



Pakistani, Afghan, and Iranian Factors of Influence on the Central Asian Region

Sergey Luzianin

August 17, 2009

Introduction by David Speedie:

We publish today the second set of papers under the U.S.-Russia strand of our [U.S. Global Engagement Program](#).

These papers—two from Americans, two from Russians—embrace an ambitiously broad spectrum of issues, covering U.S./NATO-Russia cooperation on Afghanistan and Central Asia. Four major points may be seen to emerge from the spirited discussion in the papers:

1. The United States/NATO and Russia have clear and urgent common interests in promoting long-term stability in Afghanistan. These include containing and defeating "radical extremist" forces, reversing the noxious effects of the opium trade from that country, and preventing instability in Afghanistan from impacting an extended region. Despite these shared interests, cooperation between Russia and the West is "episodic," rather than strategic or systematic.
2. Afghanistan must be seen, not in isolation, but in a broader regional (Central Asian) context. This is true both in terms of the importance of the region (strategic location, energy resources) and of the formidable challenges (instability, economic reversals). Russia and the West both see advantages and interests to be protected (thus the recent competition for a military presence in the otherwise marginal Kyrgyzstan), but should avoid a new "Great Game" of promoting self-interest over shared concerns.
3. Afghanistan is now, as one paper writer states, "Obama's War." From campaign pledge to return to the "right" war, the President has: appointed new military and diplomatic leadership in Kabul, including a special envoy; invested in an enhanced troop presence; and made strenuous, if incomplete, efforts to drum up international support for the military and reconstruction effort in Afghanistan.
4. The very future of NATO may be viewed through the Afghan lens. The (lack of) commitment of NATO partners, given military and economic constraints, exemplifies the strains and stresses on an alliance that has expanded both geographically and in terms of mission. While the American and Russian paper writers differ considerably in their views of NATO's continuing relevance and role, even the American view of NATO as the most "successful" and "durable" military alliance in history is tempered by the urging to revisit and reconsider the original NATO treaty, which current challenges may be rendering obsolete.

—David Speedie, Director, U.S. Global Engagement Program

The other three papers in this set are:

- [Obama's War](#)
- [State of Denial? NATO at 60 and the War in Afghanistan](#)
- [Prospects for U.S.-Russia Cooperation in Central Asia](#)

The alignment of forces in the region

Modern Afghanistan, including the Afghanistan-Pakistan (Pashtun) cross-border zone, today is a territory of "complex regional terrorism" (CRT),¹ the challenges and threats of which are potentially directed at post-Soviet Central Asia. In these circumstances, special importance is attached to the coherence and interaction of the large nations (Russia, China, the United States, and others) and the Western coalition (the United States and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization [NATO]), which is conducting the war against the Taliban in this area. Given trends in

recent years—the worsening of relations between Russia and the United States, including differences over Central Asia (concerning the oil and gas transportation routes, regional security, humanitarian issues, et cetera)—our countries are working at variance with one another and have different security agendas, which heighten strategic uncertainty in the region.

Two competing projects have already taken shape in post-Soviet Central Asia and are in operation:

1. An American-European one (NATO and the "Partnership for Peace" program, among others)
2. A Russian-Chinese one (CSTO EvAzEs, SCO)

Each of them is implementing a strategy to "expel" the other from the region. The American version of the policy, which was voiced by high officials in the Bush presidency, proposes to "isolate Russia" in the Central Asian region and replace Russia's influence (economic, energy, political, and military) with that of the West.

The Russian version proposes to minimize the American military presence in the nations of the region (dismantling of the base at Manas in Kyrgyzstan, and reduction of the participation of Central Asian countries in the NATO Partnership for Peace program, among others). The official Russian approach to the issue of NATO expansion in Eurasia is well known, having been confirmed in the National Security Strategy of Russia, which was approved by the President of Russia Dmitry Medvedev on May 12, 2009 and remains valid until 2020.

It states in part: "The determining factor in relations with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization is the unacceptability of its plans to move its military infrastructure up to the borders of Russia and its attempts to give itself global functions, which are contrary to international law. Russia is ready to develop relations with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization on the basis of equality and in the interests of strengthening the overall security in the Euro-Atlantic region. The depth and content of these relations will be determined by the readiness of the alliance to take into account the legitimate interests of Russia in carrying out its military and political planning, to respect international law, and further to transform them and search for new challenges and responsibilities in humanitarian fields."²

This thesis is clear and easily understood, from both the standpoint of high-level government interests and that of the ordinary citizens of Russia—the U.S. military structure is able to move to the borders of Russia and is successfully doing so. However, Russia (CSTO) is not able to move to the borders of the United States. It is clear that a deeper military-political and geopolitical discourse lies beneath this simple statement, but for now the problem of the asymmetrical capabilities of NATO and the CSTO remains intractable.

