

NOREF Report

Turf on the roof of the world

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Executive summary

Towards the end of July 2012, the government of Tajikistan responded to the stabbing of the head of the National Security Committee in the Mountainous Badakhshan Autonomous Province, on the border with Afghanistan, with a particularly heavy Special Operation. In response to a murder, why was it necessary to send an entire battalion and risk alienating an important minority group, the Pamiris, during the month of Ramadan, a month after the country celebrated unity 15 years after the signing of the Peace Accord, and a year before presidential elections?

This paper analyses four ulterior objectives that authorities may have sought directly or indirectly in launching a brief but forceful but assault on the province: (1) forced recentralisation and the sidelining of renegade field commanders

who had once been included in the government through the 1997 Peace Accord but were now commanding too much autonomy and control in competition with the centre; (2) turf war over the distribution of profits from legal and illicit trade that had been allowed to go on unrestrained in border regions; (3) gaining sympathy for efforts to contain instability in Afghanistan and sending a warning sign against the potential trespassing, not of Afghan Taliban per se, but of Central Asian jihadists and control over any future profits from transit over the Northern Distribution Network route, legal or otherwise; and finally (4) to portray control in order to up the ante in negotiations over the territory of the country in base arrangements anticipated after the 2014 withdrawal of U.S. and NATO troops from Afghanistan and any advantages that could befall from the exit.

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The Special Operation in the Badakhshan Autonomous Province was a gamble, as it counted on perceptions of the local populations, tired of the experience of civil war in the 1990s, as being passive, organised opposition as being feeble, and order and a show of force in tackling corruption and organised crime as commanding respect. However, even though social order was restored, indiscriminate use of force added to the alienation and grievances of the Pamiri people, which could in turn decrease the authority and credibility of the government in Dushanbe.

Ultimately, the incident in Badakhshan is symptomatic of the rocky centre–periphery relations between a post-war central government and neglected and desolate autonomous regions, as well as turf wars over economic and political interests that plague the vulnerable countries of the region. As such, it is a cautionary tale for Afghanistan about a number of challenges ahead. Neglect of underdeveloped sub-regions, courts controlled by local informal leaders, both benevolent and corrupt, as well as dissatisfaction among populations, which decreases possibilities of cooperation. When there is intrusion of armed forces from outside, especially as a substitute for police and security forces and without coordination with local authorities, there is the risk of apathy at best and, at worst, backlash from perceived violation of the sanctuary of local communities. The challenge ahead for both states is to find the right balance between (1) projecting strength and capability to control territory and gain legitimacy from protecting and cooperating with local populations instead of antagonising them, and (2) providing incentives for wealth creation in border regions and redistribution at the national levels. In the final analysis, the real test is that of implementing a just and efficient decentralisation system in the midst of imperatives for consolidating the nation; the two post-war countries on the two sides of the Panj river are grappling with this major challenge by different methods.

Introduction

Observers waiting to spot the spark that could ignite an Arab-style Central Asian Spring were busy recently with what was unfolding in the Pamir Mountains, the Roof of the World (*Bam-i*

Dunya) in eastern Tajikistan. In the Mountainous Badakhshan Autonomous Province (GBAO in its usual Russian-derived abbreviation), for a few tense days at the end of July, the government of President Emomali Rahmon seemed to be antagonising the population of the capital, Khorog, with a disproportionate response to the murder of a government official. In this age of connectivity and mobility, it was hard to suppress information: while Internet, mobile and landline connections were cut intermittently, Pamiris (i.e. Badakhshanis) inside used satellite phones and Afghan SIM cards to communicate with their large community of expatriates outside, who in turn mobilised around social networks, particularly Facebook.¹ A month after government troops entered the autonomous province on July 24th, thousands of inhabitants of Khorog began a vigil in the main square in protest of the ceasefire violation following the killing of a local leader, Imomnazar Imomnazarov. Protesters demanded the withdrawal of troops, the dismissal of the provincial head and amendment to the Constitution to allow a direct appointment of their leaders. Flash back to April 1992: the public criticism of the then Minister for Internal Affairs, Mahamadaez Navdjuvonov, for corruption had prompted young Pamiris in Dushanbe to start a 24-hour picket in front of the President's palace in defence of their fellow Badakhshani in the government. The protest grew into a 50-day sit-in and became inflated with the larger grievances of democratic and Islamic opposition parties. Protests against the sending of federal troops for security actions in violation of GBAO's autonomy, rising food prices and discontentment with centrally appointed local officials had also been staged in June 2008. Could this latest protest, prompted by a heavy-handed military operation, become the start of a new revolution in this impoverished Central Asian country, 15 years after the conclusion of the Peace Accord in Tajikistan that brought the civil war (1992–1997) to a halt?

