



# The Afghanistan- Central Asia relationship: What role for the EU?

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## Abstract

As the 2014 NATO drawdown from Afghanistan approaches, the EU increasingly focuses on preventing potential spillover effects on Central Asia. The Union wishes to further its cooperation with the wider region. But to succeed, it will have to develop a clearer strategy to avoid condoning the repressive policies and opaque interests of the Central Asian governments. The EU should focus on a few well-chosen areas and prioritise the involvement of local actors, in particular civilian stakeholders, who are the only vectors of long-term sustainable solutions. This paper addresses the Central Asia-Afghanistan relationship, analyses the impact of post-2014 changes to the security context and looks at the EU's opportunities to foster regional dynamics.



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## Introduction

As the 2014 NATO drawdown from Afghanistan approaches, the international community increasingly considers the potential role for 'regional solutions'. These do not imply the naïve notion of neighbourly harmony, but new civilian patterns for improving peace and stability in the region as a whole. Pakistan is quite rightly considered Afghanistan's most strategic neighbour and the main challenge to the country's long-term security. But other neighbours also play an increasingly significant role for the country's future. Their level of economic engagement, their potential leverage on domestic Afghan issues and their own perceptions of the strategic balance among regional actors will be important to reaching a stable solution.

The position of the Central Asian states towards Afghanistan is less well-known in comparison to those of India, Iran, China and Russia. Central Asian countries are most often seen as the *victims* of the Afghan situation, rather than as *actors* at the same level as other neighbours. It is important to understand not only the risks, but also the opportunities presented by Central Asia's proximity to Afghanistan. More than 2,000 km of joint borders unite Afghanistan with Turkmenistan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. In Afghanistan, the Tajiks, Turkmens and Uzbeks have served as mediators with their northern neighbours, especially since the intensification of Soviet influence in the 1950s. Today, despite a revival of insurgency in recent years, the northern provinces are remote from the unstable dynamics of the Afghan-Pakistani border and are still the most secure areas for the delivery of international aid.

The U.S. and the European Union (EU) are looking for new partners to share short-term agendas (such as transit-in-reverse of ISAF material from Afghanistan through Central Asia) and long-term plans (including integrating Afghanistan into the wider economic region and developing new regional security platforms). Central Asian republics are among the main candidates.

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The U.S. construes its Central Asia policy through an Afghan lens and in connection with a broader agenda that also includes South Asia. Europe, on the other hand, has long dissociated Central Asia from Afghanistan, and maintains different degrees of involvement with separate agendas for each region. However, preparations for the post-2014 context are pushing the EU to reconsider its approach and look for ways better to coordinate its engagement in Central

Asia and Afghanistan, at least at the narrative level. The June 2012 review of the EU Strategy for Central Asia evidences a more structured security orientation and emphasises potential threats to Central Asia stemming from post-2014 Afghanistan. It notes Central Asian fears of a new wave of insecurity from the south and it seems to support, or at least it does not criticise, the way local governments formulate the risk of 'spillover'. Although security seems to be the keyword, the review also states that the EU will help strengthen 'actions around borders with Afghanistan, in close coordination with Central Asian states and international actors'. By doing so, the EU hopes to foster regional dynamics, deepen bilateral political dialogue and transform the Afghan neighbourhood into 'an opportunity for developing economic cooperation in the wider region'.<sup>1</sup>

This paper addresses the Central Asia-Afghanistan relationship after NATO's 2014 withdrawal and Europe's role in the region. The first part discusses the multifaceted links that exist between Central Asia and Afghanistan. It gives a brief historical overview and assesses their growing economic relationship, as well as the diversity of the actors involved. The second part analyses the impact of post-2014 changes on Central Asia's security environment. It does so from three vantage points: the likelihood of 'spillovers' from Afghanistan; the Central Asian governments' perceptions of the challenges ahead and their preparedness to address them; and the roles of Russia, China and the United States in the region. The third part examines the EU's role in building cooperation mechanisms between Central Asian states and Afghanistan, and examines Europe's opportunities in light of the changing regional context.

## 1. The multifaceted linkages between Central Asia and Afghanistan

### 1.1. A shared history, dissociation and new interactions

Afghanistan and Central Asia share a long common history. The north of present-day Afghanistan is linked to Transoxiana or Turkestan, the region to the north of the Amu Darya River, which more or less corresponds to the territories of contemporary Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. The Amu Darya has not historically separated two different spaces. The broader region began to disintegrate in the eighteenth century and was divided altogether in the nineteenth century with the advance of the Tsarist and British colonial empires. The Emirate of Bukhara was the last direct historical link between Central Asia and Afghanistan; the last emir, Alim Khan, fleeing the advancing Bolsheviks, took refuge in Afghanistan in 1920.

The deep political, social, economic and cultural transformations introduced by the Soviets in Central Asia between 1917 and 1991 put an end to the region's similitude with Afghanistan. But relations between the two zones continued. In the 1920s and 1930s, tens of thousands of Central Asians, mainly Turkmens and Uzbeks, fled the civil

<sup>1</sup> Progress Report on the implementation of the EU Strategy for Central Asia, 25 June 2012, p. 2 and 16, available at: [http://www.eeas.europa.eu/central\\_asia/docs/20120628\\_progress\\_report\\_en.pdf](http://www.eeas.europa.eu/central_asia/docs/20120628_progress_report_en.pdf)

war and Stalinist collectivisation and settled in Afghanistan. In 1953, when Mohammad Daoud Khan became Afghanistan's prime minister, the country started developing closer ties with the Soviet Union. For over two decades, Moscow was Kabul's main commercial partner and political ally, providing Afghanistan with substantial military and political aid, fostering economic development in infrastructure and industry and promoting social transformation through its support for literacy programmes, women's emancipation and agrarian reform. After the 1973 coup, President Daoud Khan tried to loosen the Soviet grip on the government in an attempt to diminish the power of Afghan communists. This gave rise to another coup in 1978, carried out by local communists who formed a pro-Soviet regime and asked Moscow for help. In December 1979 the Soviet Union intervened. Moscow gave a major role, in particular in the first years of the intervention, to Central Asian soldiers and advisors (mainly Tajiks and Uzbeks) to the pro-Soviet government of Mohammad Najibullah.

The Soviet-Afghan war had a substantial impact on Central Asian societies. The Tajiks were the most affected, as their interaction with Afghanistan was the most intense. Most Tajik religious or political dissidents, and the main figures of the perestroika years and the first ten years after independence, had served in Afghanistan in the 1980s. When Tajikistan plunged into civil war in 1992, the Islamist opposition found refuge and support with the Northern Alliance of Ahmed Shah Massoud, even though he also had direct links with the central government in Dushanbe.

Uzbekistan, the second most connected Central Asian country to Afghanistan, received a small wave of refugees during the Afghan civil war, mainly ethnic Uzbeks. The country maintained complex relations with local warlords such as General Abdul Rashid Dostum. Some Islamist opponents to Islam Karimov's government sought refuge in Afghanistan and, under the banner of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), fought alongside the Taliban in the south of Afghanistan and in Waziristan. They also attempted to infiltrate Central Asia, notably with two incursions into the Batken region in southern Kyrgyzstan in summer 1999 and summer 2000. In the subsequent decade, as the IMU became more international, these Uzbeks were followed by hundreds of Kyrgyz, Uyghurs, Chechens, Dagestanis and Tatars. The Soviet Union always had to cope with illegal trade of opiates coming from Afghanistan, but the scope of cross-border drug-trafficking into Russia has increased since the 1990s.<sup>2</sup>

## 1.2. Economic cooperation

In the 1990s, economic relations between Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kazakhstan and neighbouring Afghanistan were limited. The Afghan civil war had put an end to the official trade exchanges that had persisted after the Soviet era. Aid from Central Asia and Russia was entirely directed to the Northern Alliance of Ahmed Shah Massoud. When the Taliban came to power in 1996 in Afghanistan, diplomatic relations between both zones were severed.

Only Saparmurat Niyazov's Turkmenistan, in the name of 'perpetual neutrality', continued state-to-state commercial relations with the Taliban, trading gas, electricity and food. Meanwhile, the trafficking of opiates grew in scale across the entire region. Official trade resumed after the arrival of the international coalition in Kabul and the establishment of Hamid Karzai's regime at the end of 2001. From 2007-2008 on, it underwent a significant boom.