At the same time, Russian-American disconnects limit the possibilities for cooperation in Central Asia, as well as in those areas where cooperation is objectively possible and necessary (fighting the Afghan drug trade, cross-border terrorism and crime, and support for peacekeeping operations).

This article is an attempt to define the possibilities for changing this confrontational model and the acceptable limits on cooperation between the United States and Russia on Afghan, Pakistani and Iranian issues in light of the Central Asian problem set, as well as to ascertain the features of a political and economic mechanism for influencing southern (Afghan-Pakistani and Iranian) factors in post-Soviet Central Asia.³

The Challenge of Afghanistan and Pakistan. Just What is the Threat?

A number of non-traditional challenges and risks (drug trafficking, cross-border terrorism and crime, and religious extremism) are particularly relevant and urgent in the Central Asian region. The source of these threats lies in the confrontational nature of the regional structure and the imposition of transnational challenges on traditional security issues which pose additional difficulties for their neutralization.

It is crucial for the Central Asian region to identify the correlation between the external (the Afghan-Pakistani) threats and its own domestic threats, and to determine which is dominant. It is clear, under certain circumstances inherent threats of terrorism, religious (Islamic) extremism, separatism, drug and weapons smuggling, and environmental problems may arise or recur in post-Soviet Central Asia. In the 1990s the permanent "revival" of internal challenges and conflicts (such as the civil war in Tajikistan, 1991 to 1997) was an extremely complex problem. Currently, this problem is less urgent; however, the socio-economic basis for a new "revival" of the conflict has not disappeared. This is especially true in the more backward and economically disadvantaged countries—Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. In general, the increase in internal threats in the region is due both to traditional factors and to relatively new ones created by aspects of the current stage of development of the Central Asian nations. The internal reasons include limited water and land resources, aspects of the socio-political structure of the societies with their complex system of local and inter-clan relations, border issues, and others.

Regions of the southern part of Central Asia are aligned with post-Soviet Central Asia due to a group of domestic and inter-state factors (conflict, migration, and the presence of criminal networks). This sub regional basis has given rise to regional and inter-regional "clusters," for example, India-Pakistan-Afghanistan-post-Soviet Central

Asia.

The Afghan factor is represented broadly in the context of its military and political influence on the Central Asia region, from the implementation of ideological (Islamic and fundamentalist) doctrines to the special military-tactical and organizational arrangements in the region. The internal policy pursued by the leaders of the Taliban movement of Afghanistan has resulted in special treatment being given to al-Qaeda, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), the Islamic Party of East Turkestan (IPET), Elements of the Intransigent Tajik Opposition (ITO), and other terrorist groups of Pakistani, Arabic, and Caucasian origin.

Given the history of the IMU terrorist movement in Central Asia in the 1990s and its strong ties to extremist groups in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan, its current activities in Afghanistan are of particular interest. The IMU continues to play a significant role in the military-political structure of Afghanistan and the aggressive plans of the Taliban.

Analysis of the current state and development of the "Islamic jihad" makes it possible to predict how the terrorist organizations and groups whose activities will be linked to the Central Asian region will evolve.

Generally, there are several key areas of activity for Afghan terrorist organizations, which are as follows:

- Sustainable sources of financing from international terrorist centers and organizations
- Mobility and a well-honed communications system
- Strong ideological training with a corresponding radical religious foundation, among others⁴

The militants, especially those belonging to al-Qaeda, IMU, IPET, and their various splinter groups, in the near term will form the recruitment base for many new terrorist groups. Afghanistan and Pakistan will also continue to remain training grounds in the geography of international terrorism, a field of activity for known structures and centers where new terrorist organizations will emerge. Soon they will complete the final transformation into true international brigades; their nationalist coloring and political behavior will gradually fade, transforming them into independent jihadist structures, capable of any acts in a given region.⁵

The problems of the Afghan drug trafficking through Central Asia and into Russia and Europe can be defined by three key points:

