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The Limits of Cooperation: Central Asia, Afghanistan, and the New Silk Road

Kathleen Collins

In anticipating the United States' ultimate withdrawal from Afghanistan, the Obama administration has sought to enlist Afghanistan's northern neighbors within Central Asia in an effort to stabilize and invigorate the region politically and economically. In 2011 the administration proposed a "new Silk Road" initiative linking the world to Afghanistan. The strategy is to enlist the country's Central Asian neighbors in a win-win scenario that will spur trade, energy exports, investment, and peace. The former Soviet "stan" countries, proposes the administration, will be the drivers of the new Silk Road and thereby enrich themselves while uplifting Afghanistan and ensuring regional stability. This vision is a hopeful one, yet the Central Asian states remain unpersuaded. Instead, they have preferred to paint a dark scenario of a coming Afghan "spillover"—of conflict and refugees, Islamist extremism and terrorism, and drugs—spreading not just to Pakistan and Iran but also northward to the former Soviet sphere and undermining the fragile stability of the post-Soviet stans.

The new Silk Road initiative is presaged on multiple faulty assumptions about Central Asian interests: first, that Afghanistan and Central Asia constitute a natural region sharing a common ethnic, religious, and historical identity, and that this identity will undergird a strong regional relationship; second, that the Central Asian states will not primarily treat Afghanistan as a security threat after the U.S. withdrawal; third, that they have shared economic interests in cooperation in Afghanistan; and fourth, that such economic opportunities in Afghanistan will trump the actions and interests of Russia and China. Each of the above assumptions is extremely problematic. The post-Soviet stans are unlikely to be reliable partners in the U.S. plan for Afghanistan after the withdrawal in 2014. In reality, regime survival, border security, and concrete economic incentives—coming from China, not Afghanistan—will determine the foreign policies of the Central Asian states.

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In this essay, I first provide a realistic assessment of security threats from Afghanistan. Then I shift to an explanation of how Central Asian states' insecurities will nonetheless undermine a new Silk Road by increasing their cooperation with Russia and decreasing integration with Afghanistan. Next, I demonstrate that economic incentives from Russia and China are directing the Central Asian states to the north and east, undercutting trade and energy routes through Afghanistan. Finally, I discuss the political and religious crackdowns likely to be justified in terms of the Afghan threat.

Afghanistan as Threat: Rhetoric and Reality

The Central Asian and Afghan populations do not share an identity despite their Silk Road roots and common religion. Soviet modernization policies set most Central Asian Muslims on a very different path, making them accepting of secular government and suspicious of the Islamic-leaning regimes of Afghanistan and Pakistan. Likewise, being Muslim and Central Asian, and sharing a Soviet legacy of both colonization and development, has not facilitated a sense of shared identity, much less cooperation, among the Central Asian states themselves. Since 1991, multiple external attempts at regional integration have either failed or remained hollow shells of international agreements.¹ Mistrust among Central Asian leaders has often led these countries to the brink of armed conflict on their interstate borders and rarely fostered cooperation. The Central Asian republics—with the exception of the enigmatic Turkmenistan—view Afghanistan primarily as a source of instability, refugees, Islamist militancy, and narco-trafficking. Their fears for their security are not unfounded; the U.S. withdrawal is very likely to lead to an escalation of conflict within Afghanistan and potentially even to the collapse of the Karzai regime. Yet although there will be some spillover effects, the anticipated “descent into chaos,” to borrow Ahmed Rashid’s term for the Afghanistan-Pakistan trajectory, is unlikely to dramatically affect the post-Soviet stans.² Nonetheless, several Central Asian regimes, following Russia’s lead, have chosen to act as if that chaos is coming, both to ensure their security and to appease Moscow.

First, not only the Central Asian states and Russia but also the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees have urged planning for a refugee

¹ Kathleen Collins, “Economic and Security Regionalism among Patrimonial Authoritarian Regimes: The Case of Central Asia,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 61, no. 2 (2009): 249–81.

² Ahmed Rashid, *Descent into Chaos: The U.S. and the Failure of Nation Building in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Central Asia* (New York: Viking, 2008).

crisis. While there is some basis for their security concerns, even a return to state collapse in Afghanistan is unlikely to lead to a refugee crisis for its ex-Soviet neighbors. Refugees from Afghanistan have typically flooded east and west, not to the north. Only Tajikistan faces a serious risk in this regard, because of the cross-border ethnic Tajik population, the growth of the Taliban and other insurgent presence in northern and eastern Afghanistan, and the perceived exclusion of Tajiks from power in Afghanistan.³

Second, the major Islamist threat to the Central Asian states comes from within rather than from Afghanistan in general or the Taliban in particular. Both Hizb ut-Tahrir, a transnational, underground Islamic party, and Salafism, an extremely conservative practice of Islam originating in Saudi Arabia, are growing across the region, even in Kazakhstan, which once considered itself immune to Islamism. However, these trends are growing largely due to the internal political and religious repression perpetrated by the Central Asian governments. External financing and ties come from the Middle East and Russia, not from Afghanistan, although opposition to the Afghan war has been a frequent theme in Hizb ut-Tahrir's propaganda.

