

CENTRAL ASIA

Russia's Security Interests Linked To Transport, Markets And Migration

By YEVGENY KOZHOKIN

A great deal has changed since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Russia has emerged from what seemed to be a permanent economic crisis in the 1990s and is working to regain its influence in the former Soviet republics, proceeding from its national interests.

Russia most certainly has substantial interests in Central Asia, and they will remain so in the future. The scope of these interests (its growth or decline) will depend on the internal situation in Russia and Central Asia, but the interests themselves are clearly a lasting factor. To begin with, Russia wants Central Asian markets to be open, because Russia supplies all kinds of commodities to Central Asia, mostly end products and it wants this flow to keep moving.

Go easy on democracy

Secondly, it wants to develop the transport network because trade needs a normally operating transport system. We should modernise transport systems linking Central Asia with Russia, as they are becoming obsolete and worn out due to a lack of investment.

And the third aspect is concerned with migration. It is a normal process for labour migrants to move from Central Asia to Russia. The region was part of the Russian Empire and then the Soviet Union for a very long time. People there have not only been initiated to Russian culture, but they have also retained their knowledge of the Russian language to this day. Therefore, they find it easier to adjust in Russia than Chinese, Vietnamese or Pakistani nationals.

It is another matter that migration should be regulated, looking at which industries and regions of Russia need labour migrants, and where any inflow would create tension on the labour market, which might have an adverse effect on ethnic relations. Demographically, Russia needs labour migrants, while agrarian regions in Central Asia are so over-populated that an inability to find employment elsewhere would create social tension and even lead to undesirable political results.

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The above three issues — the transport system, the openness of markets, and labour migration — are also linked with Russia's security interests. Russia wants Central Asian states to have stable and secular political regimes that can ensure that people from different ethnic backgrounds and with religious beliefs live, trade and work in a peaceful en-

vironment. Moreover, a considerable number of Russians and Russian speakers live in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and, to a lesser degree, in Tajikistan and Turkmenistan. So, internal security in these countries means the security of our compatriots.



Russia does not want to try any risky experiments, in particular, any attempt to accelerate the development of democracy there. This is not because we are against democracy, but rash methods of promoting democracy could ignite a social and political explosion that might sweep away secular regimes and bring to power Islamic, and possibly fundamentalist, forces. This risk does exist in Central Asia, above all in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan.

Flow of drugs

The road to stability there should lie through the gradual creation of states ruled by law that may incorporate elements of authoritarian regimes initially and, possibly, for a rather long period. These are Russia's main

interests in the region. However, there are certain problems in the region, drug trafficking being one of the most serious of them. It is a highly specific problem concerned with the security of Central Asia, Russia and Europe. It is extremely important to find ways to stop drug trafficking via Central Asia, because the production of

drugs has grown substantially following the overthrow of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan and narcotics are delivered mostly via Central Asia.

We believe that the withdrawal of Russian border troops from Tajikistan will increase the drug transit, because experts from the UN Office of Drug Control and Crime Prevention say the Russian border troops were the main obstacle to drug traffic via the region. Russia has a keen interest, including at the level of common people, society and the state, in finding effective methods to at least reduce the drug flow from Afghanistan.

The US is responsible for the future of Afghanistan and hence for the growth in the production of drugs under the Karzai government. What has the US done to at least keep the production of drugs at the old level, when the Taliban were in power?

Russia and other countries are ready to interact with the US in this sphere, but Washington should take practical steps and assume responsibility. It is surprising that some people say that it is the British who are responsible for the drug situation in Afghanistan. Though it is a major power, Britain cannot solve the problem.

It can be done only through concerted efforts, with the US assuming the greatest responsibility and making the bulk of efforts. Maybe it would be reasonable to review the format of Russian border troops (in Tajikistan) and involve other countries from the Collective Security Treaty Organisation in controlling the border, rather than proceeding from the assumption that Tajikistan will be able to stop drugs on its border without outside assistance.

Radical Islamic intelligentsia

In the Central Asia there also exists the threat of radical Islam. The authorities in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan (there is no reliable information about Turkmenistan) are aware of the danger of Islam taking the Wahhabi road and are trying to prevent this.

Some time ago, all Muslim preachers went through a process to receive new certificates in Kyrgyzstan and the number of mosques is decreasing in Uzbekistan precisely because the state monitors the religious situation through religious boards. A large Muslim State University has been set up in Tashkent to train personnel, including for state structures, who would know how to influence the religious situation.

It is apparent that the threat of radical Islam exists in nearly all of the former Soviet states. The negative factors of poverty and corruption are creating a breeding ground for radical forms of Islam that use slogans of social equality to win an increasing number of supporters.

The fact that many preachers of radical Islam and even Islamic terrorists come from the middle class does not mean that poverty plays no part in this process. History shows that some middle class intellectuals occasionally assume a different position. All the Bolshevik leaders were not proletarians but came from the middle class. The creation of a radical Islamic intelligentsia is proceeding along the same lines.