### Afghanistan's position in imports, exports and the total trade of Central Asian states in 2010 in millions of Euros<sup>3</sup>

	Imports	Rank	Exports	Rank	Total trade	Rank
Kazakhstan	0.5 (0.0%)	<50	145 (0.4%)	16	145.5 (0.2%)	18
Kyrgyzstan	0.5 (0.0%)	36	38.7 (4.6%)	6	39.2 (0.6%)	12
Tajikistan	30.1 (1.5%)	14	39.5 (4.4%)	5	69.6 (2.4%)	9
Turkmenistan	0.5 (0.0%)	37	162.6 (6.4%)	5	163.1 (2.4%)	9
Uzbekistan	0.1*	-	854**	-	854.1	-

Despite sharing only 137 km of borders with Afghanistan, Uzbekistan is Afghanistan's most important Central Asian trading partner. It benefits from a Soviet legacy of infrastructure that connects it to its southern neighbour. As early as 2002, Tashkent reopened the Khairaton Bridge on the Uzbek-Afghan border – the former 'Friendship Bridge', which served as a major transit route for Soviet troops. In 2003, the Airtom Customs Complex started operations in Termez, speeding up the process of registering freight and delivering it to Afghanistan.<sup>4</sup>

Uzbekistan plays a central role in two sectors in Afghanistan: electricity and transportation. Since 2009, Uzbekistan's state electric corporation, UzbekEnergo, has delivered between 90 and 130 megawatts a year to Kabul, thanks to a line built with funds from the Asian Development Bank's Central Asia-South Asia Regional Electricity Market (CASAREM) project.<sup>5</sup> The Uzbek authorities claim that their country provides an uninterrupted supply of 1.2 billion kWh of electricity a year to Afghanistan, with Kabul receiving electricity 24 hours a day, at an average rate of 6 cents per kWh.<sup>6</sup> In transportation, Uzbek firms have helped restore motor roads between Mazar-i-Sharif and Kabul and contributed to

<sup>3</sup> Sources: European Commission Trade statistics, 2011, available at: <http://ec.europa.eu/trade/creating-opportunities/bilateral-relations/countries-and-regions/>; B. Anderson and Y. Klimov, 'Uzbekistan: Trade Regime and Recent Trade Developments', University of Central Asia Institute of Public Policy and Administration, *Working Paper 4*, 2012, available at: <http://www.ucentralasia.org/downloads/UCA-IPPA-WP4-Uzbekistan%20and%20Regional%20Trade.pdf>; Afghanistan Central Statistics Organisation, available at: [http://cso.gov.af/Content/files/im-portsbycountry\(1\).pdf](http://cso.gov.af/Content/files/im-portsbycountry(1).pdf).

<sup>4</sup> V. Paramonov and A. Stokov, 'Economic Relations Between Uzbekistan and Afghanistan: Current State, Problems, and Recommendations', *Afghanistan Regional Forum 5*, February 2013.

<sup>5</sup> USAID, 'Import of Power from Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan', Afghanistan Infrastructure and Rehabilitation Program, 2011, available at: <https://www.irp-af.com/?pname=open&id=291&type=html&c=5>.

<sup>6</sup> 'Uzbekistan exports 1.2bn kilowatt-hours electricity to Afghanistan a year', *Uzdaily*, 20 February 2012, available at: [http://www.uzinfoinvest.uz/eng/news/uzbekistan\\_exports\\_12bn\\_kilowatt\\_hours\\_electricity\\_to\\_afghanistan\\_a\\_year.mgr](http://www.uzinfoinvest.uz/eng/news/uzbekistan_exports_12bn_kilowatt_hours_electricity_to_afghanistan_a_year.mgr).

<sup>2</sup> A. Latypov, 'On the Road to "H": Narcotic Drugs in Soviet Central Asia', Central Asia Program, *Central Asia Research Papers 1*, August 2012, available at: [http://www.centralasiaprogram.org/images/Research\\_Paper\\_1\\_August\\_2012.pdf](http://www.centralasiaprogram.org/images/Research_Paper_1_August_2012.pdf).

reopening 11 bridges along the route.<sup>7</sup> The Uzbek national railway company, Ozbekistan Temir Yollari, built 75 km of rail lines between Hairaton and Mazar-i-Sharif. This track has been in operation since mid-2011 and has a theoretical transit capacity of up to 30,000-40,000 tons per month.<sup>8</sup> The short-term objective of the new railroad is to increase the role of Uzbekistan in the northern supply route for the international coalition in Afghanistan, and with the NATO 2014 drawdown approaching, it will also enable Uzbekistan to take part in the reverse supply chain.<sup>9</sup> Tashkent hopes to become a key actor in Afghan transport. Ozbekistan Temir Yollari is preparing new tender bids for two sections, one linking Mazar-i-Sharif to Kabul and then to Torkham at the Pakistani border, and another connecting Mazar-i-Sharif to Herat. However, competition from Chinese and Indian firms will be tough.<sup>10</sup>

Tajikistan, with about 1,300 km of common borders with Afghanistan, is the second most important player in Central Asia-Afghanistan trade. Again, electricity is at the heart of the economic partnership.<sup>11</sup> Dushanbe hopes to take advantage of the CASA-1000 (Central Asia-South Asia) project, designed to export Tajik and Kyrgyz surplus hydroelectric power to Afghanistan and Pakistan. The project is funded by the World Bank, the Islamic Development Bank and the US Agency for International Development (USAID), with the probable future participation of Russia. The stakes for the Tajik authorities are considerable: CASA-1000 will finance the connection of the Sangtuda power station to Kunduz and on to Baghlan and Pul i-Khumri, with the aim of linking it with the line running to Kabul.<sup>12</sup> This line enables Dushanbe to compete with Tashkent as a cheaper electricity exporter to Afghanistan during the summer months. But the viability of the CASA-1000 programme is called into question by the probable delays on some of the main dam projects, as well as the difficulties in collaborating between Bishkek and Dushanbe.

Aside from electricity exports, trade exchanges between Tajikistan and Afghanistan are developing on a small scale. The border post of Nizhnii-Pianj, rebuilt with international aid, in particular from the U.S., is supposed to cater to the majority of the freight between both countries, but traffic is limited to roughly 40-50 individuals and 10-20 trucks daily. Moreover, now that security in Kunduz province has

deteriorated, the crossing is very isolated.<sup>13</sup> Further east, several smaller bridges, rebuilt or renovated by the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN), have enabled border populations to set up small trade mechanisms that can help lift them out of poverty.<sup>14</sup>

Turkmenistan, which shares a 750 km border with Afghanistan, is also an important partner for Kabul. Electricity exports are again the main driver of bilateral trade: Ashgabat claims to supply 400 kilowatts to its neighbour.<sup>15</sup> In 2007, the Turkmen authorities put back into service a Soviet-era 2 km cross-border railway between Kushka and Turgundi (Towraghondi).<sup>16</sup> Turkmenistan has renovated its own roads from Mary to Serkhetabat and from Turkmenabat, on the border with Uzbekistan, to Atymyrat and Kerikichi, on the border with Afghanistan. And the country has given the Turkmen minority in Afghanistan financial and technical assistance, in the form of medical and educational aid, allowing them to cross the border to receive treatment in Turkmen hospitals and offering several state-funded scholarships, as well as renovating some irrigation infrastructure in Afghanistan.

Despite having no borders with Afghanistan, Kazakhstan also sees itself as a key economic partner for Kabul. It is the only Central Asian country that has an Assistance Programme for the Reconstruction of Afghanistan, which includes modest projects related to water supply, infrastructure development and the delivery of cement and construction commodities.<sup>17</sup> Astana has, for instance, financed the renovation of the Kunduz-Talukan road and the construction of a school and a hospital, spending a total of \$2 million. More importantly, as its exports began to take off in 2002, Kazakhstan positioned itself as a major actor in Afghanistan's wheat market. Today, about 20 per cent of Afghan flour imports come from Kazakhstan, and during the years of the Pakistani ban on cereal exports, Kazakhstan even became Afghanistan's main supplier of wheat.<sup>18</sup>

The volume of Central Asian trade with Afghanistan cannot be to those of Pakistan or Iran. Nonetheless, some Central Asian countries are strong actors in terms of electricity supply, transportation and food security.

<sup>13</sup> J. Boonstra, 'The quiet frontier', *the FRIDE blog*, 21 May 2012, available at: <http://fride.org/blog/the-quiet-frontier/>.

<sup>14</sup> S. Peyrouse, 'Economic Trends as an Identity Marker? The Pamiri Trade Niche with China and Afghanistan', *Problems of Post-Communism*, 59(4) (July–August 2012), pp. 3-14.

<sup>15</sup> 'Afghan and Turkmen relations and cooperation to be followed by others', *Bakhtarnews*, 2 October 2012, available at: <http://www.bakhtarnews.com.af/eng/politics/item/4277-afghan-and-turkmen-relations-and-cooperation-to-be-followed-by-others.html>.

<sup>16</sup> See, for instance, the Turkmen propaganda on the repairing of a 2 km long section of the railway crossing the territory of Afghanistan. State News Agency of Turkmenistan, 'A Gift from the Turkmen People to Afghan Brothers', *Turkmenistan: The Golden Age*, 8 February 2008, available at: [http://turkmenistan.gov.tm/eng/2008/02/08/a\\_gift\\_from\\_he\\_turkmen\\_people\\_to\\_afghan\\_brothers.html](http://turkmenistan.gov.tm/eng/2008/02/08/a_gift_from_he_turkmen_people_to_afghan_brothers.html).

<sup>17</sup> S. Kozhirova, 'The Current Kazakh-Afghan Relations. A Growing Commitment', *Afghanistan Regional Forum* 6, March 2013.