If one lesson can be drawn from the Arab world, it is that this question is hard to answer. Protests can mutate, grievances can be manipulated and provocations can change the course of events.

¹ See in particular the Facebook pages “Peace in Khorog” and “Stop the military action in Khorog”.

What people go out to protest for can turn out to be different from what they ultimately get. In the case of Badakhshan, the protest eventually led to the withdrawal of the troops by the end of August. Yet the seeds of mistrust had been sown. The unrest started with a Special Operation initiated by the government, a fact that by itself raised a number of discomfiting questions: Why was it necessary to send an entire battalion and risk alienating an important minority group in Tajikistan, during the month of Ramadan, a month after the country celebrated its *vahdat* (unity) 15 years after the signing of the Peace Accord, and a year before presidential elections? What did the authorities seek to achieve, directly or indirectly, and what could be the consequences, intended or not?

This paper seeks to understand the potential motivations behind this risky move from the point of view of those who initiated it, and frame them in the regional context. It will argue that the government may have had four ulterior motives for launching the operation in Badakhshan, in addition to the officially stated objective to catch the murderers. It may have needed the confrontation at this particular time, not only in order to consolidate its authority internally, but also to portray strength to counter perceptions of vulnerability by those fearing the worst after the 2014 withdrawal of U.S. and NATO troops from neighbouring Afghanistan. The move was, however, a gamble as it counted on perceptions of the passivity of the locals, feebleness of organised opposition and respect for order among populations tired of war. The article will distil some lessons learned for Afghanistan, another post-war country seeking reconciliation with opposition commanders.

Ultimately, the incident in Badakhshan is symptomatic of a number of tangible challenges in terms of development, security and governance that plague the countries of the wider region: rocky centre–periphery relations between a post-war central government and neglected, desolate and renegade “autonomous” regions; close association – and turf wars – between economic and political interests; challenge to authorities by “informal leaders”; confrontation with mobilised masses; the tendency to use the army instead of police forces to curb criminal activities; and the interplay between domestic motivations and external opportunities.

A very special operation

Nestled between China, Kyrgyzstan and Afghanistan, GBAO represents 45% of the territory of Tajikistan but only 3% of its population. It is home to 250,000 Ismaili Shiites who speak one of seven Pamiri languages of the Eastern Iranian language family. In this they differ from the majority ethnic Tajiks of Tajikistan, Sunni Muslims who speak Tajik Persian. A stone’s throw away across the river Panj, which since 1895 has marked the border, lies the Afghan province of Badakhshan, with a population of 890,000, the majority of them Sunnis, most of them ethnic Tajiks and Dari/Persian speakers, although ethnic Pamiris also reside in the southern and eastern districts. While both provinces have rich deposits of precious stones, i.e. pink rubies (*La’l*) on the Tajik side, lapis lazuli and emeralds on the Afghan one, both feature as the least developed regions of their respective countries. One side is more blessed, however: the Tajik province received heavy subsidies during Soviet times, has a highly educated population and belongs to a country which takes centrally controlled law and order extremely seriously. GBAO also has access to major regional trade routes: the Pamir highway linking to Osh in Kyrgyzstan and a newer road connecting to Karakoram Highway in China. While it has more land to cultivate, Afghan Badakhshan depends heavily on its namesake for shipment of food aid, products and materials. When borders between Tajikistan and Afghanistan closed during the unrest in GBAO in late July, the mountainous regions in the north of the Afghan side fell under a de facto blockade.