1. The Afghan economy has passed the point of no return and has become the model of a drug-based national economy. International financial programs and others for shifting the Afghan farmer to growing crops other than opium, will most likely fail. Most of the proceeds from the sale or shipment of drugs goes to organizations outside Afghanistan, to fill the coffers of the various Islamic funds and centers involved in financing and training terrorists.
2. The volume of drugs shipped from Afghanistan to Central Asia during the time Western forces have been in the country (2001 to 2008) has increased from 180 tons to 8200 tons of heroin last year. The NATO command clearly has divided its military operations against the Taliban from the drug trafficking by local warlords and tribal elders, and has not interfered in the affairs of the latter. The motivation for the military's "non-interference" comes down to the possibility of a "social explosion" by the common people of Afghanistan against Western coalition forces, should their drug crops be destroyed.
3. The most transparent sections of the Afghan border for drug trafficking are the Afghan-Tajik and Afghan-Uzbek border zones. With regard to the Iran-Afghan section, drug traffic volumes dropped significantly as a result of a series of administrative, law enforcement, and financial measures adopted by the Iranian authorities to strengthen the border, and in some cases they were stopped entirely. Therefore, the main flow of Afghan drug trafficking shifted to the north through Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan and across the Russian-Kazakh border.

The effect of the Pakistan factor in the region is linked simultaneously to several divergent processes. The region controlled by the Pakistani Taliban in Pakistan itself is continuously expanding. It is well known that before 2001, Taliban terrorist activity initially primarily affected the tribal areas of the country; however, it has now spread throughout Pakistan.⁶

On the other hand, new government institutions were formed in the Afghan-Pakistani cross-border territories that have traditionally been under the control of independent Pashtun tribes and associated with the Taliban movement. Taliban leadership underwent a renewal. New (informal and unelected) radical leaders of groups and formations came to the fore as the influence of the "old" Taliban leaders who had cooperated with Pakistani intelligence (ISI) and military, including former President P. Musharraf, waned.

For example, between January and May 2009 in the Pakistan-Afghan (Pashtun) areas there was a sharp increase in the activities of the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) movement and its leader Baitullah Mehsud, which forced the legitimate tribal leaders in South Waziristan from power. In fact, it eliminated, as it were, the Pakistani government's instruments of informal influence on the individual tribal leaders, which is part of the internal "Talibanization" of Pakistan. It is precisely the Pashtun tribes inhabiting the Pakistan-Afghan border region that are at issue, because it is they who are the main participants in the Taliban movement in both Afghanistan and Pakistan.⁷

This trend seemingly should be taken into account by the American and Pakistani special services when conducting operations to neutralize the "new" Taliban leaders. Given the growth of conflict and inter-tribal clashes between the old (legal) and the new (illegitimate) Pashtun leaders, the Pakistani administration will retain the tactical ability for maneuver (up until they negotiate with moderate Taliban factions). On one hand, Pakistani authorities can and should use the conflicts to split the Taliban factions. On the other, they should continue monitoring the situation, both in cross-border areas with Afghanistan and in Afghanistan itself. In April 2009 in Saudi Arabia, perhaps as part of this process, negotiations became possible between moderate Taliban leaders and the brother of Afghan President Hamid Karzai, with the involvement of Saudi King Abdullah and former Pakistan Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif.⁸ Also in early 2009, Pakistani authorities signed a formal peace agreement with the banned Islamist organization Tehrik-e-Nifaz-e-Shariat-e-Mohammadi in the Swat valley in North Waziristan (the northwestern border area of the country) to formally impose Sharia law in the valley.⁹

Pakistan's strength as a country that possesses nuclear weapons and guarantees non-proliferation controls on these weapons, remains an important problem for regional and global security. Proceeding from this fact, we shall review three possible scenarios for the further evolution of the situation.

1. The Alarmist Scenario: As the terrorist and fundamentalist organizations in the country increase in strength, the threat of Pakistan disintegrating and the inability of civil authorities to prevent its nuclear weapons from falling into the hands of terrorists are heightened. Destabilization could result in the secession of some of the northwestern provinces and disintegration of the country. In our view, presently the danger of this happening is not high.