<sup>18</sup> USDA Foreign Agriculture Service, '2012 Grain and Feed Annual Afghanistan', *GAIN Report*, Global Agricultural Information Network, 24 March 2012, available at: [http://gain.fas.usda.gov/Recent%20GAIN%20Publications/2012%20Grain%20and%20Feed%20Annual%20Kabul\\_Afghanistan\\_3-12-2012.pdf](http://gain.fas.usda.gov/Recent%20GAIN%20Publications/2012%20Grain%20and%20Feed%20Annual%20Kabul_Afghanistan_3-12-2012.pdf).

<sup>7</sup> J.C.K. Daly, 'Uzbek Afghanistan proposal relevant and timely', *UPI*, 5 November 2009, available at: [http://www.upi.com/Top\\_News/Analysis/Outside-View/2009/11/05/Outside-View-Uzbek-Afghanistan-proposal-relevant-and-timely/UPI-71691257429600/](http://www.upi.com/Top_News/Analysis/Outside-View/2009/11/05/Outside-View-Uzbek-Afghanistan-proposal-relevant-and-timely/UPI-71691257429600/).

<sup>8</sup> F. Mashrab, 'Afghan rail link marks a break-out moment', *Asia Times*, 11 January 2012, available at: [http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Central\\_Asia/NA11Ag01.html](http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Central_Asia/NA11Ag01.html).

<sup>9</sup> J. Kucera, 'Pakistan's gain in Afghan transit deal Central Asia's loss?', *Eurasianet*, 17 May 2012, available at: <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/65416>.

<sup>10</sup> The tender bids have not yet been put out, but it is likely that both Indian and Chinese construction companies will respond to them, most probably with competitive prices and capabilities.

<sup>11</sup> Islamic Republic of Afghanistan Ministry of Economy Inter-Ministerial Commission for Energy (ICE) Secretariat, *Energy Sector Status Report July – September, 2010*.

<sup>12</sup> World Bank, Central Asia South Asia Electricity Transmission and Trade Project (CASA 1000), available at: <http://www.worldbank.org/projects/P110729/central-asia-south-asia-electricity-transmission-trade-project-casa-1000?lang=en>.

### 1.3. The actors of the Central Asia-Afghanistan relationship

People-to-people contacts between Central Asia and Afghanistan involve a series of actors, of whom many have conflicting interests. Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan have sizeable ethnic minorities on the Afghan side of the border. The non-Pashtuns of the northern regions are often seen as part of one single political entity: the Northern Alliance and its various constituents. But in fact, each of the three ethnic groups consists of several sub-groups with contradictory strategies, resulting in a complicated situation.

The Tajiks, about 8 million people, are the second-largest ethnic group in Afghanistan after the Pashtuns.<sup>19</sup> They have held privileged positions in the country's power structures since 2001, in repayment for their struggle against the Taliban, thus making them direct competitors of the Pashtuns. The political struggle in Kabul is firstly ethnic – Tajik versus Pashtun – and secondly between moderate versus extremist Islamic rule. For their part, the Uzbeks number between 1.5 and 3 million and Turkmens between 200,000 and 500,000. These two groups are perceived as less confrontational, with more peripheral ambitions. The Afghan Turkmens have always been excluded from the Kabul-based decision-making process. They were politically neutral during the Taliban years and the Taliban and Pashtun groups do not see them as a threat. The Uzbeks are also relatively autonomous economically. But unlike the Turkmens, they have occupied senior positions in various Afghan governments and their claims are more demanding. They call, for example, for regional autonomy, recognition of the Uzbek language in local bodies and participation in economic decision-making. Unlike the Tajiks, however, the Uzbeks are not regarded as a direct challenge to Pashtun domination.

For Central Asian states, the fact of having co-ethnics on the other side of the border only gives them leverage in the Afghan domestic situation through local warlord networks. Dushanbe has multiple networks at different levels in the Afghan government, the central administration and local authorities, especially in the Mazar-i-Sharif district. Uzbekistan has a particular connection with the National Islamic Front (*Jumbish-i-Milli Islami Afghanistan*), headed by General Abdul Rashid Dostum. And Ashgabat has good relations with former mujahedeen commander Ismail Khan, traditionally in control of the Herat region.

Co-ethnic interactions are only one part of the bilateral relationship. Official visits between Central Asian authorities and their Afghan counterparts grew steadily throughout the 2000s, bolstered by the creation of bilateral trading commissions. Leaders now meet regularly at NATO or UN gatherings, at Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) meetings or at Moscow-led platforms. The Central Asian embassies in Kabul are major sites for bilateral information collection and network building, especially for business interests.

As in the Soviet period, the Central Asian security services oversee a large part of the relationship with Afghanistan. These services have networks in Afghan intelligence circles that date back to the Soviet period and are often Russian-speaking.<sup>20</sup> Directly responsible for border security and customs committees, Central Asian law enforcement agencies are prominent actors in both official and illegal trade with Afghanistan.<sup>21</sup> For example, Tajik and Afghan security services shared intelligence about IMU incursions from the non-controlled enclaves on the Pianj River in 2010<sup>22</sup> and during clashes in Khorog in July 2012.<sup>23</sup>

Veterans from the Soviet-Afghanistan war sometimes act as intermediaries in commercial relations, but not as much as it used to be in Russia. Central Asian veterans are well represented in security services and presidential entourages, mainly in the Security Councils in Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan.<sup>24</sup> The Soviet legacy has also been revalorised by some senior Russian-speaking Afghan officials, the majority of whom are in military, aviation and academic circles.

There are few private actors in the Central Asia-Afghanistan relationship. Those involved in bilateral trade in metal products, fuel, cement, flour, fruits and vegetables have to develop close connections with the security services, which often provide them with private militias in order to ensure the security of their transactions. Frequently, these business people are directly linked with the ruling networks, being former members of the Central Committees of the local Communist Parties.

Civil society interaction is largely absent. However, a growing number of international community-led humanitarian projects straddle both regions, especially in Tajikistan and Afghanistan. In 2012, for instance, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies signed cross-border agreements between Tajikistan's Gorno-Badakhshan region and Afghanistan's Badakhshan province on disaster management and risk reduction.<sup>25</sup> Hundreds of Tajik engineers, nurses and doctors already work in the Tajik-speaking zones of Afghanistan in projects financed by the international community.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Authors' interviews with Tajik experts on Afghanistan, Dushanbe, 16 May 2012.

<sup>21</sup> A. Latypov, *Barygi, narkobaroni i narkodel'tsy: Narkoprestupnost' i rynki narkotikov v Tadjikistane*, TraCC, available at: [http://tracc.gmu.edu/pdfs/Latypov\\_RUS\\_FINAL.pdf](http://tracc.gmu.edu/pdfs/Latypov_RUS_FINAL.pdf).

<sup>22</sup> Authors' interviews with OSCE officers, Dushanbe, June 2010. Dushanbe, *Ozodagon*, in Tajik, 19 October 2011; FBIS SOV, 19 October 2011.

<sup>23</sup> S. Peyrouse, 'Battle on Top of the World: Rising Tensions in Tajikistan's Pamir Region', *Wider Europe*, August 2012.

<sup>24</sup> Anonymous interviews with Central Asian *Afghantsy*, Almaty, Dushanbe, Bishkek, May-June 2012.

<sup>25</sup> Interview with Eric Michel Sellier, IFRC Country Representative for Tajikistan, Dushanbe, 16 May 2012.

<sup>26</sup> E. Sadovskaia et al., *Trudovaia migratsiia v stranakh Tsentralnoi Azii, Rossiiskoi Federatsii, Afganistane i Pakistane* (Almaty: European Commission, IOM, 2005).

<sup>19</sup> There are no reliable population statistics for Afghanistan, since the country has not conducted a census, and the matter of ethnic distribution is particularly sensitive and stands at the core of the country's political balance. The figures given here are the most standard average estimates.

## 2. Assessing and preparing to react to the post-2014 situation

Central Asia's relationship with Afghanistan is increasingly shaped by preparations for U.S./NATO withdrawal in 2014. External actors are also taking this into account when planning their bilateral and regional involvement. The main drivers of the forthcoming reframing of relations involve security assessments, preparedness for potential new threats and the engagement of Russia, China, and the U.S. in the region.

