2001-11

Central Asia Takes Center Stage

Hall, Michael A.
Boston University Center for the Study of Conflict, Ideology, and Policy

http://hdl.handle.net/2144/3594
Boston University
The United States' military action against Osama bin Laden's Al Qaeda network and his hosts, the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, will have major implications for the security and stability of Central Asia. Virtually overnight, two of Afghanistan's northern neighbors, the former Soviet republics of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, moved from positions of relative unimportance vis-à-vis US foreign policy to center stage in the military campaign. In addition to striking a blow against terrorism and raising their visibility in Washington, both states have important long-term interests in Afghanistan that reflect their internal economic and security predicaments.

Uzbekistan: Fears of Islamic Insurgency

On 5 October 2001, at the conclusion of his visit to Uzbekistan, US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld announced that he and Uzbek President Islam Karimov had come to an agreement on US use of Uzbek bases and airspace in the event of military action against Afghanistan. At a press conference announcing the deal, Karimov stressed that Uzbekistan was to be used solely as a staging ground for humanitarian and search-and-rescue operations. US deployment in Uzbekistan began immediately, and by mid-October 2001, 2,000 soldiers of the US Army's 10th Mountain Division were on the ground in southern Uzbekistan.

The agreement took many observers by surprise, and led to immediate speculations about a possible quid pro quo from the United States. Speculations ranged from economic concessions to reduced criticism of Uzbekistan's appalling human rights...
record.(4) Although Karimov himself strenuously denied the presence of any quid pro quo whatsoever, statements made both by the US and Uzbek governments may provide some insight into the nature of the arrangement.

When US President George W. Bush addressed Congress on 20 September 2001, he mentioned two Islamic militant organizations by name. One was the relatively well-known Egyptian Islamic Jihad movement, the organization behind the 1981 assassination of Egyptian President Anwar Sadat. The second was one whose name can hardly have been well-known to the American viewing public: the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU). The IMU, discussed in more detail below, consists of a small (probably not more than a few thousand) group of guerrilla fighters, mostly fugitives from Karimov's crackdown on Islamic dissidents, which began in the early 1990s. That the president of the United States should refer to a relatively small insurrectionist movement in what was to most Americans an extremely obscure corner of the world could hardly have been a coincidence, and may reveal something of the US-Uzbek agreement.

A further sign might be found in the joint statement signed by the two governments on 7 October 2001 and released on 12 October. In the statement, Uzbekistan and the United States pledged to establish a "quantitatively new relationship based on a long-term commitment to advance security and regional stability."(5) This arrangement, according to the statement, would include "the need to consult on an urgent basis about appropriate steps to address the situation in the event of a direct threat to the security or territorial integrity of the Republic of Uzbekistan,"(6) perhaps an oblique reference to the IMU.

The IMU has its origins in the Islamic opposition to Karimov's rule that emerged in the Farghona Valley(7) immediately following Uzbekistan's independence. In March 1992, Uzbek security forces moved against one such opposition group, Adolat ("Justice"), which since the winter of the previous year had held effective control of the city of Namangan.(8) Many members of Adolat were arrested; others disappeared or fled into
exile. Two of the latter, Jum'aboy Khojiev (later known as Jum'a Namanganiy) and Tohir Yuldoshev, later re-emerged as leaders of the IMU.(9)

The IMU seems to have attracted little official attention until the spring of 1998, when Karimov accused the IMU of being behind the murders of four senior police officials in Namangan, and took advantage of the opportunity to pass a law tightening restrictions on religious organizations in the republic.(10) In February 1999, a series of car bombings took place in Tashkent, killing 16; Karimov apparently had been the intended target of one of the car bombs. Immediately after the attacks, Karimov alluded to the 1998 murders in Namangan, strongly implying that the bombings, too, were the work of the IMU.(11) Although Yuldoshev denied any IMU involvement,(12) Karimov seized the opportunity to launch a brutal wave of repression against Islamic opponents, both real and imagined, a campaign which continues to this day.(13)

In the summers of 1999 and 2000, forces of the IMU launched a series of raids from the territory of Tajikistan against neighboring regions of Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. Although militarily insignificant, the raids caused great alarm in Tashkent. In addition, the 2000 raid resulted in the brief hostage-taking of four American mountaineers, which earned the IMU a space on the US State Department's list of terrorist organizations.(14) Following both incursions, IMU forces retreated into Tajikistan, from where they were eventually persuaded to leave and were escorted to the Afghan border by the Tajik government.(15) Keeping the IMU forces out of Tajikistan, however, has proved extremely difficult; in January 2001 came reports that a further 300 IMU fighters had to be escorted out.(16)