Between July 24th and 29th, the Tajik government launched a Special Operation on GBAO which involved expeditionary forces from the Ministries of Interior and Defence and the National Security Committee, including SWAT (special weapons and tactics) teams (Alpha Unit). The official reason for the operation was to disarm illegal armed groups and arrest the murderers of the Head of the National Security Committee in GBAO, Major-General Abdullo Nazarov, stabbed to death on July 21st in a row with alleged smugglers. The response to the murder took the form of a heavy military assault with helicopter gunships and heavy weapons, which had been, according to officials, taken to GBAO at the

beginning of the month for a military manoeuvre. During the initial stage of the assault, official data pointed to 42 people killed: 30 so-called rebels and 12 members of the Tajik security forces. By the time this paper went to press, the exact number of victims among the civilian population was still not known. Government sources cited only one civilian killed, a surprising number given the very urban setting and heavy nature of the assault. Local residents – and foreign witnesses – claimed anywhere between 22 and 200 people.

The operation, brief but forceful as it was, was officially targeted at four field commanders: Tolib Ayombekov, Mahmadbokir Mahmadbokirov, Yodgor Mamadaslamov and Imomnazar Imomnazarov, who were accused by the Prosecutor General's Office of having engaged in murder, drug trafficking, smuggling, banditry, kidnapping and trafficking in persons (read of women to Afghanistan). Until these charges were formally filed, Tolib Ayombekov, the main instigator, had been wearing a government uniform as a result of a bargain for pacification: an opposition field commander during the civil war, Ayombekov initially became a battalion commander with the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Tajikistan in Khorog on the basis of the quota of 30% of government posts for the opposition negotiated through the 1997 Peace Accord. Soon removed from that post, he was unemployed for a while before becoming commander of a border guards unit at Ishkashim after the 2008 demonstrations in Khorog, of which he was thought to be one of the organisers.

A ceasefire and the beginning of disarmament were announced at the end of July after negotiations involving a 20-member mediation team and an appeal by Prince Aga Khan IV, the spiritual leader of the Ismailis, urging his followers to refrain from violence, work for peace and uphold the law. By mid-August, Ayombekov had voluntarily surrendered and remained under house arrest in Khorog. Imomnazarov, who had also disarmed, was killed, however, in mysterious circumstances on the night of August 21st in his home. Although the government denied responsibility, the killing prompted another round of demonstrations with calls for the withdrawal of troops from Badakhshan. Once a "pahlavon" (literally meaning hero/champion, the term in

this context refers to respected local tough guys) wounded and paralysed during the civil war, the figure of Imomnazarov – and his legacy – sat somewhere between field commander, warlord, drug baron, trusted "informal leader", negotiator, hero and, ultimately, martyr. His murder deepened his followers' mistrust of the authorities, but may also have been the start of a manipulation by "third parties", domestic or foreign, no one could tell. By the end of August, government troops had withdrawn from the province after a truce signed with a 20-member group of locals.

If the original and official motivation was catching the killers of General Nazarov, the murder remained unsolved while discontentment among Pamiris grew exponentially. What could have been the four ulterior objectives of the government for initiating the risky Special Operation? Two of them could be domestic considerations, the rest regional and global.

War as continuation of politics: forced recentralization

One unofficial motive was probably the opportunity to sideline renegade field commanders who no longer served the purposes of the government, and that too in time for presidential elections in 2013. As part of the General Agreement on the Establishment of Peace and National Accord in Tajikistan signed in 1997, local commanders of the then United Tajik Opposition (UTO) were given positions in their home regions, positions that undoubtedly gave them substantial political and economic clout among local constituencies. Officially allowed to remain armed and in control of power structures, these local commanders wielded more power than the centrally appointed head of provincial government (*Rais-i Hukumat*), whom local populations considered highly ineffective. Field commanders turned informal leaders may have had authority by default, but were not much respected, as local populations considered them as corrupt as formal officials. They mostly presented a challenge to central authorities with their command and control of not only security operations in the region but also trade, local politics etc.

The Badakhshan assault was thus part of a series of moves to marginalise, or remove by force, local commanders and former civil war leaders in different regions. Similar operations had previously taken place in the Rasht Valley, in the northern province of Soghd and in eastern Tavildara. For the recentralisation of power, the government had often used the pretext of hunting down terrorists or Islamist extremists, justifying the use of the army and security forces.

