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Beyond Afghanistan

The New ISAF Strategy: Implications for Central Asia

Andrea Schmitz

NATO's new Afghanistan Strategy, which provides for a step-by-step transfer of security responsibilities to the Kabul government starting in 2011, has been met with concern by the country's Central Asian neighbours. Indeed, the relatively stable political environment in Central Asia is largely thanks to the western presence in the Hindu Kush. With the new ISAF strategy, the responsibility for regional security will be transferred to the Central Asian partners over the medium term. These nations, however, are poorly prepared for these responsibilities and will continue to expect further assistance from the Europeans and their transatlantic allies to compensate for deficits in the region's security arrangement. The EU should steer in a different direction by reassessing regional cooperation in the context of its Central Asia strategy and by demanding more initiative from its partners.

A gradual strategic shift in American military and security policy has pushed NATO's involvement in Afghanistan in a new direction. Now the plan is that following a brief phase in which troop levels are dramatically increased, responsibility for security can be handed over to the government in Kabul in a step-by-step process and support can be offered in building up the necessary capacities. In the medium term, programmes for bolstering security forces within Afghanistan should make it possible for the ISAF to withdraw.

These plans have caused great concern among the country's Central Asian neighbours. They are justified in their fear that with the withdrawal of western forces from the country, the hazards originating in

Afghanistan, which are currently contained by the NATO presence, could spread throughout the country's northern reaches, exacerbate endogenous potential for conflict, and destabilise the region.

War Profits

The five Central Asian nations – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan – have been incorporated into the supply logistics of the NATO/ISAF troops in Afghanistan since the start of the NATO mission. The former Soviet states in the region have become indispensable partners to the west by granting flyover rights and allowing military bases on their territories (in Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and

Tajikistan). The strategic importance of Central Asia to NATO has increased even more since the northern supply route was established, which runs across the Baltic states, the Southern Caucasus and Russia, linking Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan in the transport of non-military equipment for the war in Afghanistan. While this cooperation comes at a high price, the West has shown that it is prepared to pay it. An example of this can be seen in the negotiations conducted in early 2009 between the Pentagon and the Kyrgyz administration regarding the use of the Manas Air Base. The Kyrgyz owners of the base succeeded in increasing their annual rental income from 17.5 to 60 million dollars.

Kyrgyzstan, however, does not stand alone in profiting from the war in Afghanistan. The nations through which the northern supply route runs are not opening up their streets and railways to the NATO free of charge; they offer these services within the framework of agreements with the US government that include commercial components. This cooperation is particularly advantageous to Tajikistan as well, whose foreign debt – like Kyrgyzstan's – is equal to roughly half of the nation's GDP. In some cases, the transportation infrastructure first had to be built up to accommodate heavy vehicles, which led to new bridges and streets being constructed in the country and an associated increase in the trading of goods.

Uzbekistan also has its cooperation with NATO and the USA to thank for a modernisation of its transportation infrastructure, as its geographic location makes it the most important junction along the northern supply route. Among other things, this profits Uzbek-Afghan trade relations and is enabling Uzbekistan to expand its energy supplies, which also includes the export of electricity into Northern Afghanistan. The political dividends for Uzbekistan arising from cooperation with the NATO states are of no less importance than the economic gains. The fact that the EU sanctions from November 2005 levied against Uzbekistan

for gross human rights violations have been essentially without effect is largely due to Tashkent providing the Bundeswehr with a military base close to the Afghan border for logistically supporting the ISAF.

Repression and a Return to Traditions

Not only in Uzbekistan, but also in the other Central Asian nations, the increased strategic importance of the region to the war in Afghanistan has had the side effect of abetting the elites in these countries, who have only the vaguest hint of democratic legitimacy, in expanding and consolidating their power. The presidents of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have ruled without challenge since 1991, the Tajik head of state has been in power since the first presidential elections in 1999 following the civil war, and the president of Turkmenistan has been largely following the course set by his predecessor, who died in December 2006. The authoritarian build-up in the case of Kyrgyzstan, once the white hope of democracy in the region, has been particularly striking. Since President Bakiyev assumed power following the Tulip Revolution of 2005, the country's political system has become increasingly repressive. Just how fragile the country's stability was, however, became evident when riots broke out in early April 2010 in Kyrgyzstan and led to the ousting of President Bakiyev.

In all the Central Asian states, the consolidation of power has run parallel to a new nationalism, which links back to pre-colonial traditions and constructs of identity, and rejects the paternalism of colonial Russia just as it rejects the liberal pathos of the Europeans. At the same time, Muslim ideas of political order are evidently attracting more and more followers. This is particularly true for the residents of the Ferghana Valley, which cuts through Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, and constitutes a historical centre of Islam in Central Asia. In this traditionalist environment, it is primarily the younger genera-

tion that is becoming increasingly receptive to conservative Muslim ideas.