### 2.1. Security assessments of the post-2014 impact

The progressive withdrawal from Afghanistan entails the need to reassess the Central Asia-Afghanistan relationship. Despite some profound differences, the five Central Asian states share similar concerns regarding the post-2014 situation. All local experts believe that Karzai's successor will not be able to withstand insurgency attacks. They believe that the Taliban will take power back, or at least be able heavily to influence the political process. They also expect that patterns of civil war will re-emerge. Their assessment of post-2014 Afghanistan is pessimistic. They also think that the international community is refusing openly to discuss an alternative plan to address the potential failure of the Afghan central state. Alike Russia, the Central Asian governments are critical of the West, in particular the U.S., for having committed multiple strategic errors, and believe that the decade-long intervention has largely been a mistake. At the same time, however, they complain about the West's departure, which they see as another error, given that 'the work is not finished'. Lastly, they fear losing their rent-seeking mechanisms linked to the Western presence in Afghanistan.<sup>27</sup>

Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan in particular are most at risk of domestic repercussions resulting from a deteriorating security situation in Afghanistan. For Tajikistan, the main spillover threats include the possible return to power of the Taliban in Kabul or a renewed civil war that would involve Afghan Tajiks. Either scenario could lead to Taliban/Pashtun attacks against Tajik symbols of power and would have a negative impact on official relations between Dushanbe and Kabul. Tajikistan's growing social Islamisation would also be affected. The Islamic Renaissance Party (IRPT), the only legal Islamic opposition in Tajikistan, could find itself confronted with Salafist movements, especially if these movements receive additional foreign support.<sup>28</sup> Narcotraffic is already a major cause of domestic tensions among Tajikistan's elites, and was probably the root cause of the violent clashes in Khorog in July 2012. A potential reduced opium production in Afghanistan (the Taliban already attempted this during their years in power in the 1990s) could lead to more intense battles between Tajikistani networks for control of transit and revenues. Increased production would serve to reinforce Tajikistan's role in the drug transit and

would further increase the corruption of the country's elites. Kyrgyzstan has no border with Afghanistan and very few co-ethnics there. Even so, it could be indirectly affected by Islamic insurgency and drug-trafficking. In recent years, local Islamic insurgents, mostly Uzbek and Kyrgyz young men from the southern part of the country, have been training in Afghanistan. The Kyrgyz armed forces do not have the capacity to manage sustained attacks from insurgents. However, the major actors involved in the Islamisation of Kyrgyzstan – Hizb ut-Tahrir and Tablighi Jamaat – are homegrown and have no connection to Afghan issues and social tensions in the country are expressed primarily through ethnic rather than radical Islamic violence.<sup>29</sup> As in Tajikistan, a reduction in drug-trafficking is likely to trigger increased conflict over the control of routes, especially among southern elites. An increase would provide criminal organisations with new financial benefits and create incentives to keep the country's institutional capacity weak.

Uzbekistan faces different challenges. Islam Karimov's regime has historically been the main target of the region's Islamic insurgency. A few thousand Uzbek jihadists associated with the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) have been trained in Afghanistan and Waziristan. These fighters have maintained close connections with the Taliban, and could therefore benefit from their return to power. But the Uzbek army is better prepared than its Tajik or Kyrgyz counterparts. Also, unlike the situation in the two neighbouring countries, drug-trafficking in Uzbekistan does not directly contribute to state failure. It seems to be better monitored by law enforcement agencies and is protected by some high-level senior officials who have links to the security services. The largest risks for domestic instability stem not from spillovers from Afghanistan, but from potential mismanagement of the presidential succession and from regional elites' discontent with their access to state resources. The same applies to Kazakhstan: the country experienced terrorist attacks in 2011, but this did not precipitate state failure. Astana's main challenges are the need to address homegrown Islamisation among impoverished young people, especially in western Kazakhstan, and ensuring the continuous improvement of living standards so as to circumvent political protest. Again, these matters have no direct relation to the future of Afghanistan.

### 2.2. Central Asia's preparation strategies

Each Central Asian state conducts its relationship with Afghanistan bilaterally, without involving its neighbours. However, three overall patterns can be identified in their strategies: a defensive strategy focused on conventional security; a growing appreciation of soft security risks; and an effort to reshape each state's geostrategic positioning.

Given the negative assessment of Afghanistan's future prevalent in Central Asia, preparations for the post-2014 situation are mostly defensive. Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan plan to reinforce security at their southern borders. They present themselves as fortresses under

<sup>27</sup> On Central Asia's position of the NATO withdrawal, see M. Laruelle, 'What does Central Asia's "no-show" at the NATO Chicago Summit Mean?', *Wider Europe*, 8 June 2012.

<sup>28</sup> Interview with Muhiddin Kabiri, IRPT leader, Dushanbe, 19 May 2012.

<sup>29</sup> N. Melvin, 'Promoting a Stable and Multiethnic Kyrgyzstan: Overcoming the Causes and Legacies of Violence', *Central Eurasia Project Occasional Paper Series 3*, March 2011.

siege. This perception will probably have repercussions for the transit of people and goods, which is likely to aggravate the already precarious cross-border cooperation in the Ferghana Valley and between Tajikistan and Afghanistan. Local decision-makers ignore debates on the utility of impermeable borders, except in Tajikistan, where some experts do not believe Islamic-based 'spillover' from Afghanistan can be avoided, regardless of the measures taken at the borders.<sup>30</sup>

All five Central Asian states, including Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan that do not border Afghanistan, are likely to reinforce domestic control over the population. In the name of the struggle against terrorism, they will probably enhance the already numerous mechanisms limiting public freedoms and increase the discretionary powers of law enforcement agencies. The 'terrorism' epithet is applied without distinction to political opposition and all religious expression that does not conform to the official standards endorsed by the spiritual boards and committees for religious affairs. Lastly, the narrative of 'foreign interference', be it from states or non-state actors, will serve as a pretext to intensify repression to control social discontent. The Kazakh authorities have already used this to justify their repression of the riots in Zhanaozen in December 2011.<sup>31</sup> This repressive approach is underpinned by the fear of an Arab Spring scenario, in which revolutionary protests could lead to a sudden change of government.

Central Asian states have also begun to discuss soft security risks, albeit to a far lesser degree. Their biggest concern are possible refugee flows from Afghanistan should there be renewed mass violence. Central Asian states remember the difficulties they faced in the first years of independence, when they had to cope with flows of Tajik refugees fleeing the civil war. The three neighbouring states of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan are particularly likely to have to deal with refugee inflows. Kazakhstan too could attract a growing number of Afghans, in particular graduates who have worked for the international community during the last decade and who might be drawn to the country's regional power status and economic dynamism. The refugee problem is the only soft security issue on which official Central Asian actors request greater foreign involvement.<sup>32</sup>

Local authorities are equally concerned about the economic impact of renewed civil war in Afghanistan. If this were to happen, major gas, electricity and transportation projects could be partially stopped or impeded, and the growing private businesses in cement, food, chemicals and fuels to Afghanistan could be disrupted.

The post-2014 situation also entails a global geostrategic readjustment for all Central Asian states. Each of them

uses Afghanistan as one of its key foreign policy tools in relations with neighbouring countries and the great powers. Kazakhstan, for instance, presents itself as a responsible stakeholder in the international community. It foresees an increase in its humanitarian aid and its civilian projects for reconstruction and development, modelled on the strategy advanced for Afghanistan during its OSCE chairmanship in 2010.<sup>33</sup> Kyrgyzstan's own geostrategic position has no Afghan prisms other than that of resolving the Manas deadlock. The maintenance of an American military base with a civilian status would be useful to state finances, but it would go against Kyrgyz public opinion and would anger Moscow, risking potential economic retaliation.<sup>34</sup> Turkmenistan is preparing to cite its 'perpetual neutrality', as it did in the 1990s, and will cooperate with the regime in Kabul, whatever its ideological orientation. It intends both to move forward on its energy projects with Afghanistan and to remain hermetically sealed against any kind of 'spillovers'.

The stakes are higher for Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. Should the Taliban return to power, the Uzbek authorities would have to choose between confrontation and conciliation. Confrontation would involve the Uzbek minority in Afghanistan engaging in the Northern Alliance's successor formation. Or the Uzbek authorities could choose conciliation, in the hope that the Taliban will concentrate on domestic issues and will not openly seek to topple the Uzbek regime by supporting its domestic Islamist opposition. If that were to happen, some Uzbek experts suspect that the Uzbek minority in Afghanistan could break with the Tajiks and negotiate a status of autonomy with the Pashtuns. Tashkent's main goal is to maintain its electricity exports and railway investments in Afghanistan, regardless of who is in charge in Kabul. The Uzbek authorities also want to capitalise on their change of geopolitical status. They hope to build on the financial and strategic gains obtained from the Northern Distribution Network, which grants them a central role in the region, and secure long-term engagement from the U.S. This could compensate for potential German disengagement if the Termez base is closed.

Dushanbe thinks that the porousness of Tajik and Afghan societies makes Afghanistan a key engine of Tajikistan's own future (in)stability.<sup>35</sup> If the Afghan Tajiks find themselves in conflict with the new government in Kabul, the local authorities will have a difficult time trying to cooperate with the Taliban. A new civil war would likely see their territory again providing a support base for the insurrection of Afghan Tajiks. Dushanbe also fears a possible Tashkent-Kabul alliance that would flank Tajikistan on both sides.<sup>36</sup> The geopolitical and electricity competition between Tajikistan and Uzbekistan could also intensify, as Afghanistan is used as a foreign policy tool by both countries. The Tajik authorities also worry about the likelihood of Iran becoming a more

<sup>30</sup> This is what transpired in the debates between Tajik experts at the international conference 'Afghanistan's Stability And Regional Security Implications For Central Asia', organised by the Central Asia Program (George Washington University), and EUCAM (Europe-Central Asia Monitoring), with the support of the NATO Science for Peace and Security Program, Dushanbe, 17-18 May 2012.