In September 2010, a military convoy had similarly been sent to the Kamarob gorge in the Rasht (formerly Gharm) District to track down the 25 inmates who had escaped from prison in Dushanbe. An attack on the convoy, which resulted in the death of 28 soldiers, was blamed on Ali Bedaki and Abdullo Rahimov (also known as Mullah Abdullo), prominent former opposition commanders in the 1990s. Three days after the assault, a massive security operation was launched in the region to capture what the Ministry of Defence claimed were UTO field commanders and their new allies among terrorists and radical Islamists. The terrorist group Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) did in fact claim responsibility for the attack on the convoy, although the exact connections between former UTO commanders and the IMU have never been clarified beyond speculations.

One by one, former commanders were deposed by force or intimidation, the continuation of a process that had already seen the marginalisation of political leaders and neutralisation of entrepreneurs of war that started in the late 1990s.² The taming of former warlords and opposition figures may have eroded the political space and eradicated competition, but the strategy was pursued to ensure that the Tajik government could obtain its unity (*vahdat*), stability and unopposed longevity.

Politics as continuation of economics: turf wars

A second congruent hypothesis that could explain the forceful Special Operations has to do with a turf war between local and central mafias, a connection hinted at in the charges of the Prosecutor General against the four commanders. The violent chastisement could have been motivated by settling of scores and control over legal and illegal trade that had been allowed to go on unrestrained in border regions. Officially positioned field commanders, in control of the local cross-border trade, are supposed to share part of their booty with central authorities – both through the national budget and under the table. By launching an operation against them, the central government sought to diminish the power base and authority of local commanders while putting on display its capacity to control distant regions. This show of force was especially deemed necessary in preparation for the activation of the Northern Distribution Network (NDN) route, which would see the transit of NATO supplies and, with them, a host of other possible economic dividends through GBAO and Khatlon province. As it is, large amounts of narcotics and other contrabands from Afghanistan go through official crossings on Tajikistan's 835-mile border with Afghanistan, with estimates of up to 80 tons of heroin and 20 tons of opium smuggled.³ Although GBAO is no longer the main road for drug traffickers, with the trade now using less geographically challenging routes through Khatlon, control over all trade, legal or illicit, is the prerogative of officials in Dushanbe.

Apparently, the Pamiri Mafiosi no longer sent the appropriate cut to the centre. Tolib Ayombekov had supposedly received permission to engage in business at will in exchange for non-interference in politics. He used this prerogative to set up a lucrative trade in cross-border smuggling of narcotics, tobacco and precious stones. The murder of General Nazarov, who by some accounts was himself running a competing tobacco trade or claiming a bigger cut of local trade for himself, may have been used by rival criminal networks backed by the government to curb in this privilege.

2 See Shahrbanou Tadjbakhsh, "International peacemaking in Tajikistan and Afghanistan compared: lessons learned and unlearned", Les Etudes du CERJ, No. 143, Paris, CERJ, April 2008, <http://www.ceri-sciences-po.org/publica/etude/etude143.pdf>.

3 UNODC (UN Office on Drugs and Crime), Opiate Flows through Northern Afghanistan and Central Asia: A Threat Assessment, May 2012, http://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/Studies/Afghanistan_northern_route_2012_web.pdf.

It was not the first time that economics featured in the calculations of show of force in the region. During the September/October 2010 operation in the Kamarob gorge in Rasht, rumours had it that a new coal field had been found at the top of the valley and local commanders refused to share it with the centre.

The inevitable Afghan connection

A third potential motive for the Special Operation could be sought across the river. The government had an interest in associating the criminal networks in GBAO with “insurgency” in Afghanistan so that it could derive a number of advantages: it could boast of cooperation and coordination with the Afghan government in defending border areas; it could justify the heavy-handed tactics as a preventative measure and create sympathy for its efforts to contain instability in Afghanistan; ultimately, it would send the message that local deals and localised linkages between communities/commanders across borders could not be tolerated if they did not go through the centre. Furthermore, tagging the operation in GBAO to the wider insecurities in the region was a strategic move to highlight the importance of Tajikistan as a transit route between the two hot spots of the region: Afghanistan as the source of instability, and the Ferghana Valley as the desired destination of Central Asian militants currently engaged in the jihad against Western troops in Afghanistan.