2. The Stabilization Scenario: Despite the growth of Taliban and other terrorist threats, Pakistan's civil authorities minimize the challenges and threats while maintaining the integrity of territory and keeping nuclear weapons out of the hands of al-Qaeda and other terrorist organizations. It would seem that this scenario is the most likely, given the current situation. Despite some tactical mistakes made by President Zardari, the government is in control of the situation, the army continues operations against the Islamists, and the police and paramilitary units are conducting "mopping up" operations in some Pakistani cities. The internal situation remains more or less under control. With regard to Pakistan's nuclear arsenal, in early 2009, Pakistani authorities officially notified the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) at a meeting between Pakistani officials and experts and officials of the international organization that they fully guarantee the security of Pakistan's nuclear weapons.¹⁰

3. The Intermediate (Military) Scenario: Against the backdrop of a crisis of civil authority and a growing Taliban threat, the possibility that the military will return to power is not out of the question. This return may take many forms, from a coup to the voluntary resignation of the current government. However, presently the chances of this scenario happening are not high.

The Iranian Factor in Bilateral Relations with the Central Asian Nations. Is there an Iranian Threat to the Region?

In comparison with other factors, the Iranian factor in the international relations system of the "Greater Middle East" and "Greater Central Asia" is the most complex. In contrast to Afghanistan and Pakistan, Iran's influence is not related to the terrorist or other subversive activities of al-Qaeda, the Taliban, or others. Iran has been and remains an enemy of the Taliban movement in Afghanistan. Iran's allies, the Afghan Hazara Shiites, were at one time subject to total genocide by the Taliban. By contrast, American politicians and experts believe that Iran is involved in planning and financing terrorist attacks in Central Asia, and that the Iranian "Al-Quds" unit of the Islamic Revolutionary Corps is supplying arms and funds to the Taliban in Afghanistan.

Iran is trying to use the principle of cultural and linguistic kinship with respect to post-Soviet Central Asia. For example, on March 25, 2008 in Dushanbe, the Foreign Ministers of Tajikistan, Iran, and Afghanistan signed agreements to establish the Economic Council of the Persian-Speaking Union. However, according to Russian Central Asia expert A. A. Kazantsev, attitudes in the region toward Iranian ideas of cultural kinship "range from indifferent-negative (Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan), to competitive-negative. (Uzbekistan is positioning itself as a regional cultural center.) Turkmenistan, despite its proximity and officially proclaimed 'Aryan idea,' is also very indifferent to Persian culture, postulating 'kinship' with Turkey."¹¹

If official (government) influence of Iran on the post-Soviet Central Asian region is presented in a structured fashion, it primarily falls among the bilateral models of cooperation.

The most significant bilateral model in the region is Tajikistan, which is the only country in the region where Iranian ideas and projects have found fertile ground. A common Persian culture and history is at work here. Iran occupies second place (after China) in terms of investments in Tajikistan. The Iranians are building the Sangtuda-2 hydroelectric power station and the Istiqlol tunnel; preparing the Shurabad hydroelectric power plant project for implementation; and are planning to build several small power plants, and in cooperation with Russia, finance the construction of the Rogun hydroelectric power plant, which will be the largest in Central Asia. Currently, Iranian experts are building highways and railways that will connect Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Iran, and the Rogun-Mazar-e-Sharif-Herat-Mashhad power transmission line, and other facilities.¹²

The experts and politicians of Iran and Tajikistan have discussed the idea of creating a Farsi-speaking union of nations, which would include Afghanistan in addition to themselves. In particular, this issue was raised during the March 2009 visit to Tehran by Tajik President Emomali Rakhmon during a tripartite meeting of the heads of state of Tajikistan, Afghanistan, and Iran. "There is no language barrier between us, except the language is called Dari in Afghanistan, Tajik in Tajikistan, and Persian in Iran."¹³

The Iran-Kazakhstan model: Iran is interested in Kazakhstan as a country having industrial, agricultural, and scientific potential. Tehran imports grain, petroleum, and metallurgical products from this republic. Kazakhstan is interested in implementing joint oil and gas projects, in particular such projects as construction of a Kazakhstan-Turkmenistan-Iran (Persian Gulf) pipeline, by which Astana could gain access to Asian markets. Kazakhstan would also like to see the Iranians as investors in machine building, infrastructure, transport, and telecommunications facilities. From 2002 to 2008 the volume of business increased five-fold, from \$400 million to more than \$2 billion.¹⁴

The Iran-Turkmenistan model: According to current expert estimates, the annual volume of trade between the two countries, including cooperation in the oil and gas industry, is \$1.2 billion. In Turkmenistan, Iranian companies have implemented various investment projects which include a program to develop optical fiber communications; construction of the Mashhad-Sarakhs-Tejen railway; and establishment of bunkers, water facilities, a plant in Mary, an oil refinery in Turkmenbashi, liquid natural gas terminals, roads and highways, and the Druzhba dam.