<sup>31</sup> A. Kourmanova, 'Lessons from Zhanaozen. Bringing Business, Government and Society Together', *Voices from Central Asia* 6, September 2012.

<sup>32</sup> Anonymous interviews with Central Asian experts on Afghanistan, Almaty, 11 May 2012, Dushanbe, 16 May 2012, Bishkek, 22 May 2012.

<sup>33</sup> S. Kozhirova, 'The Current Kazakh-Afghan Relations. A Growing Commitment', *Afghanistan Regional Forum* 6, March 2013.

<sup>34</sup> E. Zhuraev, 'The Problem of Not Knowing Afghanistan: A Reflection Based on the Case of Kyrgyzstan', *Afghanistan Regional Forum* 4, January 2013.

<sup>35</sup> S. Olimova and M. Olimov, 'The Withdrawal of NATO Forces from Afghanistan: Consequences for Tajikistan', *Afghanistan Regional Forum* 7, March 2013.

<sup>36</sup> Anonymous interviews with Tajik experts on Afghanistan, Dushanbe, 14 May 2012.

proactive neighbour once NATO leaves Afghanistan.<sup>37</sup> Lastly, Moscow's pressure could drastically increase and Tajikistan could acquire a status as Russia's quasi-institutionalised protectorate, a site of growing proxy tensions with the United States.

### 2.3. Russian, Chinese and U.S. engagement post-2014

#### 2.3.1. Russia

Upon Vladimir Putin's return to power in May 2012, Moscow is increasingly adopting a 'Russia first' strategy, and has begun to provide a better definition of its priorities.<sup>38</sup> Moscow will only get involved in those areas that it considers crucial to its security and domestic development. Other sectors will be 'marketised', left to the private sector or to market competition. The fight against drug-trafficking passing through Central Asia from Afghanistan is one of Moscow's security priorities. Another is the control of labour migration from Central Asia. The Kremlin is also concerned about the risks of interaction between its own Islamic networks and those in Central Asia and Afghanistan.

To support its domestic development, Russia is prioritising the creation of a Eurasian Economic Space and promoting greater regional coordination in key sectors such as hydrocarbons, electricity, transport and cereals production. This strategy, which is still in the making, is built on the assumption that Russia will partially retract its interest in states that resist its influence, such as Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. Instead, it will privilege regional structures with fewer members – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan – but a higher degree of cohesion. Examples of this include the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), and the yet incomplete Customs Union/Eurasian Economic Space.

The 'Russia first' strategy raises several questions. First, its implementation is still shaky. It is insufficiently formulated and coexists with other, older patterns, which conceive of Central Asia as a regional entity in which Moscow can set standards. Many in Russian decision-making circles do not seem ready to abandon all influence over Uzbekistan (Turkmenistan is deemed less crucial) and are waiting for Tashkent to define a new, more peaceful relationship with the former hegemon. What is more, the 'Russia-first' strategy has no chance of succeeding if it is not accompanied by a serious assessment of Russia's own domestic challenges, including drug consumption, integration of migrants and long-term solutions for the north Caucasus.

There is a large gap between Moscow's power projection and its actual political will and capacities on the ground. Can the CSTO really guarantee Tajik and Kyrgyz security, as Moscow becomes more and more hesitant about any military intervention in Central Asia? Will the Kremlin risk Russian soldiers' lives in order to defend Central Asia's incumbent leaders against public discontent? Can the Eurasian Economic Space really benefit the Central Asian economies, or is it only good for Russia? The Central Asian

governments are not sure whether the answers to all these questions would favour them and are uncertain about Moscow's role in post-2014 regional security. Traumatized by the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan, the Central Asian elites do not think that Russia is ready to replace the international coalition. Instead, they think it will conceptualise its relationship with Kabul in a purely defensive way.

#### 2.3.2. China

The Chinese stance on the post-2014 situation is confusing to the Central Asian authorities. China's investments throughout the region and in the northern provinces of Afghanistan are appreciated, although Beijing is also criticised for targeting only minerals and hydrocarbons. On security, the majority of the Central Asian elites are either sceptical or actually afraid of China's involvement on the ground. For the time being, bilateral military aid is confined to the supply of electronic material and textiles for Central Asian uniforms, and to training sessions for a few dozen Central Asian officers in Chinese military academies. China is even less involved in military issues in Afghanistan and tries to avoid making definite commitments in terms of security engagement as requested by Kabul.

Debates about Afghanistan are central to the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) and regional security is alluded to in most of its public statements. But the organisation has little impact on the ground. It has no coordinated structure between its member states that is relevant to Afghanistan, not even on humanitarian aid or crisis preparedness or refugee flows, not to mention the unlikely prospect of shared border management. At the regional level, the SCO is only active in the fight against alleged Uyghur extremism and in monitoring persons suspected of terrorist activities.<sup>39</sup> The Chinese authorities are not interested in developing the security aspect, which could turn out to be a quagmire. They try to keep their distance from potential internal succession conflicts in Central Asian states, as well as from those between the Pashtun-backed Taliban, the Karzai government and the northern warlords in Afghanistan.

#### 2.3.3. The United States

The U.S. has made a ten-year financial commitment to Afghanistan for the period 2014-2024, and has signed a Strategic Partnership with Kabul, which includes a military presence in Afghanistan for the next decade, in the form of intelligence operations, special forces and training activities.<sup>40</sup> But this continued involvement cannot mask the U.S.'s expected future disengagement. U.S. priorities in international security have clearly been reoriented toward the Asia-Pacific region and the 'Greater Middle East'.<sup>41</sup> The latter includes Afghanistan and Central Asia. But the

<sup>39</sup> A. Cooley, *Great Games, Local Rules: The New Great Power Contest in Central Asia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

<sup>40</sup> Office of the Press Secretary, 'Fact Sheet: The U.S.-Afghanistan Strategic Partnership Agreement', *WhiteHouse.gov*, 1 May 2012, available at: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2012/05/01/fact-sheet-us-afghanistan-strategic-partnership-agreement>.

<sup>41</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, 'Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense', January 2012, available at: [http://www.defense.gov/news/Defense\\_Strategic\\_Guidance.pdf](http://www.defense.gov/news/Defense_Strategic_Guidance.pdf).

<sup>37</sup> M. Laumulin, V. Niyatbekov and G. Yudasheva, 'Debating the Impact of the Iranian Nuclear Crisis in Central Asia', *Iran Regional Forum* 1, June 2012.

<sup>38</sup> A. Matveeva, 'Selective Engagement: Russia's Future Role in Central Asia', *Central Asia Policy Papers* 3, July 2012.

situation in the Middle East has changed after the Arab Spring, the civil war in Syria and renewed Israeli calls for greater support. This will probably lead to Afghanistan and Central Asia becoming a secondary priority.

The sense of future American disengagement is also visible in the State Department's 2011 'new Silk Road' narrative. Announced with great pomp as a strategic vision for the whole Central Asia-South Asia region, the 'new Silk Road' rapidly raised doubts: rather than a concrete strategy, it is essentially a way of thinking.<sup>42</sup> No specific budget has been allocated, nor have any commitments been made in terms of diplomatic personnel. The launching of the Northern Distribution Network was supposed to be accompanied by a revival of American investments in the Central Asian economies, but this has not been the case.<sup>43</sup> Neither has it enabled any kind of regional economic cooperation, since the only transit is financed by international actors. Above all, it serves as a rent-seeking mechanism for the local elites. The traditional U.S. commitment to promoting democratisation has experienced the same setbacks as that of its European counterpart. It is regularly compromised by the need to work with local governments on security or energy agreements, and its impact on the ground is difficult to assess.

The main U.S. commitment to post-2014 Central Asia is essentially security-oriented. The Central Asia Counter-narcotics Initiative (CACI) is designed to provide training and equipment to set up counter-narcotics task forces for the entire region.<sup>44</sup> Another U.S. initiative involves opening training facilities in Batken and near Dushanbe to combat drug-trafficking and terrorism.<sup>45</sup> At the bilateral level, the U.S. plans to increase military aid to some states of the region, such as Tajikistan.<sup>46</sup> So, the long-term impact of U.S. engagement in Central Asia is questionable, focusing mainly on conventional security and fighting poorly defined 'spillovers' from Afghanistan. There is no hard commitment to improving economic conditions and good governance in the region. In addition, chances are small that new programmes like the CACI will have more success in fighting drug-trafficking than previous ones did.

Central Asia's governments see an intrinsic association between the region's preparedness for post-2014 on the one hand, and the countries' domestic situations and risk assessments regarding their own regime security, on the other hand. From a regional perspective, Russia, China and the U.S. have demonstrated insufficient commitment to post-2014 security. The Central Asian governments expect external actors to give generous amounts of aid to meet their

requirements: they want material but not training, short-term help but no long-term development. In the case of the West, this aid must come with no political strings attached, and in the case of Russia and China, with no geopolitical ones. The Central Asian states, therefore, feel disappointed by current commitments and fear disengagement by the main external actors in preparing for the post-2014 situation.