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Baluchistan CM escapes bid on life

Associated Press

QUETTA, Aug. 2. — The chief minister of Baluchistan, Mr Jam Md Yousuf, escaped unharmed after gunmen ambushed his motorcade near Khuzdar today, police said. Two policemen and a suspected attacker were killed.

One policeman and another suspected assailant were injured in the attack on a road near Khuzdar, a town in Baluchistan that had been the scene of an earlier ambush on army-men, Mr Tariq Javed, the

local police chief, said. One of the attackers, who was injured, was arrested after the shooting, Mr Javed said. The man, who was not identified, was a local tribesman.

The death toll rose after a police officer who was injured in the attack died later at a hospital in the nearby town of Kalat.

The policemen were hit in their sports utility vehicle, which was leading the motorcade. Policemen riding in the last vehicle of the convoy responded to the attackers' fire after Mr Yousuf's car had passed.

There was no immediate word on a motive, but it seemed unlikely to have any links to terrorism. The PM-designate also survived an assassination attempt on Friday, that has been blamed on the Al-Qaida.

Mr Yousuf was coming back after visiting the site of an ambush on Pakistani troops in Khuzdar. A man claiming to speak for a little-known group Baluchistan Liberation Army claimed responsibility for the attack and warned the government not to set up new army garrisons in Baluchistan.

Afghan clashes

KABUL, Aug. 2. — More than 100 Afghan and US troops supported by US warplanes clashed with 50 militants near the Pakistani frontier today, inflicting "heavy losses" on the rebels in the fiercest border skirmish in months, the US military said.

An Afghan commander said the bodies of two dead militants were found after the fighting in Khost province, a former Al-Qaida stronghold in southeastern Afghanistan. — AP

New regionalism in Central Asia

By M.K. Bhadrakumar

CENTRAL ASIA has become a testing ground for "new regionalism," characterised by incipient trends of multipolarity. Assumptions that the region, following the establishment of the United States' military presence there three years ago, was set to become an American sphere of influence are looking facile. The disastrous Iraq war and the consequent loss of American credibility — as the "champion" of democracy and human rights and as the guarantor of the security of globalisation — is impacting on Central Asian political consciousness. Recent developments point to the Central Asian countries moving towards "new regionalism" that would help reduce their vulnerability to external intervention.

This trend is underscored by three pivotal events in June. Following a summit meeting between the Russian President, Vladimir Putin, and his Tajikistan counterpart, Emomali Rahmonov, in Moscow on June 4, the two countries agreed to enter into a strategic cooperation with wide-ranging political, economic and military dimensions.

Among other things, Tajikistan granted free of charge to Russia the right to use *ad infinitum* the Nurek space surveillance centre, one of the most advanced military establishments in the former Soviet Union with a capability to track satellites up to 40,000 km in outer space. Nurek is a Cold War legacy and is still one of only four centres in the world with such formidable capability. There had been speculation that under American pressure, Tajikistan would turn down Russia's pending request. Mr. Putin and Mr. Rahmonov further agreed that Russian border guards would continue to man Tajikistan's border with Afghanistan.

This was also an issue on which Tajikistan had come under concerted Western pressure. Tajikistan is the

only country in the region where Russian forces continued to be stationed after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Again, Russia agreed to write off \$300 millions in debt and offered extensive participation in Tajikistan's hydroelectric projects.

These agreements ensure a pronounced Russian role in Tajikistan for the foreseeable future. Given Tajikistan's sensitive location vis-à-vis Islamic radicalism, major powers have viewed the country as a vital beachhead. Lately, Western scholars have all but cited Tajikistan as a case

half the Great Game.

Yet Uzbekistan has veered toward "new regionalism." On June 17, Tashkent hosted a summit meeting of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) comprising China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. Uzbekistan sought and obtained the privilege of locating the SCO's Regional Anti-Terrorism Structure in Tashkent. At the summit, China made an offer of \$900 millions as loan and trade credits. The SCO announced plans for its rapid deployment forces to stage war

The Central Asian states are looking to reduce their vulnerability to external interventions.

games in late July. SCO member-countries will coordinate on Afghanistan and to this end, will keep a Contact Group in Kabul.

The SCO summit meeting itself took place in an extraordinary setting. The day before the meeting, on June 16, Mr. Putin and the Uzbek President, Islam Karimov, signed in Tashkent a strategic partnership treaty which brought together several threads of cooperation in the political, economic, military and commercial spheres. The treaty commits the two countries to building a regional security system. It says "the sides grant each other... the right to use military facilities on their territory."

Apart from large-scale military exercises, the treaty opens the door to extensive military cooperation such as Uzbekistan procuring military hardware from Russia, training its personnel in Russian military academies, and coordination of the air defence systems. Russia's participation in the Uzbek military-industrial complex (for example, the Chkalov Tashkent Aircraft Production Company) and in Uzbekistan's uranium

mining and enrichment facilities were also envisaged. The economic dimension involves Russia investing \$2 billions in Uzbekistan's energy sector. (In comparison, cumulative American assistance for Uzbekistan since 1992 amounts to \$900 millions).