One Islamist element that is clearly linked to Afghanistan, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), is likely to resurface as a border challenge to Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan in the wake of the 2014 withdrawal. The IMU originated from domestic political opposition to the Uzbek regime around the time of independence. After a failed uprising in 1992, its leaders fled to Tajikistan and later to northern Afghanistan, where they became intertwined with al Qaeda and were harbored by the Taliban. After years of hiding and training in Pakistan's tribal regions since 2001, the IMU may be moving back to northern Afghanistan, and from there it will likely seek to re-enter Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. There have also been reports of ethnic Uighurs, Chechens, Kazakhs, Uzbeks, and Tajiks fighting as jihadis in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and now Syria. While being unlikely to pose a serious military risk to the regimes, Central Asian jihadis could present periodic challenges to regional militaries, which rely on mostly outdated equipment and poorly trained and unmotivated conscripts.

Finally, because opium production in Afghanistan finds its way to markets in Russia and Europe mainly through Central Asia, the narco-trade

³ Gilles Dorransoro, "Waiting for the Taliban in Afghanistan," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, September 2012 ~ <http://carnegieendowment.org/2012/09/20/waiting-for-taliban-in-afghanistan/dvkr>; and Gilles Dorransoro, "The Taliban's Winning Strategy in Afghanistan," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, June 2009, 15 ~ http://carnegieendowment.org/files/taliban_winning_strategy.pdf.

is probably the most serious and ongoing threat to the region's populations. It is unclear how the Central Asian states will be affected in this respect by the U.S. withdrawal. Increased conflict in Afghanistan may escalate the trade as internal control becomes even less effective; however, conflict may also decrease production if parts of the country return to Taliban control. The narco-world is one of the least understood aspects of Central Asian politics and geopolitics, but many local analysts believe that elements of the Central Asian states are heavily involved in the narco-trade, as are many wealthy businessmen in these countries.

Perceptions of Insecurity and Implications for the New Silk Road

Although the Central Asian states and many pundits clearly exaggerate the negative externalities of Afghanistan's post-2014 course, their expectations of growing insecurity will have three immediate consequences that threaten the U.S. vision for a new Silk Road and prospering Afghanistan, as well as any future U.S. political or geopolitical influence in the region. First, several Central Asian states are clearly reorienting themselves into Moscow's sphere of influence. Second, their security concerns—together with Chinese investment—will at least partially undermine the U.S. vision of a new Silk Road revitalizing Afghanistan and the region. Third, the Central Asian states will have little incentive to even pretend to appease Western concerns about political rights and economic freedoms.

Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan pivot toward Moscow. First, sounding the alarm of spillover effects post-2014, the Central Asian states and Russia together have created a pretext for increased Russian involvement in security affairs in the region, and potentially for a greater security role for China and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) as well. In an August 2013 press conference, Russian minister of defense Sergei Shoigu expressed serious concern over security on the Central Asian borders after 2014 and announced that Russia will deploy forces there.⁴ President Emomali Rahmon of Tajikistan expressed similar concerns after talks with President Vladimir Putin,⁵ and in August Tajikistan held border troop exercises that he declared were meant to maintain border readiness against Afghan threats. In September, President Putin announced that the Collective

⁴ "Russia Fears for Afghan Border Security after 2014—Paper," BBC Monitoring South Asia, August 19, 2013.

⁵ "Tajik President Sums Up Results of Top-Level Talks in Russia," BBC Monitoring Central Asia, August 2, 2013.

Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) would perform the Grom-2013 exercises in Kyrgyzstan to combat drug trafficking and terrorist activities,⁶ and in November the Kyrgyz speaker of parliament publicly echoed Russia's concerns.⁷ Despite the exaggeration of risks from Afghanistan, at least two Central Asian states are falling in line with Russia's attempt to reassert its sphere of influence.