During the Operation in GBAO, rumours flew of a significant build-up of fighters on the Afghan side of the river ready to provide support to their brothers in arms. According to officials, eight Afghan nationals were among the rebels killed, and Presidents Emomali Rahmon and Hamid Karzai had a phone conversation during which the former passed on a list of 10 Afghan commanders supposedly cooperating with militias in Tajikistan. This was followed by the arrest of Qari Wadud, commander of the security forces in the Shuhada district in Afghan Badakhshan Province, and the further arrest of three security force commanders in the Baharak district.⁴

⁴ Thomas Ruttig, *Afghan Politicking after the Rebellion in Tajik Badakhshan*, Afghan Analysts Network, August 16th 2012, <http://www.aan-afghanistan.org/index.asp?id=2933>.

While GBAO may not be the primary route for trafficking, the drug economy and smuggling were more prominent causes for the assault than the presence of the Taliban or bleeding out of Afghan insurgents across the river. Ever since the Tajik civil war, when a large number of Pamiri men moved to Afghanistan to join the UTO, affinities have existed between fighters on both side of the river. However, with them belonging to different branches of Islam, Pamiris and other UTO fighters were united in their common struggle against the government rather than religious affinities. Consequently very little, if any, cooperation exists between the Pamiris, Ismaili Shiites with their demands for autonomy, and the Afghan Taliban, Sunnis who consider Ismailis heretics and have limited interest in extending their struggle across borders. If there is convergence among fighters north and south of the river Panj, it is most likely over business interests rather than religious or political goals.

The Afghan province of Badakhshan has until now been considered to be one of the more secure areas, although Taliban infiltration has increased as has the concentration of Central Asian jihadists such as the IMU and the Islamic Jihad Union (IJU), who are often identified loosely – and perhaps incorrectly – as al-Qaeda militants in the mainstream press. The heavy-handed response by the government of Tajikistan to the murder of General Nazarov can be seen as a warning against any potential trespassing, not of Afghan Taliban per se, but of Central Asian jihadists in the future.

The global recipients of the message

If the Tajik government considered playing the Afghan card as a way to draw attention to its importance in the region, the main message was meant for two extra-regional actors.

Russia certainly was one intended recipient. The show of force in Badakhshan happened at a time when the Tajik and Russian governments were involved in uncertain negotiations over the future of the 6,000-plus Russian troops stationed at the 201st Military Base in Tajikistan. Initially leasing it until 2014, Russia had exempted itself from payment in exchange for rendering military and

technical assistance. During negotiations over the extension of the lease, the Tajik government had allegedly demanded a number of modifications, including the payment of around \$250–300 million per year and reduction of the new lease term from the 49 years requested by Russia to an initial 10 years with option to renew. A week before the Special Operation began, the Tajik Ministry of Foreign Affairs had officially rejected the claim of the Russian Ground Forces commander Vladimir Chirkin that the two sides had concluded a 49-year agreement. Throughout late June and early July, accusations had been flying between diplomats and the military of the two countries, with pundits chiming in, of threats of abandonment, blackmail etc. Russian commentators in the press reminded the Tajiks of the help that the 201st Division had rendered to prop up President Rahmon's rule in the 1990s and of the danger that awaited them after 2014 and the inevitable, as they saw it, take-over of the Taliban in Afghanistan. While negotiations were ongoing, the Tajik government may have wanted to manifest its capability to respond swiftly to disturbances on the border with its own army.

The government's strategy to up the ante for negotiations over the Russian bases was no doubt facilitated by the potential for a U.S. rapprochement. In early July, a Congressional delegation had visited Tajikistan where apparently (though officially denied by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs) the question of establishing a military base on Tajik soil after 2014 was raised as a potential replacement for the Manas Transit Centre in Kyrgyzstan. By the end of the month, the Obama government had asked Congress for an increase in military assistance for Central Asia, including doubling of funding for Tajikistan in 2013. Tajiks knew that they had not been winners in the NDN deal, with only 10% of the NATO cargo poised to pass through their territory and the remainder through their rival Uzbekistan. A show of force by the Tajik government would ease fears of Western politicians, who may have mistrusted the state's ability to protect the region against a potential surge north by militants after 2014.