### 3. Niches for European engagement

In this troubled situation, how realistic are the EU's plans for developing Central Asia-Afghanistan cooperation? Like the other external players, the EU must take into account the difficult regional context. Central Asian governments have never approved the U.S. narrative on a 'Greater Central Asia' and do not desire the systematic integration of Afghanistan into the region, whose unity is already debatable. Tajikistan sees maintaining cultural links with the Tajiks on the other side of the border as important. But the rest of the Central Asians do not identify with the Afghans. The Central Asian states see Afghanistan more as a destabilising factor than as the 'sixth republic of Central Asia'. They would prefer to limit interactions to a few shared security mechanisms, regional platforms and economic activity. European actors cannot compel regional integration without the will of local stakeholders. Europe must also take into consideration the fact that regional intra-Central Asian tensions could intensify because of Afghanistan, as already evidenced by the growing competition between Tashkent and Dushanbe to export electricity to Kabul.<sup>47</sup>

#### 3.1. The EU's dissociated aid strategies

To date, the EU and its member states have differentiated between Central Asia and Afghanistan both at the level of policy planning and of programme implementation. Historically, the five Central Asian states have been viewed as one of the post-Soviet regions, while Afghanistan has either been aligned with South Asia or treated as a special case. Thus, the current European Commission's development aid is guided by separate documents: the Regional Assistance Strategy for Central Asia and the Country Strategy Paper for Afghanistan (2007-2013). Nevertheless, the EU has identified several shared priorities, albeit at a very general level, in all six countries. Among the key EU objectives in both Afghanistan and Central Asia are the promotion of stability, economic development and good governance. Looking more closely at the EU's priorities and programmes, overlapping areas remain limited for the moment.

While European assistance to Afghanistan is largely governed by the policies of individual states, support for Central Asia is mainly shaped at the EU level and channelled through the European Commission. The EU clearly prioritises Afghanistan in terms of funding. The Commission's current Indicative Programme (2011-2013) for Afghanistan allocates €600 million to support

<sup>42</sup> See G. Pyatt's contribution in 'Discussing the 'New Silk Road' Strategy in Central Asia', *Central Asia Policy Forum* 2, June 2012.

<sup>43</sup> G. Lee, 'The New Silk Road and the Northern Distribution Network: A Golden Road to Central Asian Trade Reform?', *Central Eurasia Project Occasional Paper Series* 8, 2012.

<sup>44</sup> U.S. State Department Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, 'The Central Asia Counternarcotics Initiative (CACI): Fact Sheet', *U.S. Department of State*, 21 February 2012, available at: <http://www.state.gov/j/inl/rls/fs/184295.htm>.

<sup>45</sup> D. Tynan, 'Pentagon looks to plant new facilities in Central Asia', *Eurasianet.org*, 8 June 2010, available at: <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/61241>.

<sup>46</sup> J. Nichol, *Central Asia: Regional Developments and Implications for U.S. Interests* (Washington DC: Congress Research Service, May 31, 2012).

<sup>47</sup> V. Panfilova, 'Dushanbe podelilsia s Kabulom fotonami. SShA podderzhivait proekt novogo Shelkogo puti', *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, 28 October 2011, republished at <http://www.centrasia.ru/newsA.php?st=1320009180>.

a number of country-specific priorities.<sup>48</sup> By comparison, over the same period only €321 million were allocated to bilateral and regional programmes in the five Central Asian states.<sup>49</sup> EU amounts are complemented by large European national disbursements. Over 2011-2013, the EU envisages supporting Afghanistan's police and justice reform with €160 million.<sup>50</sup> For the same period, only €10 million was allocated to regional rule of law programmes in Central Asia, along with a total of €39 million of bilateral support for judicial reform in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan.<sup>51</sup> What is more, assistance to Afghanistan seems to be much more focused. The three major areas for support are rural development, social sector, and governance and the rule of law. Regional allocations for Central Asia are also divided into three focal sectors, but they include a variety of issues, which are further complemented by various different priorities for each state.

EU assistance documents attach significant value to economic (or rural) development, governance and social sectors, both in Afghanistan and Central Asia. However, regional cooperation figures are much more prominently in the case of Central Asia. The Country Strategy Paper and the Indicative Programme for Afghanistan regard regional cooperation only as a non-focal area for support. For 2011-2013, it has been allocated €15 million (only 2.5 per cent of total EU assistance).<sup>52</sup> Regional allocations to Central Asia were far more significant, at €105 million for 2011-2013, a third of the total assistance.<sup>53</sup> These allocations primarily went to support intra-regional cooperation programmes among the Central Asian states, in which Afghanistan is not usually included.

In both cases, EU mainstream support is agreed on with local governments, but aid delivery mechanisms differ in Central Asia and Afghanistan. In the latter, European assistance is partly disbursed through multi-donor trust funds: the Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund (ARTF), administered by the World Bank, and the Law and Order Trust Fund for Afghanistan (LOTFA), managed by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). This is due to the need to coordinate the many donors' efforts and to avoid direct allocations to weak state structures. In

Central Asia, European bilateral support is commonly made available through inter-governmental financing agreements, while regional assistance is provided to larger infrastructure, energy and security programmes led by international organisations.

European actors participate in the Regional Economic Cooperation Conferences on Afghanistan (RECCA) and closely follow the Istanbul Process initiated by Ankara. At the ministerial conference in Kabul in June 2012, it was decided to bolster the dialogue process by strengthening political consultation and developing Confidence Building Measures (CBMs) in the 'Heart of Asia'.<sup>54</sup> The EU has indicated its intention to support the implementation of CBMs in several areas, including disaster management, counter-narcotics and commercial opportunities. All Central Asian countries apart from Uzbekistan have expressed their willingness to lead CBMs. Some EU member states will also support these measures in the spheres of counter-terrorism (France and UK), cooperation among chambers of commerce (Germany and UK) and regional infrastructure (Germany).<sup>55</sup> While these commitments are welcomed, so far they are no more than vague promises. It remains to be seen whether any concrete action will follow.

### 3.2. Security programmes: victims of distrust between Central Asians and Afghans

A significant share of EU regional assistance to Central Asia goes to border management, counter-terrorism and counter-narcotics, to help deal with Afghanistan-associated security concerns. The EU finances the Border Management Programme in Central Asia (BOMCA), which aims to introduce Integrated Border Management (IBM) methods and improve regional cooperation by providing infrastructure, equipment and training to national border agencies as well as organising joint events. The EU also supports the related Central Asia Drug Action Programme (CADAP). This programme focuses on drug addiction prevention and treatment, and provides European expertise through trainings, seminars and study tours for Central Asian institutions on issues surrounding drug policies. The OSCE, which is 70 per cent funded by EU member states, has established a Border Management Staff College in Tajikistan.<sup>56</sup> Finally, several European states fund the Central Asian Regional Information and Coordination Centre (CARICC), which was created to coordinate joint actions for combating illicit drug-trafficking. European countries also participate in the Central Asia Border Security Initiative (CABSI), a platform organised by Austria for dialogue and exchange between local actors and international donors.

<sup>48</sup> European Union, 'Afghanistan: state of play', European Union External Action Service, September 2011, available at: [http://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/afghanistan/documents/content/state\\_of\\_play\\_september\\_2011\\_en.pdf](http://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/afghanistan/documents/content/state_of_play_september_2011_en.pdf).

<sup>49</sup> European Commission External Relations Directorate General, 'Central Asia DCI Indicative Programme 2011-2013', European Union External Action Service, 2010, available at: [http://eeas.europa.eu/central-asia/docs/2010\\_ca\\_mtr\\_en.pdf](http://eeas.europa.eu/central-asia/docs/2010_ca_mtr_en.pdf).

<sup>50</sup> European Union, 'Afghanistan: state of play', European Union External Action Service, September 2011, available at: [http://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/afghanistan/documents/content/state\\_of\\_play\\_september\\_2011\\_en.pdf](http://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/afghanistan/documents/content/state_of_play_september_2011_en.pdf).

<sup>51</sup> European Commission External Relations Directorate General, 'Central Asia DCI Indicative Programme 2011-2013', European Union External Action Service, 2010, available at: [http://eeas.europa.eu/central-asia/docs/2010\\_ca\\_mtr\\_en.pdf](http://eeas.europa.eu/central-asia/docs/2010_ca_mtr_en.pdf).

<sup>52</sup> European Union, 'Afghanistan: state of play', European Union External Action Service, September 2011, available at: [http://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/afghanistan/documents/content/state\\_of\\_play\\_september\\_2011\\_en.pdf](http://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/afghanistan/documents/content/state_of_play_september_2011_en.pdf).

<sup>53</sup> European Commission External Relations Directorate General, 'Central Asia DCI Indicative Programme 2011-2013', European Union External Action Service, 2010, available at: [http://eeas.europa.eu/central-asia/docs/2010\\_ca\\_mtr\\_en.pdf](http://eeas.europa.eu/central-asia/docs/2010_ca_mtr_en.pdf).