Quite obviously, the IMU was able to cross the Afghan-Tajik border and move across certain parts of Tajik territory almost at will, a fact which implies close ties with former United Tajik Opposition (UTO) commanders, members of the Afghan Northern Alliance, and perhaps the Russian border guards stationed there. Indeed, on both occasions, the withdrawal of IMU forces to Afghanistan was negotiated and overseen by Mirzo Ziyoev, Tajikistan's Minister of Emergencies and the former military commander of the UTO;
according to some reports, Namanganiy was under Ziyoev's direct command during the Tajik civil war.(17) Following his latest expulsion from Tajikistan, however, Namanganiy seems to have sought new allies. In early 2001, a Taliban minister confirmed that Namanganiy had asked for and received asylum in Taliban-controlled territory.(18) In the summer of 2001 came unconfirmed reports that Namanganiy had been made a deputy of bin Laden and put in command of an "international brigade" of Chechens, Uyghurs, Pakistanis and others,(19) whose reported numerical strength ranged from 2,000 to 9,000 and was allegedly based in the northern Afghan city of Taluqan.(20) His tenure, however, may have been short-lived. On 19 November 2001, as fighting between the Northern Alliance and the Taliban raged over the northern Afghan city of Kunduz (the Taliban's sole remaining stronghold in northern Afghanistan), Northern Alliance General Abdurrashid Dostum first reported to the BBC that Namanganiy had been killed in the fighting, a report which was later confirmed by Tajik military sources. At the time of writing, however, Namanganiy's death has not been independently confirmed, nor has his body been found. Responding to the reports of Namanganiy's death, a spokesman for Uzbekistan's foreign ministry, Bahodir Umarov, expressed his government's elation at the news, stating: "Our supreme court sentenced him to death two [sic] years ago. (21) Now that sentence has been carried out."(22)

As elated as Uzbekistan's government might be over the apparent death of Namanganiy, this alone cannot guarantee the republic's future security. For one thing, it seems that the actual military threat posed by the IMU was negligible. A far more serious Islamist challenge to Karimov comes from an organization known as the Hizb ut-Tahrir, the "Party of Freedom," a genuinely international organization seeking, it claims, to use nonviolent means to oust all existing Islamic governments and replace them with a unified Caliphate. Hizb ut-Tahrir is highly secretive, highly organized, and very active in the three Farghona Valley states. Operating in small local cells, Hizb ut-Tahrir cannot be defeated by a military assault.(23) Furthermore, unless Karimov ceases his brutal suppression of any and all dissent and takes real steps to improve the lives of his citizens, support for movements such as Hizb ut-Tahrir is likely to only increase.
Tajikistan: The Quest for a Secure Border

It seems that Tajik President Emomali Rahmonov's motives for cooperating with the US are rather more diffuse than Karimov's, and center on concerns over Tajikistan's 800-mile (1,200-kilometer) border with Afghanistan. Large parts of the border pass through very rugged and remote mountain territory, and are virtually impossible to control. This has become particularly important since the collapse of the Soviet Union and Tajikistan's descent into anarchy almost immediately thereafter. Among groups taking advantage of the new permeability of the border were the armed forces of the United Tajik Opposition who routinely staged cross-border raids during the 1992-1997 Tajik civil war. (24)

The inability of Dushanbe to secure the border led to the deployment of 15,000 Russian troops in 1993 and direct Russian involvement in the Tajik civil war. With the fall of Kabul to the Taliban in September 1996, Russia began to pressure the Tajik government to reach an accommodation with the rebel forces. A cease-fire between Dushanbe and the UTO was declared in December 1996; the following June a peace treaty was signed in Moscow. Moreover, the fall of Kabul prompted Moscow to dispatch a further 10,000 troops to the Tajik-Afghan border, (25) which remains under the control of Russian forces to this day.

Keenly aware of his dependence on Russian military support, Rahmonov has been one of the most pro-Russian leaders in Central Asia, in stark contrast to Karimov, who has charted a much more independent course. In the current conflict, Rahmonov has declared that he is in consultation with Russian President Vladimir Putin "every day or every second day, sometimes every hour, depending on the situation." (26) These close ties with Russia may help explain why Rahmonov has been even more reticent than Karimov when discussing the nature of US-Tajik cooperation in the current campaign. Conflicting reports have been circulating over the presence of US forces on Tajik soil and the use by the US of Tajik airspace and facilities.
It does seem that the US and Tajikistan recently have come to an agreement, no doubt with Russia’s blessing. In early November 2001, Rumsfeld visited Dushanbe, later announcing that Tajikistan had agreed to open its airspace and share intelligence with the US,(27) and on 7 November Interfax reported that Rahmonov had granted the US the right to inspect three Tajik airfields (in the cities of Kulob, Qurghonteppa, and Khujand),(28) although Tajik officials have stated publicly that these airports may not in fact be capable of accommodating the heavy aircraft used by the US.(29) Recently, there have been reports that US and French military personnel studying the Kulob airfield have reached a similar conclusion.(30)

Chief among Tajikistan’s concerns regarding its southern neighbor is Afghanistan’s role as a major supplier of drugs, particularly heroin. Afghanistan ranks as the world’s largest supplier of heroin, and Tajikistan has become a major conduit for Afghan heroin moving from Afghanistan into Russia and Western Europe; of six known Afghan drug-smuggling routes, three lead through Tajikistan.(31) Arrests in Tajikistan for drugs trafficking are an almost daily occurrence; the desperate economic situation of much of the country has been driving large numbers of people, increasingly women, into the trade.(32) There has also been evidence of the involvement of high-level Tajik officials in trafficking as well.(33) As a result, Tajikistan faces rapidly increasing rates of crime, addiction, and HIV infection.(34)

The Taliban government, under international pressure, did take measures to suppress the production of opium in Afghanistan; in July 2000 the Taliban’s spiritual leader, Mulla Muhammad Omar, decreed that the Koran expressly forbids the cultivation and trade of opium, and production dramatically decreased. (There has been no evidence that the Northern Alliance, many of whose forces are likewise suspected of involvement in the heroin trade, have undertaken any similar initiatives.) Large stockpiles of raw opium and heroin already existed, however, and cross-border traffic continued.(35) Nor did the US air campaign stop the flow; in October 2001, 300 metric tons of narcotics reportedly were seized on the Uzbek-Tajik border, and one Russian soldier reportedly was killed in a shootout with smugglers.(36)
It seems that the border guards have not proved entirely effective in maintaining the perimeter. Russian border guards told Anna Badkhen, a visiting journalist, that drugs are transported into Tajikistan in Jeeps under convoy. "Everyone is a smuggler here," the officer says to her as he sends a local man to fetch a heroin sample. "The exchange - and its comfortable familiarity - says a lot about the local culture," Badkhen concludes.

(37) Tajikistan may take advantage of its enhanced international profile to win greater international assistance in securing the border, and in fact the German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer, on a recent visit to Dushanbe, announced that Germany would be sending experts and funds to help improve Tajikistan's border infrastructure.(38)

**Conclusion: Prospects for Future Stability**

Historically, the fate of Central Asia has been linked inextricably with that of Afghanistan. Cultural and historical ties, particularly with the Uzbek- and Dari-speaking regions of the country,(39) are profound, and memories of this relationship are alive today; one example is modern Uzbek emphasis on a 15th-century poet from the Afghan city of Harat, Alisher Nawaiy, considered by many to be the "father of Uzbek literature." Afghanistan also loomed large in the historical and cultural imaginings of Tajik intellectuals in the late 1980s and early 1990s who sought to foster closer ties with Persian(40) speakers in Afghanistan.(41) Uzbekistan and Tajikistan have lent material (and perhaps even military) support to various Northern Alliance factions since the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, backing Abdurrashid Dostum (an ethnic Uzbek) and Ahmad Shah Mas'ud (a Tajik), respectively. For both countries, however, the first priority must be a stable Afghanistan, which can only be achieved through a broad-based government in which all major ethnic groups are represented, and in which no one ethnic group is seen as benefiting unduly from international aid. Clearly, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan will both have a major role to play in reconstructing Afghanistan.(42) Both presidents have at least paid lip service to this idea; time will tell how sincere these pronouncements are. Of far greater importance to their own stability, however, will be how these countries seek to address the internal factors of grinding poverty and political
repression within their borders. Here, the signs so far have been decidedly less than encouraging.

The United States now has a unique opportunity to use its new friendship with the governments of both states, particularly Uzbekistan, to urge them to undertake greater political liberalization. At the time of writing, however, the only concession Washington seems to have won from Tashkent is a commitment, issued in a recent joint statement by the two governments, for Uzbekistan "to accelerate its program of reform to achieve economic liberalization and a market economy, including current account convertibility." For its part, Washington has pledged "to expand its broad cooperation and assistance to support these goals."(43) In the past, the US has paid a high price for its uncritical support of increasingly authoritarian regimes. The US government must choose its next steps very wisely if it truly wishes to promote peace and stability in the vital and volatile region of Central Asia.

1. Michael Hall is a Ph.D. candidate in Inner Asian and Altaic Studies at Harvard University. He spent nine months in 1999-2000 conducting research on language politics and ethnic relations in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan.


7. The Farghona Valley is a region divided between three Central Asian States: Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan. The most densely populated region of Central Asia, it is plagued by rampant unemployment and increasing demographic pressures, factors which have contributed to its emergence as a center of Islamist activity in Central Asia.