The Iran-Uzbekistan model: Iran's relations with Uzbekistan are the most complex in the region. From the earliest years of its sovereignty, Uzbekistan feared that the Iranian presence in Central Asia would provide an impetus to revive Tajik culture and nationalism in the country. Since 2005, commercial and economic cooperation has developed between the countries. There are agreements to develop relations in the areas of agriculture, transport, oil and gas mining and processing, construction, pharmaceuticals, and banking. In 2008, the volume of Iran-Uzbek trade exceeded \$600 million. Uzbekistan exports cotton, ferrous and nonferrous metals, chemical fertilizers, artificial fibers, and other products to Iran. In turn, Iran exports construction materials, detergents, foodstuffs, tea, fruits, and other goods to Uzbekistan.¹⁵

Thus, the bilateral models of Iran's relations with the countries of Central Asia Iran do not fall outside the general rules of inter-state partnership and do not pursue the goal of implementing any special "Islamic projects" aimed at destabilizing the region or intensifying other threats and risks.

Conclusion

It is vitally necessary to strengthen U.S.-Russian cooperation across a broad range of security issues. The time has come for a qualitative upgrade to the regional (Central Asian) agendas of Russia and the United States. The need for changing the political approaches to the issue of the United States and Russian presence in this region is linked to the overall "resetting" of U.S.-Russian relations, which would help to shift away from total mutual antagonism and make more frequent use of the principle of "political pluralism" in the region.

This approach assumes a more non-judgmental and tolerant attitude by the United States toward Russian interests, and by Russia toward American involvement in the Partnership for Peace program and others. Of course, this scheme does not guarantee against elements of rivalry. However, it creates a common political platform and provides a few rules that may lead to compromise and cooperation even on the most complex and sensitive issues of regional security, including the Afghan, Pakistani, and Iranian issues.

NOTES

¹ The author defines "complex regional terrorism" (CRT) as a system of ethno-political and ethno-religious conflicts and threats associated with internal and external terrorist networks and implemented in the space of one

or several neighboring states. Threats in a CRT area, as a rule, occur in the context of increasing cross-border terrorism, drug trafficking, or protracted, inter-ethnic conflicts, et cetera, the reasons and motives for which are not only contemporary and rationally explicable, but also derive from history and from long-standing inter-tribal and inter-territorial disputes and disagreements.

2 The National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation. Approved by Decree No. 537 of the President of the Russian Federation, dated [May 12, 2009](#).

3 According to UN data in Pakistan at the end of 2007 there were more than a million refugees from Afghanistan, and about 1.4 million Afghans were living outside camps. *UNHCR Statistical Yearbook 2007*, Geneva, 2008, p. 114.

4 [Aset Askarov. Vremya Vostoka, March 25, 2009.](#)

5 Ibid.

6 V. Moskalenko. Terrorism in Pakistan: Some Aspects [Terrorism v Pakistane: nekotoryye osoben-nosti], <http://www.carnegie.ru/ru/>

7 V. I. Sotnikov. On the "Taliban" Movement in Pakistan [O pakistanskom dvizhenii "Taliban"], <http://www.iimes.ru/rus/stat/2009/20-04-09.htm>.

8 Ye. Ye. Kirsanov. Pakistan and Afghanistan: Two Sides of the Same Coin [Pakistan i Afganistan: dve storony odnoy medalii]. May 5, 2009, <http://www.iimes.ru/>.

9 <http://www.ferghana.ru/news.php?id=11692&mode=snews>.

10 V. I. Sotnikov. How Realistic is a Collapse of Pakistan as a State and the Emergence of "Talibanistan" Over the Next Six Months? [Naskol'ko realen kollaps Pakistana kak gosudarstva i voznikoveniye "Talibanistana" v blizhayshiye polgoda?] (an attempt to debate foreign analysts), <http://www.iimes.ru/rus/stat/2009/15-04-09.htm>.

11 A. A. Kazantsev. "The Great Game" with Unknown Rules: World Politics and Central Asia ["Bol'shaya igra" s neizvestnymi pravilami: mirovaya politika i Tsentral'naya Aziya]. Moscow, 2008, p. 211.

12 Iran and Central Asia: A Brief Survey of Relationships [Iran i Tsentral'naya Aziya: Kratkiy Obzor Vzaimootnosheniy], April 11, 2009, <http://www.ferghana.ru/article.php?id=6130>.

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid.

Copyright © 2011 Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs