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NATO Supply Lines in Afghanistan: The Search for Alternative Routes

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15 June 2009

With an expected upsurge in US and NATO troops in Afghanistan, Western policymakers have intensified their efforts for alternative routes through the Central Asian states of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan. Is Central Asia a viable alternative to Pakistan?

THE AFGHAN theatre of the war on terror appears set to witness decisive battles with the United States announcing the deployment of an additional 17,000 troops, increasing the total troop strength to around 50,000. The Taliban have countered by uniting their forces on both sides of the Pakistan-Afghan border.

Need for alternative routes

The critical component in the surge is the ability to safely supply the troops. The frequent attacks on the supplies and logistics in Pakistan have forced the allies to search for new routes, focusing on two new areas: Russia/Central Asia and Iran. While each is currently secure, both pose significant strategic issues that perhaps make them untenable.

The main supply route through Pakistan has been under serious threat since December 2008 when Taliban militants mounted sustained attacks on NATO supply lines passing through Pakistan. According to some estimates, Taliban militants have torched more than 500 vehicles and killed more than 80 drivers involved in the supply chain. The Taliban have used multiple tactics to disrupt the Pakistan route -- attacks on the terminals; threatening and targeting the businesses involved in the transportation system; and blowing up bridges which connect Pakistan with Afghanistan. This sustained threat has caused the US and NATO to intensify their efforts to seek alternative routes through the Central Asian states of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Russia.

Central Asia: The Freight Option

The critical question remains open: are the alternative routes through the "stans" viable? The financial and political costs of diverting supply routes through Central Asia may not be sustainable. The key concern is Russia; supplies would have to enter Central Asia through Russia, and the Russian

influence over this northern route means that it has strategic leverage over the US and NATO. While the need for an alternative supply route is obvious, a long term dependence on this route is strategically and tactically unwise, and may widen the conflict.

Expanding the Conflict Zone

The Central Asian region has been a home to various indigenous radical Islamist movements such as Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM), Islamic Jihad Union (IJU) and the Islamic Movement of Tajikistan (IMT). In the recent past, external groups like Hizb-ut-Tahrir (HT) have also been able to consolidate their footholds in the region.

Militant groups in Central Asian states maintained strong relationships with the Afghan Taliban and Al-Qaeda since its return to the region in 1996. However, after “Operation Enduring Freedom” these groups were relocated to new sanctuaries in Pakistan’s Federally Administered Tribal Area (FATA) where they established contacts with a new brand of Pakistani Taliban. It is not difficult to see that these connections could be used to attack coalition supply lines across Central Asia.

The possible extension of the conflict shifts the focus to the ability of the “stans” to combat the militants. Many of these states are reliant on Russia to provide troops to secure their borders from militants. Thus an increasing threat will require additional forces, either Russian or NATO. The former means de facto recognition of a Russian sphere of influence in this geo-strategic region -- something the US has been trying to avoid. If NATO places “security” forces in the region it is unlikely Russia will tolerate it for long. This has already been seen in the expulsion of US forces from the airbase in Kirgizstan. Given the global financial crisis, it is unclear if western allies have the necessary financial, let alone military, resources to make this option viable for long.

The most critical point in this alternative route would be Tajikistan. According to some estimates, an expected alliance of the battle-hardened militants of Al Qaeda, Taliban (both Afghan and Pakistani), and indigenous Tajik groups would easily stretch the 8,800 strong Tajik army. The last time the Tajiks fought the militants was in the 1990s when it was only with considerable Russian support that the radicals were defeated.

Uzbekistan, which maintains a comparatively large army with approximately 53,000 active troops, would face a revival of the most lethal militant group in Central Asia, the IMU. Neither Tajikistan nor Uzbekistan has improved on its quality, while the militants have gained invaluable experience against Western armies, meaning the balance would seem to have shifted against the states.

Possible Strain

While it is always wise to diversify supply lines, NATO should by no means view Tajikistan and Central Asia as a viable alternative to Pakistan. Heavy reliance on Central Asia and Tajikistan in particular and a combination of oppressive, unrepresentative regimes, weak militaries, fragile state institutions, and existing networks of Islamist militants and drug traffickers could pave the way for the Taliban and Al Qaeda to penetrate more deeply into Central Asian societies and ultimately dismantle the already-weak state infrastructure.

If the battle zone were expanded into Central Asia, NATO and its allies would find itself under strain and at a major disadvantage. Once the situation deteriorates in Central Asia, it would be a difficult, if not impossible, task to manage a conflict theatre that extends from FATA to Afghanistan and the other Central Asian states.

Iran: The non-option option

Iran is an intriguing option. It has the infrastructure to support supplies, and is a far more stable government than those in Central Asia. But if at all, a possible rapprochement is not likely to emerge. Even if it did, such an arrangement would not reach a point where the Ahmadinejad regime and the

clerics in Tehran would allow military supply lines to run across its territory or would use the security forces to defend them. Even so, the strategic impact on the wider Middle East would be more substantial than dependence on Russian-influenced supply lines.

Pakistan: Still the Best Option

Pakistan should be recognized for the considerable commitment of lives and political capital to protect the supplies of a war that is widely unpopular amongst ordinary Pakistanis. Despite protracted attacks, Pakistani security forces must be commended for having prevented a larger scale and strategically-significant attack on NATO's supplies. A US military spokesman was quoted as saying the losses were "militarily insignificant" and would have only "minimal effects on our operations." It demonstrates that even if the subject of criticism, Pakistan is still willing to risk the lives of thousands of its own soldiers to ensure its own security and to support the war effort in Afghanistan. This is a commitment that Washington cannot expect from any of Afghanistan's neighbours.

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