President Rahmon needed to convince Western politicians that he would be able to secure borders against potential terrorist/extremist incursions and control the territory of GBAO, from where

NATO supplies would transit, in order to gain support and legitimacy for his regime, much as Uzbekistan had done in recent negotiations over the NATO exit from Afghanistan. This was largely because of the impression left after the start of the War on Terror that support from the largest funder of the region, the United States, may be contingent upon strength in security operations and ability to show control rather than on soft power and democratic values. President Rahmon may have needed to present himself as the strong leader, the saviour of unity, fighter against organised crime, separatism and terrorism in order to garner international support, especially at a time when his country's position was weakened by allegations, among many Western analysts, that it was a state on the brink of failure.

Potential unintended consequences

The government may have thus calculated that by conducting a brief, surgical assault, it could intimidate and rein in renegade commanders, deflate their influence, punish delinquency in not sharing booty with the centre, rehearse for an eventual post-2014 cooperation with the Afghan government, show capacity and signal control to external courtiers. All this may explain why authorities launched an intimidating Special Operation using the army instead of a simple investigation to find and punish the murderers of General Nazarov. However, indiscriminate use of force would undoubtedly alienate and add to the grievances of the Pamiri people, already feeling under-represented in central government institutions and excluded from the economy. Did the government take into account the potential risk of alienation, the loss of legitimacy or the possible ramifications of the conflict and its manipulation? On the one hand, the operation could have been seen as an ethnic assault on Pamiri minorities, which would then reinforce feelings of separatism and demands for autonomy. Indeed, in spontaneous demonstrations in front of embassies in Moscow and Bishkek, in inflated speeches by opposition figures and on some social networks, the cry of stopping "ethnic genocide" was heard. This, however, was mostly voiced by activists and anxious expatriates outside the province. From within, demonstrations focused more on

the withdrawal of troops, direct mediation by the President and more autonomy for the province, such as election of the head of province.

The government may have counted on the second possible option: that Tajikistanis, whether Pamiri or not, having experienced a bitter civil war in the 1990s, had no more taste for another one; that the elimination of corrupt organised criminal activity would bring respect for a government that is seen as protecting the security of its population; that Pamiris know that the province cannot manage full independence and would strangle if blockaded; that they do not have leaders, such as Davlat Khodonazarov, or organised political parties, like the civil war-era La'le Badakhshan, which could mobilise them politically; that the remaining 97% of the population of Tajikistan would not support an uprising by the Pamiris; and so on.

Ethnic identity may not have turned out to be a mobilising force for a spontaneous rise against authorities this time, and social order “reigned supreme by default”, while, as one eye-witness from Ishkashim claimed, “self-styled nascent and old fighters continued to sit on the fences and exchange rumors of war”.⁵ One important factor is the absence of men of a certain age in GBAO. Despite the high proportion of people with higher education, a large number of men have migrated abroad, given the very few opportunities for employment in the province. Russia is said to have more than a million workers from Tajikistan. The remaining inhabitants are dependent on remittances from relatives, handouts from the state and more immediately the support of the Agha Khan Development Network (AKDN). The Agha Khan himself wields moral authority among the inhabitants, more than any political figure, but for everyday income and dispute settlement many people revert to “informal leaders” who, as explained above, can wear multiple hats.

Yet, if they are not willing to engage in the war of local commanders, whom many consider corrupt narco barons, it does not mean that Pamiris trust authorities. As a result of an operation that involved the army as opposed to law and order forces appropriate for a criminal investigation, their

distrust of authorities, central or local, increased: the central government for encroaching on the province and threatening its autonomy, and their local representatives for being corrupt, nepotistic, indifferent and ineffective. In the meantime, opposition political parties decried the raid as unconstitutional and the government as reproachable for not clarifying the objectives of the operation and seeking a peaceful resolution. The National Social Democratic Party went as far as threatening civil disobedience. The Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IPRT) blamed the government for the killing of Sabzali Mahmadrizoev, the GBAO party head, after he spoke at a rally in Khorog on July 23rd.