<sup>54</sup> According to the Kabul Ministerial Conference Declaration, the 'Heart of Asia' countries include Afghanistan, the five Central Asian republics, Azerbaijan, China, India, Iran, Pakistan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and the United Arab Emirates.

<sup>55</sup> Istanbul Process: A New Agenda for Regional Cooperation in the 'Heart of Asia', "'Heart of Asia" Ministerial Conference - Kabul: Conference Declaration', 14 June 2012, available at: <http://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/cae/servlet/contentblob/620128/publicationFile/169405/120612-HeartOfAsia-Konferenzzerklaerung.pdf>.

<sup>56</sup> Security and peacekeeping, counter-terrorism, border security and crisis management are usually among the key areas for joint PfP actions.

All these programmes and initiatives are in some way associated with the 'Afghan factor'. But Kabul is almost never a stakeholder in them. The OSCE has led some attempts to organise joint Tajik-Afghan and Turkmen-Afghan border guard trainings, but with very limited results. The most recent CABS conference, in April 2012, included Afghan representatives.<sup>57</sup> But there is no common programmatic approach linking Central Asia and Afghanistan. CARICC, for instance, brings together the five Central Asian states, Russia and Azerbaijan, but excludes Afghanistan. BOMCA is practically separate from analogous EU initiatives in Afghanistan – the completed BOMBAF (Border Management in Badakhshan province) and its on-going successor, BOMNAF (Border Management Northern Afghanistan) – even though they are all implemented by UNDP. The EU Strategy review acknowledges the need to develop 'synergies between assistance programmes for Central Asia with those for Afghanistan and ensure improved coordination of EU programmes working on both sides of Central Asian and Afghan borders (BOMCA and BOMNAF)'.<sup>58</sup> However, it remains to be seen how this can be achieved in practice.

The UNDP and OSCE staffs on the ground are taking steps to enhance inter-institutional and inter-regional cooperation through information-sharing and joint events. However, contact building between Central Asian and Afghan border officials is still in its infancy and often suffers from a lack of interest on both sides. European efforts to facilitate regional cooperation through border security assistance, therefore, seem of little efficacy in their present form. Lack of trust between Central Asian and Afghan border guards seems to be the main hurdle, so solutions to this issue should be central to current projects.

Future European security cooperation with Central Asia should not only concern potential threats emanating from Afghanistan. It should also, where possible, include Afghan actors in existing cooperation structures, or at least create consultation mechanisms. Here, the coordination of joint actions at CARICC and the established dialogue platforms within BOMCA and CABS could include Afghan stakeholders more at the regional level. This could also be achieved by the planned institutionalisation of EU-Central Asia security fora, similar to those held in 2008 and 2009, in the form of a regular High Level Security Dialogue. As proposed in the Progress Report and Implementation Review of the 2007 EU-Central Asia Strategy, this new platform is expected to address 'common threats and challenges' associated with Afghanistan.<sup>59</sup> To coordinate these discussions with the EU's political dialogue with Kabul, it would be logical to involve Afghan stakeholders in this exercise, thus creating a shared agenda between dialogue fora in Central Asia and Afghanistan. The existing regular meetings between the EU Special Representative (EUSR) for Central Asia and the EUSR for Afghanistan set a good example for ensuring proper coordination of European efforts.

### 3.3. Developing joint programmes in the civilian sphere

To boost Central Asia-Afghanistan cooperation, Europe will have to go beyond state-to-state relations and try to involve civilian actors. The EU Council Conclusions on Central Asia in 2012 emphasised that 'close cooperation of Central Asian States with Afghanistan is an important element in promoting security as well as encouraging cross-border trade and people-to-people contacts'.<sup>60</sup>

One good example of an attempt to promote cross-border trade in the region is the 'Framework and Finance for Private Sector Development in Tajikistan' programme, co-funded by Germany and the United Kingdom and implemented by the German Society for International Cooperation (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit/GIZ). The programme aims to alleviate poverty and encourage economic growth through strengthening the private sector. It includes a component that focuses on enhancing cross-border economic cooperation between Tajikistan and its neighbours, Afghanistan and Kyrgyzstan. The current project phase, from July 2010 to December 2013, involves supporting measures for improving the framework conditions for bilateral economic activities, including policy dialogue and legislative reforms. It assists in the development of mechanisms that directly benefit enterprises on both sides of the border, through consultancy, business support events and the creation of cross-border markets.<sup>61</sup> Other successful example is the Aga Khan Foundation, which promotes cross-border development operations on a modest scale, especially between Tajikistan and Afghanistan.

Giving assistance to local businesses working on both sides of the frontier through the EU's Central Asia Invest (CAI) programme could extend and add to this experience. Launched in 2007, CAI seeks to strengthen the Central Asian private sector, especially small and medium-sized enterprises, as part of the EU's agenda for economic development and the fight against poverty. The programme currently works on the macro and meso levels, seeking to improve the policy environment by contributing €1 million to the OECD's Central Asia Competitiveness Initiative and providing grant support (€8.4 million in total) to Central Asian Business Intermediary Organisations (BIOs).<sup>62</sup> The OECD initiative includes Afghanistan, but the CAI component targeting BIOs focuses exclusively on post-Soviet Central Asia. The next phase of the programme could incorporate support for local Afghan-Central Asian partnerships, especially in agro-business, food processing and construction. As a grain producing country, Kazakhstan plays a key role in regional food security in the whole of Central Asia and Afghanistan. Cross-border initiatives on

<sup>60</sup> Council of the European Union, 'Council Conclusions on Central Asia', 3179th Foreign Affairs Council Meeting, Luxembourg, 25 June 2012, available at: [http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms\\_Data/docs/pressdata/EN/foraff/131149.pdf](http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_Data/docs/pressdata/EN/foraff/131149.pdf).

<sup>61</sup> Framework and Finance for Private Sector Development in Tajikistan, Component 3: Cross Border Economic Relations, GIZ Presentation at the Tajikistan Development Coordination Council Special Session on Cross-Border Cooperation, 6 March 2012.

<sup>62</sup> European Commission, 'Central Asia Invest: Making Small Business Grow', 2011, available at: [http://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/where/asia/regional-cooperation-central-asia/sme-development/documents/euaid07a-1011-brochure\\_central\\_asiainvest\\_programme\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/where/asia/regional-cooperation-central-asia/sme-development/documents/euaid07a-1011-brochure_central_asiainvest_programme_en.pdf).

<sup>57</sup> Ministerial Conference of the Central Asia Border Security Initiative (CABS), 'Ministerial Declaration' 16-17 April 2012, available at: [http://www.bomca.eu/images/stories/cabsi\\_Declaration%20en\\_2012.pdf](http://www.bomca.eu/images/stories/cabsi_Declaration%20en_2012.pdf).

<sup>58</sup> Progress Report on the Implementation of the EU Strategy for Central Asia: Implementation Review and Outline for Future Orientations, available at: [http://www.eas.europa.eu/central\\_asia/docs/20120628\\_progress\\_report\\_en.pdf](http://www.eas.europa.eu/central_asia/docs/20120628_progress_report_en.pdf), p. 17.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., p.16.

wheat storage, transport and distribution could be a driver for improving regional food security.

Water management and the sustainable use of renewable energy sources is another sphere in which Afghanistan and Central Asia could benefit from enhanced cooperation, facilitated by the EU or its member states. Different countries' conflicting requirements from trans-boundary rivers – some needing to use water for irrigation, others for hydropower generation – have contributed to intra-regional tensions between upstream and downstream countries. The EU has established a regional water dialogue with the five post-Soviet states to address the issue. To avoid a potential conflict of interest, Afghanistan, which shares the Amu Darya River basin with Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, should be included in this process. At the same time, the northern Afghan provinces are in acute need of electricity and water supply, which is vital to their economic development. Central Asian states can offer a way to meet Afghan electricity demands. The EU and its member states can provide substantial know-how on integrated water management and environmentally-friendly technical solutions for water and electric energy supply. The existing EU-Central Asia Platform for Environment and Water Cooperation and the EU-Central Asia Working Group on Environmental Governance and Climate Change could gradually incorporate Afghanistan and help identify the best ways to achieve cooperation. The Regional Environmental Centre for Central Asia (CAREC), supported by the EU and its member states, could also be used to integrate Afghanistan into regional structures dealing with water and environment issues.

Some short-term joint Afghan-Central Asian water management projects already exist. In 2010, the East-West Institute and the Irrigation and Water Engineering Group of Wageningen University conducted a one-year project called 'Afghan-Central Asian Water Cooperation on Management of the Amu Darya: Connecting Experts and Policymakers in the Low Lands'. The project resulted in the establishment of the Amu Darya Basin Network, which brings together international water management experts, practitioners, policy-makers and researchers. With European support, this kind of projects could be expanded to programme level, comparable to the European Commission's EURECA 2009 (EU Regional Environment Programme for Central Asia). Regional programmes on collective water management and sustainable energy generation that benefit both Central Asia and Afghanistan could be funded through the Development Cooperation Instrument (DCI) thematic programme for Environment and Sustainable Management of Natural Resources.