These developments do not yet pose a threat to the regimes of Central Asia. They are aware, however, that this could change – especially if a power vacuum opens up in Northern Afghanistan following the withdrawal of ISAF forces, which could be used by militant organisations like the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) to gain new centres of operation in Central Asia. In fact the IMU, whose activities are closely associated with the Taliban and who operate out of locations including Kunduz, is primarily focused on combating the secular regimes of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, despite an increasingly international slant to its actions.

Externalising Responsibility

Instead of addressing these threats as political challenges, which also point to corresponding deficits in the Central Asian states themselves, the elites of these countries have grown accustomed to projecting the causes for instability onto the outside world. Consequentially, they primarily follow a course of modernising their military infrastructure and upgrading the technical capacities of their security forces. In addition, they try to establish more effective border management in order to keep the potential infiltration of dangerous elements – Islamic extremists, drugs, organised crime – outside their borders. In Uzbekistan's case, this has caused a drift towards isolationism, which the country can only afford due to external support.

This support does not come solely from cooperation with NATO and the USA, but also from the Europeans' developmental efforts. The EU finances programmes for improving border security within the framework of its Central Asia strategy. The programmes are largely targeted at provisioning the region with security technologies as well as training police and customs officials. The implementation of these programmes takes place along bi-

lateral lines as well as under the umbrella of regional programmes such as Border Management in Central Asia (BOMCA).

The fact that Central Asian elites tend to externalise the responsibility for regional security is a consequence of decades of paternalism and external support – initially within the context of the Soviet planned economy and later via western development assistance. The associated rent-seeking attitude is further promoted by the strategic importance afforded to the geographical region not only by the USA and Europe, but also Russia and China. The interest of these international powers in accessing regional resources, markets and trade routes allows the Central Asian nations to conduct a foreign policy balancing act, which guarantees a maximum amount of domestic autonomy, but doesn't give any incentive to the elites to pursue solutions to conflicts that threaten the region's stability. This final issue is more pressing than ever considering the premise of a medium-term withdrawal of NATO forces from Afghanistan.

Risks of Securitisation

The increasing militarisation of Central Asia's security policy, which comes as a direct consequence of the ISAF mission, has bolstered the regional elites in their attitude that internal as well as supra-national problems should be addressed primarily with security policy instruments. This securitisation policy may cause internal tensions to be contained over the short term, but on a regional level, it has caused burgeoning conflicts to be exacerbated. First and foremost this is true regarding the relations between Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Their shared borders are militarised and a number of border crossings have been closed. This hampers passenger traffic as well as the movement of goods in border regions and puts a heavy burden on the people living there. These people also have to pay the price for politicians' incompetence in

addressing the issue of regional water management. Instead of looking for compromises, the respective parties are committed to individual national policies, which poison bilateral relations and feed resentment that can easily lead to an escalation of conflicts.

The cooperation with NATO in terms of security policy evidently worked as a negative incentive for regional cooperation in Central Asia. Instead of promoting cooperative approaches, the increase in the strategic importance of the Central Asian nations has been encouraging unilateralism and confrontational policies. This represents the principal risk to regional stability – and the danger will grow with NATO’s withdrawal from Afghanistan and the corresponding drop off in resources.

Russia and China can’t substitute the security benefits that the Central Asian elites derive from the NATO presence and USA military engagement in Central Asia – either in bilateral formats or within the framework of existing security policy arrangements such as the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). This is mainly due to the Central Asian nations’ highly developed mistrust towards Russia, whose hegemonic tendencies they reject. The regional regimes’ foreign policies are oriented towards a balance of powers, and the “western vector” is a key component in this balancing game, which seems to guarantee at least one thing: a continuation of the status quo.

Countermeasures

Against this background, it is hardly surprising that in Central Asia a withdrawal of NATO forces from Afghanistan is viewed with concern. Governments are aware of the associated risks, but an appropriate political perspective for the “time thereafter” is lacking. Indeed, to develop such a perspective is anything but easy. The creation of a regional security framework would require a change of

direction, which would affect both the domestic and foreign policies of the Central Asian nations. First of all, it would require an understanding of foreign policy as not being solely a means to promote national interests, but rather an instrument for solving problems that transcend national boundaries and require cooperation on a regional level. Secondly, this cooperation would have to be committed to a comprehensive understanding of security, which would also include its human dimension, thereby addressing the basic political needs of the citizens of the Central Asian states.

This is where the EU, whose Central Asia strategy will undergo a review by the Council and Commission in the summer of 2010, can make a difference. Rather than being discouraged by the slow progress towards regional cooperation, the EU should place even more importance on this area of activity in the future and require more initiative from its Central Asian partners towards a joint regional approach. Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan have already taken corresponding steps – Kazakhstan in connection with its plans for an OSCE summit in 2010; Uzbekistan in connection with its proposal to create a regional platform for dialogue with the participation of the Central Asian states and Afghanistan as well as the USA, NATO and Russia (“6+3”). These activities, however, follow the familiar pattern of externalisation by placing the focus on stabilizing Afghanistan. Nevertheless, these initiatives allow for progress – provided the issue of stability risks in the Central Asian nations themselves is pushed to the fore.

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