Despite the absence of ethnic mobilisation, the government’s calculation may not have taken into consideration the alienation that would in turn decrease the authority and credibility of the head of state a year before elections; that further violence instigated in the future could elicit a reaction; or the possibility that, in the security vacuum that would be created after 2014, forces external to the province could be interested in stirring the muddy waters and create instability, if not encourage separatist tendencies.

A cautionary tale for Afghanistan

In order to restore order and confidence, it is clear the government has to launch an open and transparent dialogue following the withdrawal of forces from the province. Instead of predicting scenarios in prospect for Tajikistan, however, it may be useful to decipher in the case of Badakhshan five rudimentary and interrelated lessons, among others, for managing vulnerability in other conflict-ridden countries, such as Afghanistan.

The first lesson is that using the army as substitute for police and security forces could undermine long-term confidence, which is the cornerstone of nation building. Indiscriminate use of force does not necessarily gain the trust of local populations, even in pursuit of militants and terrorists, let alone of criminals. When there is intrusion of armed forces from outside, especially as substitute for police and security forces and without coordination with local authorities, there is

⁵ Navruz Nebakhtshoev, “The view from Ishkashim”, Registan.net, August 6th 2012, <http://registan.net/index.php/2012/08/06/the-view-from-ishkashim/>.

the risk of apathy at best and, at worst, backlash from perceived violation of the sanctuary of local communities.

Dissatisfaction of neglected and marginalized populations decreases prospects for cooperation with the state. This raises the importance of not leaving some sub-regions underdeveloped, relegated to low priority for infrastructure development. Underdevelopment by itself may not be a cause of insecurity, but it increases disappointment and mistrust for authorities. In regions like GBAO, where families heavily depend on remittances from labour migration and handouts, social mobilisation can happen under the influence of mafia groups. In the case of Badakhshan, while most men of working age have emigrated, the remaining youth could more easily lend support to power brokers and radical leaders when disenfranchised of their rights. Relegated regions are also where conservative, superstition-laden Islam can take root, with networks controlling the social mores of society for their own interests, far from centres of orthodoxy and education.

Third is the challenge of projecting strength and capacity. An ideal state must neither show weakness, which could be interpreted as lack of control and capacity, nor throw its weight around through security and police forces, for it would be seen as too authoritarian. The most important prerogative of the state should be protection of populations. The fine balance is to define what can be considered a “strong” state, whether from a realist point of view, which emphasises military capability, territorial control and monopoly over the legitimate use of force, or from the liberal one, which puts value on soft power and limits the role of the state to that of an enabler. The government of President Rahmon, which has experienced civil war, sought to consolidate peace through a show of authority and control. This is its gamble, its sustainability strategy, despite what analysts repeatedly stress as threatening to the fragile peace. The Afghan government, after 2014,

may have a bigger challenge given its overall weakness, over-dependence on foreign military, political and development aid, and the formidable military strength of its insurgency.

Fourth is the challenge of ensuring a fair distribution of wealth in the country as a whole. Border regions stand to benefit from cross-border trade, both legal and illicit. Where some local leaders would seek to increase their authority locally and use the profits for their constituencies, competition with the centre is inevitable, but at least wealth is distributed locally. The state has a responsibility to provide incentives for redistribution at the national level, by, for example, devising a proper decentralisation scheme, supporting the provision of social infrastructure to needy areas, facilitating barter between regions etc. It could also happen, as in the case of the narcotics trade on both sides of the Panj river, that very little profit stays for regional development and that much of it becomes concentrated in a few hands. In cases such as this, central authorities would have the responsibility to intervene to curb corruption, but in a way that does not violate the rights of local populations. In all cases, zero tolerance for corruption and setting the right example is the state’s most important obligation.

In the final analysis, the real test is that of decentralisation, the degree to which local governance is allowed to flourish while being supported from the centre and checked to ensure that it abides by laws, regulations and the ethic of fairness. In Tajikistan, a de facto decentralisation had taken place as a result of the power-sharing agreement of the peace accords to include local commanders in the government. In times of insecurity, when the future stability in the region was in question, the government chose recentralisation for better control. It remains to be seen whether the Afghan government could, or should, adopt the same strategy in its eventual power-sharing agreement, if there is one, with its opposition and insurgents.