

After Afghanistan Implications of the “War on Terrorism” for Central Asia

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Introduction

U.S. policymakers have already begun to ask and develop answers to the increasingly common and undeniably important questions of what a post-Taliban Afghanistan might look like and what the role of the United States should be in reconstructing this war-torn country. Little effort has been made, however, to address an equally important question: *What is the likely impact of the current “war on terrorism” for Afghanistan’s neighbors?* In particular, although the tenuous nature of the newly formed U.S. partnership with Afghanistan’s eastern neighbor, Pakistan, has received considerable attention, and the tensions between the United States and Afghanistan’s western neighbor, Iran, are well-known, the significance of the recent alliance between the United States and several former Soviet Central Asian republics to the north of Afghanistan—and, more importantly, the regional implications of this alliance—have not yet been fully articulated and are poorly understood.

All five of the Central Asian states—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan—publicly denounced the September 11 terrorist attacks against the United States and, albeit to varying degrees, responded affirmatively to subsequent requests for cooperation in fighting terrorism. Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan agreed, somewhat reluctantly, to give the United States access to their airspace for humanitarian purposes. Uzbekistan went much further by allowing the United States to station ground troops as well as airplanes and helicopters at one of its air bases, while not dismissing the possibility that the United States could use its territory to launch offensive strikes on Afghanistan.

The attraction of an alliance with the Central Asian states for the United States was perhaps without controversy. Uzbekistan, for example, has several structural advantages for waging a war against Afghanistan. Not only does it possess the best transport facilities, air bases, and military capabilities in the region, it was also used by the Soviets as an important staging area for their invasion into Afghanistan in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

The motivations of the Central Asian states to yield sovereignty and risk reprisals are less clear. These are newly independent states that we might expect to guard jealously their newfound sovereignty. Moreover, they are composed of large Muslim populations and have experienced growing support for militant Islam in recent years. One might thus expect them to fear domestic reprisals for their cooperation with the United States. This is particularly true for Uzbekistan. Since its independence, Uzbekistan has been the most resistant of the Central Asian states to foreign influence on its soil. It has refused to implement economic reform to attract foreign investment and ignored criticism from the United States regarding its abominable record on human rights. Uzbekistan's poor performance in both of these areas has greatly reduced its access to much needed economic aid. At the same time, Uzbekistan is home not only to the largest Muslim population in Central Asia but also to the region's most extremist Islamic groups.

Uzbekistan, then, seems to have the most to lose for eagerly endorsing an alliance with the United States. Yet, it also has the most to gain. Uzbekistan's gains, moreover, may mean serious losses for its Central Asian neighbors. Central Asia's direct involvement in the war and geographical proximity to Afghanistan is likely to simultaneously spur its economic decline and increase its political instability. A unilateral military buildup in Uzbekistan, moreover, will exacerbate regional tensions between Uzbekistan and the other Central Asian states on the one hand and between Uzbekistan and Russia on the other. A short-term alliance with Uzbekistan is thus also likely to jeopardize long-term U.S. security interests.

What Uzbekistan Expects to Gain

The U.S.-Uzbek alliance coincides with two of Uzbekistan's dominant political goals. First and foremost, Uzbekistan expects to enlist U.S. military assistance to eliminate the two increasingly militant and popular Islamic movements—the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and Hizb-ut-Tahrir—on its territory. Both of these groups advocate the establishment of an Islamic state in Uzbekistan through violent means and can be linked directly to international terrorist networks. The former receives support from the Taliban, including an office in Kabul and military training camps in other parts of the country, and has strong ties to Osama bin Laden and Al Qaeda. At the same time, a much stronger and long-term U.S. military presence would help Uzbekistan achieve a more long-term goal—greater independence from Russia, which currently has more than 20,000 ground forces and border guards in neighboring Tajikistan. Up to now, Uzbekistan has pursued a foreign policy that is deliberately independent of Russia. Uzbekistan's president, Islam Karimov, has been perhaps the Central Asian leader most willing to take policy stances that conflict with Russia's. He has always opposed Russia's military presence in the region, only begrudgingly accepting its enlargement after several bombs exploded in central Tashkent in February 1999, and has consistently been reluctant to sign collective security agreements as well as trade agreements that involve Russia.

Uzbekistan also expects to exploit the alliance economically. Although Uzbekistan's thriving cotton trade and oil and gas reserves made it one of the strongest Central Asian economies after the Soviet Union collapsed, this relative success has started to unravel in recent years with declining cotton prices, drought, and rising unemployment. As a direct result of its abysmal records on economic reform and human rights, Uzbekistan has also received the least amount of international economic aid and foreign investment per capita of the Central Asian states. Thus, it

views its strengthened alliance with the United States as a way to increase its access to economic aid and investment without having to improve either of these records.

The Likely Costs: Refugees, Regression, Retaliation, and Regional Tension

Based on geography alone, Central Asia cannot escape some serious implications from the war in Afghanistan. The region will undoubtedly face, for example, a massive influx of refugees from neighboring Afghanistan. Indeed, the districts along Tajikistan's border with Afghanistan (Garm and Badakhshan) and Kyrgyzstan's border with Tajikistan (Bakten) already serve as a haven for Afghan refugees as well as a thoroughfare for trafficking guns, drugs, and women across the Afghani border to Russia and Europe. In comparison to Iran, Pakistan, and even Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are far less adept at closing their borders to refugees and guarding their borders from smugglers. There is also reason to suspect that Russian troops who benefit from illicit trade and local residents who support militant Islamist groups sustain their porous borders.