Kyrgyzstan is most directly affected by the U.S. withdrawal, after hosting the U.S. and coalition forces at the Manas Transit Center for over a decade. President Almazbek Atambayev has recognized that the United States' exit from the region means the end of any chance of repositioning Kyrgyzstan in the U.S. sphere of influence. Unlike his predecessor, he has not sought to balance the United States and Russia or enrich the regime by provoking a new bidding game for bases. Kyrgyzstan now finds itself under new pressure from Moscow to allow Russia a more expansive, long-term presence. Not long after the announcement that the United States would depart from its air base at the Manas Transit Center, a senior Russian air force official declared that Russia would "at least double" the number of its aircraft at its own Kant base in Kyrgyzstan, just a few miles away.⁸ Russia has also consolidated several bases in Kyrgyzstan—including a potential base in Batken—under one agreement that gives it basing rights through 2032, not entirely to Kyrgyzstan's satisfaction. Yet the country will receive a military assistance package from Russia worth about \$1 billion, as well as potential strategic investment in hydropower. The Kyrgyz government expects that the new tranche of Russian money and military investments will boost its budget, revitalize its decrepit military, lure hydropower investment, and in doing so stabilize Kyrgyzstan's internal politics, as well as secure both its borders and a longer-term external patron.

Tajikistan is the Central Asian state at greatest risk for instability, due to its 1,400 kilometer border with Afghanistan, its history of IMU incursions, and its cross-border narco-trade. Tajikistan is also turning increasingly to Russia and the CSTO for greater military assistance, although whether this will mean more Russian troops is still unknown. Russia and the CSTO have promised "substantial aid" to the borders ahead of the U.S. withdrawal

⁶ Vladimir Putin, "Press Statement following the CSTO Collective Security Council Summit," President of Russia, September 23, 2013 ~ <http://eng.kremlin.ru/transcripts/6025>.

⁷ "Developments in Afghanistan Can Take Any Turn after Coalition Forces Are Withdrawn," ITAR-TASS, November 13, 2013.

⁸ Joshua Kucera, "Russia to Double Presence at Kyrgyzstan Air Base," October 28, 2013 ~ <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/67687>.

in 2014, and Defense Minister Shoygu announced that Russia “will fully upgrade the equipment at its military base in Tajikistan ahead of the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan.”⁹ President Rahmon is probably hoping that the increased border security will stabilize the growing internal militancy in the Pamir Mountains and the Islamic Party–leaning Garm region, both of which have seen sporadic violent conflicts against government forces in recent years.

However, not all the ex-Soviet stans are returning to the Russian fold. Turkmenistan, as usual, is maintaining its neutrality and is relatively unconcerned about the effects of Afghanistan. Uzbekistan continues to balance Russia and the United States. For example, it appeared to counter Russia’s reassertion in the region by withdrawing from the CSTO in 2012 and indicating its increased interest in cooperation with the United States. These moves probably reflected Uzbekistan’s desire to benefit from U.S. military hardware left behind. Kazakhstan, facing little serious risk from Afghanistan, can afford to proceed with its current multivector foreign policy. It has led regional discussions about the new Silk Road and Afghanistan but is still unlikely to answer the U.S. call for regional players to step in to stabilize and develop the country.

Borders, trade, and energy along the new Silk Road. A second consequence of U.S. troops leaving the region is that borders will become more difficult to cross and trade will be further impeded. Uzbekistan will likely rely on its own resources to guard its critical border, but this is likely to make trade and transit more difficult. Even before the U.S. exit, the Northern Distribution Network has been frequently delayed for days or weeks by bottlenecks at the border checkpoints. Moreover, Uzbekistan is more interested in exporting goods to Afghanistan than in importing them, as trade figures for the last decade illustrate.¹⁰ The advantage, to the extent that trade continues, will be primarily in developing Uzbekistan’s export market, not Afghanistan’s.

Already, the stan countries rank among the most difficult places in the world for cross-border trade.¹¹ For Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan, tougher procedures at the borders will further inhibit trade

⁹ Joshua Kucera, “Russia to Upgrade Tajikistan Military Base,” Eurasianet, November 13, 2013 ~ <http://eurasianet.org/node/67756>.

¹⁰ Brion Anderson and Yuriy Klimov, “Uzbekistan: Trade Regime and Recent Trade Developments,” University of Central Asia, Working Paper, no. 4, 2012 ~ <http://www.ucentralasia.org/downloads/UCA-IPPA-WP4-Uzbekistan%20and%20Regional%20Trade.pdf>.