For Russia, the agreements with Uzbekistan and Tajikistan signal a commitment to regain lost influence in Central Asia. They augment Russia's special relationships with Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. For Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, strategic partnerships with Russia underline the willingness to rethink the fundamental modes of their post-2001 alignments (gravitating towards the United States), and to explore new frontiers of regionalism attuned to national interests. The Central Asian leaders have articulated their disenchantment with U.S. policies in the region, including Afghanistan.

What are the factors inducing this shift in the co-relation of forces in Central Asia? Eduard Shevardnadze's summary ouster from power in the United States-orchestrated "velvet revolution" in neighbouring Georgia last December was surely a turning point. Central Asian political elites took serious note of the "regime change" in Georgia.

Their resentment of the intrusiveness of Western diplomacy began to be openly expressed. Meanwhile, an opportunity has presented itself in the new purposiveness of Russian (and Chinese) policy towards the region. But the crunch came with the Iraq war and the incremental depletion of American power and influence globally. The Central Asian states have been quick to sense that the "war on terrorism" could be heading in uncertain directions.

(The writer is a former Indian Foreign Service officer who has served extensively in Central Asia.)

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Anti-terror official links Uzbek violence to al-Qaida

Associated Press
Tashkent, April 1

THIS WEEK'S outbreak of violence in Uzbekistan is linked to al-Qaida, a top anti-terror official said Thursday — the first time the Uzbek government has directly tied the attacks to the terror network headed by Osama bin Laden.

Ilya Pyagay, Interior Ministry deputy anti-terrorism chief, said operations were continuing to capture suspected terrorists. At least 43 people — mostly alleged terrorists — have died this week in a series of suicide bombings and police shootouts.

"These are Wahhabis who belong to one of the branches of the international al-Qaida terrorist group," Pyagay said, referring to the strict strain of Islam in which bin Laden was raised. "These are bandits who planned these attacks long in advance". Prosecutor-General spokeswoman Svetlana Artikova said on Thursday the events were "all part of one chain".

It was the first unrest to hit this Central Asian nation since it became the United States' key ally in the region after the September 11 attacks.



REUTERS

Uzbek soldiers block a road in Tashkent on Wednesday. Armed soldiers poured through residential areas after a fresh explosion rocked the city.

Pyagay said officials were trying to determine if the 20 alleged terrorists they said died on Tuesday were Uzbek citizens or not. He said many had been carrying false passports in a clash that officers at the scene and witnesses said was sparked after two suicide bombings that killed three police — contradicting official accounts that all 20 blew themselves up.

The events appeared to spark the start of a deeper

crackdown on independent Muslims.

Human Rights Watch confirmed six arrests in Tashkent and the surrounding region, and another two women and three children detained overnight and later released, said Allison Gill, the group's Uzbekistan researcher. She said none of them appeared to have a connection to the violence.

"The volume of arrests just in the last 24 hours is

high," she said. "It seems (authorities) are using this as a pretext to get people that they wanted anyway."

All land border crossings have been closed until further notice, the Border Protection Committee said. Tashkent's international airport continued to operate.

The latest violence was a stand-off that ended early Thursday when officials said a militant blew himself up. Pyagay said it involved a

"lone bandit" and no hostages, although police earlier had said several militants had taken hostages.

Oleg Bichenov, Tashkent city police anti-terrorism deputy chief, said at the scene that a man who had barricaded himself in a house detonated explosives, killing himself. But one officer, who would not give his name, said there were about 20 militants holding "many" captives, and that special police forces were wary of attacking because of the large number of hostages.

Bichenov declined to explain the discrepancies in accounts of the standoff, which began late on Wednesday. Uzbekistan is an authoritarian country where information is strictly controlled, contributing to the confusion. Dozens of troops and officers and a unit of eight police dogs surrounded the house.

A police major at the scene said the standoff began when a booby-trap grenade detonated while a police patrol tried to enter the gate of the house about a half a mile from the Chorsu bazaar where suicide bombers struck on Monday, and that militants took an unknown number of hostages.

Hunt for suspects continues

UZBEKISTAN HUNTED on Thursday for suspects who staged three days of attacks aimed mostly at police in the Central Asian country amid questions of who was behind the violence that left dozens dead in Washington's key regional ally.

Authorities provided few details on who could be behind the suspected terror attacks which began on Monday and have left more than 40 people dead, and were the first time suicide bombers struck in Uzbekistan. Foreign ministry spokesman Ilkhom Zakiruv said, "It's still not clear who is supporting these people, which organisation or movement."

Immediately after the attacks, Uzbek authorities blamed them on Islamic extremists. Suspicion has focused on two groups — the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and the Hizbi Tahrir. Hizbi Tahrir has denied any involvement in the Uzbek attacks.

AFP, Tashkent

