's greatest opposition, however, comes from General Ahmad Shah Massoud and his army, known as the United Islamic Front for the Salvation of Afghanistan, or the Northern Alliance. Massoud and Burkhanuddin Rabbani (who most of the world still recognizes as Afghanistan's president), ran Afghanistan from 1992 until Taliban forces expelled them from Kabul in 1996. As of this summer (2000), Massoud still controlled patches of territory north of Kabul and in central Afghanistan where his forces reportedly enjoy local popular support. (In fact, this is allegedly one of the reasons the Taliban's attempts to defeat Massoud have been thwarted.) The civil war between the Taliban and Massoud has literally crippled the country. Yet the Taliban continues its fierce attacks against Massoud. In order to do so, it receives support (military as well as financial) from Pakistan and Islamic militants from other countries. Its other main source of financing--an expansive drug trade--has made it the world's largest opium producer. (By some estimates, the Taliban collected \$30 million in revenue last year from taxes on opium production alone.) For his part, Massoud continues to receive support from Russia, Iran, India and the Central Asian states, all of which want to contain the Taliban and its activities within Afghanistan's borders.

## **What Changed Karimov's Stance Toward the Taliban?**

Since the spring and summer events described above, three important developments have influenced Karimov to change his stance toward the Taliban from archenemy to potential friend. First, Russian president Vladimir Putin has stepped up his anti-Taliban rhetoric and pledges for military support and action in the Central Asian region. For example, at

the July 2000 G-7 summit in Okinawa, Japan, he told journalists that Afghanistan was among the greatest military threats in the region, and then upon returning home, pledged to provide the Russian military and security forces with new weapons to fight this threat. At this time, Putin also accused the Taliban of aiding the Chechens in their struggle against the Russian state. In August, shortly after Putin's visits to Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, his spokesman Sergei Yastrzhembsky officially announced Moscow's intention to launch preventive and aggressive air strikes in Afghanistan; Uzbekistan's leaders then feared the Central Asian states themselves would incur retaliation from the Taliban. During this same month, Putin moved to tighten collective security between Russia and the Central Asian states, which culminated in the signing of a formal pact with several Central Asian states for rapid troop deployment in October. Although Uzbekistan took part in the discussions in August, it opted not to sign the collective security agreement: by the time the agreement was signed, it had already begun separate talks with the Taliban. Russia has simultaneously been pushing economic ties with the Central Asian states. On October 10, for example, the presidents of Russia, Kazakhstan, Belarus, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan agreed to establish the Eurasian Economic Community (EEC), based on the already existing Commonwealth of Independent States Customs Union. Once again, Uzbekistan opted not to join its neighbors in formal cooperation with Russia.

Russia's increasingly aggressive response to the Taliban and its renewed efforts for military and economic cooperation in Central Asia are not reassuring trends for Uzbekistan's leaders. They have always been wary of Russia's military presence in Central Asia and suspicious of its motives. Moreover, it undermines the position of Uzbekistan as the region's only (albeit very limited) military power. In fact, just last year (April 1999) Karimov reproached Russia for militarizing Central Asia when it set up a military base in Tajikistan. Yet later that year he was forced to begrudgingly accept an expanded Russian role due to the perceived threat of a Taliban victory in Afghanistan to Uzbekistan's own internal security, as well as to the stability of the region as a whole.

These recent developments regarding Russia's role are all the more threatening to Uzbekistan because they amount to the first significant convergence in opinion and foreign policy between Russia and United States since independence. Putin explicitly linked his threat to launch airstrikes against the Taliban, for example, to similar US action last year after the Taliban refused to hand over Osama bin Laden. Soon after, the US and Russia began a continued dialogue concerning the Taliban, which led to the establishment of a US joint working group on Afghanistan. October 2000 talks in Moscow between US Undersecretary of State Thomas Pickering and Russian officials also focused in part on how to effectively counter the Taliban's involvement in international terrorism. This seems to have heightened Karimov's fears that the US will continue to support Russia as the predominant military force in the region.