Exchanges between Central Asia and Afghanistan fostered by the EU or member states could be extended to civil society also. This could be done by supporting joint civil society projects through the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) and the Non-State Actors and Local Authorities in Development (NSA-LA) programme, both of which are already in operation in Afghanistan and Central Asia. Cross-regional exchange between women's NGOs, which are particularly strong in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan and are growing in Tajikistan, could be especially promising in helping to address gender issues in Afghanistan.

Finally, funds from the EU's Instrument for Stability (IfS) could be made available for civil society partnership projects in the border regions of Tajikistan and Afghanistan to work on conflict prevention and strategies for coping with the consequences of potential crises. The IfS has both short-term (crisis response) and long-term (programmed) components. Funds under the short-term component have already been allocated to projects in Afghanistan, and also to Kyrgyzstan to help the country deal with the consequences of the 2010 political crisis and inter-ethnic clashes in the south. Under the long-term component, the IfS Thematic Strategy Paper and Indicative Programme for 2012-2013 mentions Afghanistan in relation to the post-2014 situation and Central Asia in relation to counter-radicalisation and regional initiatives. However, the regions are again only superficially linked to each other, if at all. Possibilities for inter-regional civil cooperation on the ground need to be incorporated into IfS planning.

### *3.4. Enhancing education exchanges*

There are promising opportunities for European actors to support education, science and cultural exchanges between Central Asia and Afghanistan, building on the foundation of the legacy of Soviet-Afghan proximity and existing people-to-people contacts, especially through ethnic Tajik, Turkmen and Uzbek minorities in northern Afghanistan. Central Asia faced challenges in reforming its educational and science systems after the break-up of the Soviet Union, which were aggravated by the lack of financial and human resources and restrictive state policies. But Central Asian countries can still offer a good (and affordable) alternative for educating and training Afghan specialists abroad. Programmes for financing studies in the West are reserved for a privileged minority of Afghans, and, for the moment, India and Pakistan are the main destination countries for Afghan students who leave the country at their own expense. Afghan students could be encouraged to go to Central Asian countries, in particular Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, as well as Tajikistan in case of Tajik-speaking Afghans. The cultural similarities with Central Asian societies could help families feel more comfortable in sending young women abroad.

Kazakhstan has already begun to implement a \$50 million (€37.5 million) scholarship programme to benefit Afghan students, while Turkmenistan provides scholarships to the Turkmen minority of Afghanistan. Attracted by the relatively low cost of education and the language similarity, many Afghans go to Tajik universities at their own expense. European funding could supplement these options and provide new opportunities for both Afghans and Central Asians. Central Asia also hosts several international universities and colleges that could open their grant programmes to Afghan students, as is already the case of the American University of Central Asia in Bishkek. Many universities, however, are oriented towards humanities and social sciences, whereas Central Asia and Afghanistan are in desperate need of engineers and medical specialists. Recruiting European experts in these fields to teach at international universities in Central Asia and creating more opportunities for scientific and technical exchange between Central Asian, Afghan and European institutions could help share international know-how to the benefit of all the

countries involved.

The EU's 'Strategy for a New Partnership' with Central Asia has included the promotion of education reform as one of its key priorities and so the Union is well placed to support education and scientific initiatives in the wider region. The EU's Erasmus Mundus, a cooperation and mobility programme in the field of higher education, is particularly relevant for establishing university partnerships and offering scholarships to students and academics. However, the programme has very complex procedures and focuses primarily on facilitating bilateral exchanges between Europe and third countries, rather than among third countries themselves, which might make it difficult fully to incorporate the aforementioned proposals. In addition, EU member states' own programmes should also be considered for developing education and scientific links between Central Asia and Afghanistan.

## Conclusion

The 2012 Review of the EU Strategy for Central Asia seeks to address the potential changes that will emerge after 2014. It stresses the need better to articulate the relationship between Central Asia and Afghanistan in the years ahead, particularly with regard to security and development. But concrete proposals on how to do this are largely absent. In streamlining a new and effective policy that links Afghanistan and Central Asia where appropriate, the EU needs to address five major obstacles:

- The EU talks of 'common challenges such as Afghanistan, terrorism and drug-trafficking',<sup>63</sup> a confusing narrative that does not help to dissociate issues from one another. As such, it indirectly validates the official Central Asian discourse about the region as a victim of potential 'spillovers' from Afghanistan. This approach neglects that radicalisation – in this case, Islamic – is mostly a home-grown phenomenon in Central Asia, and that drug-trafficking is largely a state-sponsored business. Overestimating the security risks could further push Central Asian governments to adopt strategies that are harmful to long-term development and democratisation. The EU should develop a more realistic narrative by emphasising Central Asia's home-grown security threats and challenges.
- Central Asian governments are mindful that Afghan instability is an important source of revenue. Losing Western military aid and the current transactional relationship surrounding the transit of equipment to and from Afghanistan would penalise the elites in office. In this environment, high-level security fora run the risk of ending up as talk shops for Central Asian governments' rent-seeking strategies. Whereas the EU will assure Central Asian leaders that it will not disengage post-2014, it should set a broader agenda with Central Asian states that goes well beyond managing the drawdown.
- The EU has no clear-cut solution to counter the lack of political will towards regional cooperation. Initiating effective cooperation between Central Asian countries and Afghanistan will be difficult. Distrust runs deep and is longstanding. With the possible exception of Kazakhstan, the Central Asian states are not interested in coordinating economic and humanitarian aid to Kabul. Each of them has developed an individual relationship with Afghanistan and has trade and/or investment interests. The quickly deteriorating relationship between Uzbekistan and Tajikistan over Afghan electricity imports shows that Afghanistan can be more of an object of discord than of agreement. It is in the EU's interest to speak more openly about the region's complex realities.
- The EU has repeatedly stated that security is the main concern in Central Asia and Afghanistan and it spends considerable amounts of resources on border security projects like BOMCA/BOMNAF. However, this kind of programmes alone cannot adequately tackle drug-trafficking. Securing borders with checkpoints, barbed wire and watchtowers is not enough to make the frontier impenetrable. In Central Asia and Afghanistan, all border points, even those that the international community has equipped best, remain porous, because corruption has rendered them permeable. Progress on border efficiency requires the political will to fight corruption over the long term. Thus, to be effective, international efforts to combat drug-trafficking in Central Asia must be first political in nature. Such an approach is unlikely to obtain the support of Central Asian ruling elites and the international community is not well-placed to impose it. Nonetheless, support for border control needs to move increasingly from technical projects to political debate and from supporting hardware to providing training and guidance for reform.
- The EU is vague about cooperation with other external actors. If security is a real concern, then the role of Russia as a partner in Central Asia must be clearly addressed. But the EU and its member states are divided over which projects to share with Moscow. Hopes of developing security cooperation with China in the region are even more far-fetched. More importantly, it is necessary to improve coordination between EU and U.S. strategies in Central Asia and Afghanistan. Both are experiencing financial difficulties and facing growing pressure at home to limit costly undertakings abroad, as well as having to manage on-going tensions in the Middle East. The EU and the U.S. have everything to gain by bolstering the transatlantic partnership in Central Asia and Afghanistan; not by throwing money at the problems but by streamlining their approaches and policies.

It will be hard for Europe, as for any external actor, to set up mechanisms of trilateral EU-Central Asia-Afghanistan cooperation. Probably the most realistic way in which the EU can help connect Afghanistan and Central Asia is by supporting locally-based initiatives, such as cross-border

<sup>63</sup> Progress Report on the implementation of the EU Strategy for Central Asia Implementation Review and outline for Future Orientations, p. 29.

trade or community-based activities, and by trying to foster water negotiations and joint education programmes. But most calls for greater integration between Afghanistan and Central Asia will remain unanswered as long as local actors prefer to remain on the margins and lack the political will to build integrated cooperation mechanisms.

If Central Asia and Afghanistan are the victims of anything, it is of the multiple pompous narratives and grand geopolitical designs that have framed the involvement of external actors in the region, from the 'war on terror' to 'nation building'. Concepts such as these have been instrumentalised and internalised by the local elites to their own advantage. The European Union aims to be a normative actor in its values and a pragmatic one in its objectives. Hence, it is in its best interest realistically to assess the post-2014 challenges and find ways to promote constructive relations between the Central Asian countries and Afghanistan. The EU must focus on areas in which the long-term involvement of local actors can be boosted, in particular that of local civilian stakeholders, who are the only vectors of long-term sustainable solutions.



Established in 2008 as a project seeking to monitor the implementation of the EU Strategy for Central Asia, EUCAM has grown into a knowledge hub on broader Europe-Central Asia relations. Specifically, the project aims to:

- Scrutinise European policies towards Central Asia, paying specific attention to security, development and the promotion of democratic values within the context of Central Asia's position in world politics;
- Enhance knowledge of Europe's engagement with Central Asia through top-quality research and by raising awareness among European policy-makers and civil society representatives, as well as discuss European policies among Central Asian communities;
- Expand the network of experts and institutions from European countries and Central Asian states and provide a forum to debate on European-Central Asian relations.

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