The previous outflow of refugees from Afghanistan to these Central Asian states promises only to become intensified by the length and severity of the U.S. military action. Thus it will impose a significant economic burden on these states, adding to the already immense economic problems they face. Tajikistan was the poorest country to emerge from the former Soviet Union and the aforementioned border districts are among the poorest in the country. Tajikistan has also suffered from five years of civil war. In the early 1990s Kyrgyzstan suffered an enormous decline in its GDP and high levels of inflation that only in the mid-1990s were brought under control through large amounts of international aid.

The political implications of a refugee crisis in Central Asia are thus not difficult to imagine. Many of these refugees may themselves be members of Islamic militant groups. Others may become ardent supporters if treated poorly and indefinitely corralled into refugee camps with no hope of future opportunities. In the Middle East historical precedent for refugee camps serving as breeding grounds for radical Islamist groups is strong.

Based on Central Asia's more recent political history, a likely consequence of the war in Afghanistan is greater repression against any person or group deemed an opponent of the government. The governments of the three states that border Afghanistan—Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan—are likely to use this new threat of terrorism to continue and intensify their crackdown on political opposition in any form, and Islamists in particular. They will also expect the United States to be less critical of human-rights violations in their efforts to rid themselves of this threat. This is especially likely in Uzbekistan, which has not allowed independent opposition since 1992, and has consistently used both Islam and terror as an excuse to crack down on political opposition.

Further repression, in turn, will radicalize existing Islamic groups and fuel support for militant Islamist groups. For compelling evidence, one need only look to the recent past in both Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. In Tajikistan, exclusion from politics and the subsequent civil war (1992–1997) radicalized a moderate Islamic movement, which not only forced the movement to seek funding from Islamic countries and groups with more radical views but also forced many of its members into exile in Northern Afghanistan where they built ties to the Afghan mujahideen. In Uzbekistan, a series of increasingly repressive crackdowns on Islam since 1992 had by 1997

produced the IMU. This movement evolved from a small group of imams, known as *Adolat* (justice) who attempted to impose Islamic law on Namagan, a city in the Fergana valley, into an extremist group with the primary intent of overthrowing the Uzbek government. It gained supporters when the government crackdown became much more widespread, such that one could be arrested for wearing traditional Islamic clothing, having a beard, or for being in possession of Islamic literature. Following several bombings in downtown Tashkent in February 1999, these same government tactics were used to explicitly target Hizb-ut-Tahrir—a movement that previously espoused the goal of establishing an Islamic caliphate in Central Asia by peaceful means. The mass arrests that ensued, however, convinced its leaders that Uzbekistan’s repressive regime could only be defeated through violence.

Continued widespread crackdowns and the growth of detention camps (allegedly 7,000–10,000 detainees suspected of being Islamic terrorists are being held in camps that were built to hold approximately 70,000 such detainees, giving Karimov plenty of room to continue his crackdown), combined with growing economic problems, unemployment, and increasing poverty, particularly in the countryside, is likely to increase popular support for militant Islamic groups, setting the stage for retaliation, and hence, greater domestic instability. After the latest crackdown on Islam in Uzbekistan, for example, the IMU began distributing leaflets accusing Karimov of being an arch enemy of Islam—even a Jew.

Retaliation will not come in response only to repression, however. As many Central Asians are well aware, military cooperation with the United States will also make several of the Central Asian states a prime target for terrorist groups, both within and without the region.

Finally, the military presence of the United States in Uzbekistan and any increased training, equipment, and financial support that the Uzbek military receives from the United States will increase regional tensions. Most importantly, it will increase the perception that Uzbekistan has fulfilled its “dream” of becoming the regional hegemon. Uzbekistan has declared its intention to serve as regional hegemon more than once since its independence and in the past few years has used its military superiority to exert its will on two of its neighbors—Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. This perception will be greatly facilitated, moreover, by increasing the military capacity of the Uzbek state and reducing Russia’s role as the chief military power in the region. The result will be heightened tensions not only between Uzbekistan and the other Central Asian states, but also between Uzbekistan and Russia.

Conclusion: Policy Recommendations

The implications discussed above are likely but not inevitable. A proactive U.S. policy to the region that entails (at a minimum) the following can mitigate their effects:

- *A comprehensive economic aid package to the Central Asian states so that they may adequately deal with their impending refugee crisis.* They should be offered economic incentives to resettle refugees who prefer not to return to Afghanistan. This is quite likely because ethnic Uzbeks and Tajiks populate northern Afghanistan. Sustained economic aid will also enable the Central Asian states to address growing poverty in the region, which has served as a catalyst for popular support for militant Islamic groups.

- *Continuing pressure on Uzbekistan and the other Central Asian states to improve their record on human rights and democratization.* The “stability trap” that has plagued U.S. policy in the Arab world, whereby states’ desire to impose order at any cost is privileged, must be avoided.
- *Avoidance of a unilateral military buildup in Uzbekistan.* The focus instead should be on providing a broad package of economic aid, and this aid should continue to be tied to respect for human rights, political liberalization, and economic reform.

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