Second, beginning in August the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), which is based in Afghanistan and has reportedly been armed and trained by the Taliban, has made several incursions into Central Asia itself. According to the Central Asian briefing in October by the International Crisis Group, groups of armed Islamic insurgents, ranging

from 70-100 in number and apparently belonging to the IMU, have entered Uzbekistan's southernmost region (Surkhan Darya) and Kyrgyzstan's Baktan oblast, which borders Tajikistan. Both governments have accused these insurgents of attempting to set up military bases in their border regions from which to launch an Islamic jihad in Central Asia. Some IMU units have reportedly found their way into Andijan oblast in Uzbekistan's part of the densely populated and culturally traditional Fergana Valley, and even a resort town not far from Tashkent, Uzbekistan's capital.

Third, and most recently, the Taliban has made substantial military gains in the northern part of Afghanistan. In short, its forces were finally able to break through Massoud's only remaining stronghold--the Panjshir Valley--which also acts as a buffer between the Taliban and Central Asian territory. The Taliban's forces made their first significant advance in early September when they captured Taloqan, Massoud's political capital, giving them control of more than 90% of the country for the first time. They then moved northwards from Taloqan and eastwards from Kunduz, along Afghanistan's border with Central Asia, into the Panjshir Valley, where they have managed to cut off one of Massoud's main sources of financing--the export of emeralds from mines. In the past few weeks, the Taliban's forces have pushed their way right to the Amu Darya River, the only "real" border blocking its entrance into Tajikistan.

The sum result of these three developments has been to convince Uzbekistan's leadership that the best course of action is to literally "make a deal with the devil" to protect both its short- and long-term interests. Clearly, it fears the IMU--which it has repeatedly accused of conspiring to create an Islamic state on the territory of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan--more than it does the Taliban. As prominent Uzbek military journalist Colonel Vladimir Kaloshin said, "Uzbekistan is hostile to the IMU, but it doesn't want to make an enemy of the Taliban." Thus, it is likely that in their talks with the Taliban's leaders, Uzbekistani officials are hoping to exchange their recognition of the Taliban as the legitimate government in Afghanistan for the Taliban's renunciation of the IMU. Yet, more importantly, Uzbekistan's leadership fears continued Russian influence in the region more than it does recognizing the Taliban's victory in neighboring Afghanistan. Moreover, since the US was viewed as the appropriate counterbalance to Russian influence, Uzbekistan may have believed that it needed to find another ally, and the Taliban, unfortunately, was the most willing partner. Now they both seem to share some hostility for the US-Russian consensus that has developed concerning policy in Afghanistan. (Most recently, for example, the Taliban criticized the United States and Russia for jointly seeking to impose more sanctions on the war-devastated nation.)

In sum, Uzbekistan's recognition of the Taliban enables it to meet two of Karimov's chief short-term foreign policy goals simultaneously: first, to be the chief architect of peace in the region; and second, to get the Russians out of Central Asia. Together, these facilitate his overarching long-term goal: to solidify Uzbekistan's position as the regional hegemon.

**How Should the US Respond?**

The best US response seems to be none at all; that is, neither endorsing nor condemning the Uzbekistani government's decision to make peace with the Taliban. If indeed Karimov has brokered a deal with the Taliban to recognize their government in Afghanistan in exchange for a pledge to curtail its active support for the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, which has recently made several incursions into Uzbekistan and neighboring Kyrgyzstan through Tajikistan, this move may inadvertently bring some peace to the region. At the same time, however, the US should take Karimov's negotiations with the Taliban as a strong sign that he is no longer confident in the level of US commitment to the region. The US should then utilize this opportunity to reassess and reestablish its commitment to Central Asia beyond developing the region's vast oil and gas reserves. It should also not abandon its recent efforts to cooperate with Russian forces to control the spread of the Taliban's influence in the region, but rather reassure Uzbekistan that it will help keep Russian troops in check.

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