¹¹ World Bank Group, “Trade Across Borders,” Doing Business Project ~ <http://www.doingbusiness.org/data/exploretopics/trading-across-borders>.

with Afghanistan. While the aim is partly to control the flow of weapons, drugs, and insurgents, the effect will be negative for businessmen and shuttle traders, the ordinary people who might benefit from open borders and increased trade. Moreover, Kyrgyzstan's and Tajikistan's security reorientation toward and reliance on Russia are accompanied by plans to complete their integration into the Moscow-led Customs Union, joining their Kazakh neighbor. The effect of that integration, as with other Russia-led institutions, will likely be to increase dependence on Moscow and to disincentivize trade with Afghanistan.

Meanwhile, for the five Central Asian states, trade with China—in goods, services, and energy—has been increasing by leaps and bounds through bilateral agreements, starting at \$527 million in 1992 and reaching \$40 billion in 2012.¹² Speaking in Kazakhstan, President Xi Jinping recently declared “a Silk Road economic belt” linking Central Asia and China. Chinese trade, loans, and investments in the region have already made this a reality, far eclipsing Central Asian ties to Afghanistan and South Asia, as well as north to Russia and west to the European Union. Chinese money comes without short-term security risks and devoid of rhetoric about political and economic reform.

Turkmenistan remains outside the Customs Union and is little concerned about its borders. Yet Turkmen-Chinese relations are undermining a critical piece of the United States' new Silk Road agenda. The U.S. government has made a proposed Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India pipeline (TAPI) the centerpiece of its vision. This potential pipeline, discussed since the 1990s and touted by the State Department since 2011, would carry Turkmen gas across Afghanistan to markets in Pakistan and India. But while the United States continued musing about TAPI, China signed a gas deal with Turkmenistan. In September 2013, on a sweep through Central Asia, Chinese president Xi and Turkmen president Gurbanguly Berdimukhammedov jointly inaugurated operations at the new Turkmen Galkynysh gas field, estimated to be the second-largest in the world. President Xi also signed an \$8 billion agreement to build a second pipeline to export Turkmen natural gas across Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan to China. The deal will increase gas exports to China from the current level

¹² Ding Ying, “Silk Road Revival,” *Beijing Review*, September 19, 2013 ~ http://www.bjreview.com.cn/world/txt/2013-09/16/content_568045_3.htm.

of 25 billion cubic meters (bcm) per annum to 65 bcm per annum by 2020.¹³ As a result, TAPI will now happen only if the Afghan security situation is resolved and China does not exhaust Turkmenistan's production capacity.

Finally, hydropower is another linchpin in the new Silk Road strategy. But the United States has continued to underestimate the intransigence of the Uzbek-Kyrgyz-Tajik conflict over sharing water resources. It is not yet clear that building additional hydropower plants to export energy to Afghanistan can be done without triggering cross-border conflict. Electricity exports may also trigger internal unrest in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, whose populations face frequent electricity and gas shortages and are unlikely to support exporting power to Afghans. Such trading schemes typically bring wealth to elites close to the government while the population remains in the dark.

Domestic consequences: Further degradation of freedom. Finally, the Central Asian regimes and their populations are increasingly convinced that the U.S. presence in the region was short-term and self-serving, while Russia and China remain for the long-haul. U.S. base closures are thus a signal to them that they must accept and rely on the partial reconstitution of Russia's sphere of influence, a potentially greater security role for China, and severely diminished U.S. influence in Central Asia. Indeed, over the past decade the regimes across the region have generally preferred the Russian and Chinese approach. The CSTO and SCO provide some counterterrorism assistance and a pretext for cracking down on unregistered religious groups as well as other political opposition. Meanwhile, Russia and China voice no demands for democratization, respect for human rights, or economic reform. A complete U.S. military withdrawal from the Central Asian republics, together with the drawdown in Afghanistan, will no doubt be followed by a further retrenchment in political freedoms and human rights in those countries. Kazakhstan has already escalated crackdowns on religious groups and is drafting a new counterterrorism program. Likewise, in the past six to nine months, Kyrgyzstan's political reforms have appeared increasingly at risk from executive abuses.

Although the threat of spillover is clearly exaggerated, in the wake of the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan the Central Asian regimes will act to maximize their stability. For most states, this will mean a combination of tighter borders, a pivot toward Russia, and a crackdown on internal dissent,

¹³ "Growth Picture Strong, but Risks on Eastern Focus," Emerging Europe Monitor, October 16, 2013.

branded as Islamist extremism. Washington's idea of a new Silk Road lifting Afghanistan out of poverty and bringing stability to the region is appealing, but it may be a pipedream. Any U.S. plan for stabilizing Afghanistan presaged on a shared identity and regional cooperation in Central Asia, while ignoring either security considerations or Chinese economic interests and alternatives to Afghanistan, is unlikely to succeed. ◆