9. Reliable details about Namanganiy and Yuldoshev are hard to come by. According to one Russian media source, Namanganiy had served in the Soviet army in Afghanistan, while Yuldoshev had long been active in underground Islamic circles in Namangan. Both reportedly fled to Afghanistan in 1992, where they established contacts with the Tajik opposition (see below) and local mujahiddin; they are also said to have undergone military and religious training under the guidance of Pakistani and Saudi intelligence. In 1996, the two founded the IMU, with Yuldoshev as political head and Namanganiy as military commander; Namanganiy is then said to have established a series of terrorist training camps in northern Afghanistan and central Tajikistan, providing support both for the Tajik opposition and for Uzbek opponents of Karimov's regime. (Mikhail Fal'kov. "Rukovoditeli IDU: Dzhuma Namangani (Khodzhiev) i Mukhhamad Takhir Faruk (Iuldashev)," *NG-Internet*, 24 August 2000.

10. "President Karimov says he will shoot Islamic fundamentalists," Uzbek Radio Second Program, in Uzbek, 1500 and 1000 GMT, 1 May 1998; monitored by The British Broadcasting Corporation, via lexis-nexis.


13. Tolib Ya'qubov, head of the Human Rights Society of Uzbekistan, said in March 2001 that Uzbekistan's prison population now exceeds 250,000, 40 percent of whom are said to be "prisoners of conscience in prison for being Muslims." ("Crackdown against Islam swells Uzbekistan's prison population," EurasiaNet, 3 March 2001.)


17. Fal'kov, "Rukovoditel' IDU."


19. The governments of Uzbekistan and Russia have justified their crackdowns against Islamists and Chechen separatists, respectively, by arguing that these groups represent different offshoots of a vast international Islamist conspiracy linking Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, the Tajik opposition, the Taliban, Al Qaeda, and others, an argument which
overlooks the internal conflicts within this supposed united front. During the recent fighting for Kunduz, reports circulated of large numbers of "foreign Taliban" in the city - if independently confirmed, this may lend some credence to parts of the Russian and Uzbek claims, although at the time of writing this remains impossible to verify and the true scope of the collaboration unclear.


21. In November 2000 Uzbekistan's Supreme Court tried Namanganiy and Yuldoshev in absentia and sentenced both to death. Convicted together with Namanganiy and Yuldoshev was the secular opposition leader Muhammad Solih, who was sentenced to fifteen and a half years for his alleged role in organizing the bombings, for which no credible evidence has yet been presented. ("Acacia Shields Comments on the Tashkent Terrorism Trial and Uzbekistan's Ongoing Crackdown Against Islam," EurasiaNet, 20 November 2000.) Solih, who has been living in exile in Europe since 1992, recently was arrested in Prague on Uzbekistan's request and at the time of writing is being held there pending a hearing on his extradition to Uzbekistan. It does not seem unreasonable to speculate that the silence of the US government regarding Solih's arrest may be linked to Uzbekistan's role in the Afghanistan campaign.


24. In the spring of 1992, following months of unrest in Dushanbe, a coalition of opposition parties ousted the former communist president of Tajikistan. Supporters of the former government, based in the southern Tajik city of Kulob and the northern city of
Khujand, rallied their forces and expelled the coalition government that winter. Forces loyal to the coalition, now known as the United Tajik Opposition (UTO), withdrew into the mountains of central and eastern Tajikistan as well as across the border into Afghanistan, from where they waged a five-year guerilla campaign against the Dushanbe government and established close ties with some Afghan mujahiddin, today's Northern Alliance.


39. Afghanistan's population is a complex mix of ethnic groups. The single largest group is made up of ethnic Pashto, who live mostly in the south of the country and also make up a significant portion of the population of Pakistan; it is the Pashto who constitute the majority of the Taliban forces. The north is home to ethnic Uzbeks (who speak a Turkic language) and Tajiks (speakers of Dari), with smaller groups of Turkmen, while central Afghanistan is home to the Hazara, Dari-speakers who constitute Afghanistan's only majority Shi'i Muslim group; the anti-Taliban alliance consists largely of members of these three groups.

40. Tajik, Farsi (the majority language of Iran), and Dari are all so closely related as to be virtually one and the same language.


42. One important role the two countries have to play is in the delivery of international humanitarian aid. Tajikistan has long been the major conduit for aid to northeastern Afghanistan, and Uzbekistan is under considerable international pressure to re-open a key border crossing near the southern city of Termez, a step Karimov so far has been
reluctant to take. ("Uzbekistan imposes restrictions on travel to regions bordering Afghanistan," *RFE/RL Newsline*, 4 December 2001.)