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The Regional Dimension of Central Asian Security Cooperation

Over the last twelve years, the security dynamics of Central Asia have been dominated by Afghanistan. Not anymore, argues David Erkomaishvili. The region's security calculations are already being dominated by more traditional ethnic, tribal and sectarian concerns.

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Summary

Long before the creation of Soviet Central Asia, let alone its post-Soviet successor, the security dynamics of this volatile region were driven by interactions among its various ethnic groups. With the ongoing withdrawal of coalition forces from Afghanistan, ethnic, tribal and sectarian commitments will again come to the fore. Over the last twelve years, the active presence of the US military has transformed the region's security fabric, most notably in terms of international security cooperation. Nevertheless, the transition in Afghanistan will not create a power vacuum on a scale comparable to that in Iraq or enable insurgents to take over. Following the examples of Syria and Ukraine, the sources of conflict around the world are likely to become more ethnic, clan-related and sectarian in nature in the coming years. Similarly, the most important security challenges in Central Asia will now be posed by developments internal to the region itself.

Origins of regional security cooperation

The importance of security cooperation among the states of Central Asia was immediately apparent after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Due to the break-down of highly integrated Soviet military systems, successor states lacked the capacity to provide for their own security. Artificial borders, often created by the Soviets in the 1920s, were not clearly demarcated. In general, violent conflicts that arose from ethnic and religious divisions, such as the Tajik civil war, combined with the region's geography to create an unstable environment. Finally, the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan (and subsequent collapse) forced successor states (especially those that bordered Afghan territory) to develop their own approaches to deal with the deteriorating situation there.

Regional security institutions in Central Asia were established under the auspices of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) shortly after its formation. The Collective Security Treaty (CST) of the CIS built upon the foundation of the integrated Soviet military. Its aim was to allow successor states to safely transition to independent military structures and to decrease the costs of providing security by pooling resources together. Although the structure and objectives of the CST –

and its present day successor, the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) – have changed several times since its inception in 1992, the organization has remained focused on the region.

The influence of China

At the same time, the opening up of Central Asia to actors that were barred during Soviet times created a need to establish a framework for resolving regional tensions. This led to the emergence of the Shanghai Five, which later evolved into the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), and signalled a Chinese push into the region. Immediately after the Shanghai bloc was formed, it was tasked with tackling the legacy of the Cold War by solving border disputes and addressing the militarisation of adjacent areas between China and the post-Soviet states. When the group became the SCO, this goal was elevated to reflect a larger Chinese vision for the region – one based on dismantling obstacles to Chinese economic influence. Subsequently, security matters – including anti-terrorist collaboration, intelligence sharing, anti-narcotics coordination, and occasional joint military drills – were added to the SCO's economic core, and the organization became China's primary instrument for engaging with Central Asian governments.

The significance of Afghanistan

For many years, Afghanistan represented the most significant security challenge facing Central Asia. Following the US intervention, states in the region sought to establish regional platforms that balanced the competing interests of external powers against one another. This contributed to the institutionalization of regional security cooperation under the frameworks of the SCO in 2001 and the CSTO in 2002.

The war in Afghanistan also eliminated acute security challenges for the governments of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan. ISAF forces significantly weakened the Taliban and eliminated its government in Kabul; shattered al Qaeda training camps and the group's ability to use Afghanistan as a safe haven for staging terrorist attacks; and consolidated a stable Afghan government. Moreover, the US military presence in the region created opportunities for Central Asian governments to increase their security through "train and equip" programs – as well as providing an alternative to Russia and China.

By contrast with recent developments in Iraq, the ongoing coalition departure from Afghanistan shows few signs of causing the security situation in Central Asia to deteriorate. There is also little evidence that Afghan issues are securitized by its Central Asian neighbours. Indeed, while Afghanistan remains important to the security of the region, that importance is declining. There are, for instance, few signs of contingency planning by other governments in the region or of cross-border militant activity.

Afghanistan: security partner rather than threat

Rather than being a destabilising force in regional security, Afghanistan merely highlights wider problems that have not been resolved in the last two decades. Despite the existence of two major cooperative frameworks – the SCO and CSTO – and the involvement of external powers, the Central Asian contribution to the security of the region, and to Afghanistan in particular, has been hindered by a lack of trust and cooperation. Frequent conflicts over water between upstream and downstream states and border disputes in the Fergana Valley have undermined the effectiveness of joint action.

From a Central Asian perspective, the management of the Afghan transition has two main problems: a lack of multilateral engagement from both the SCO and CSTO, and a lack of consensus among Central Asian governments. As a result, each government has advanced its own initiative to address the stability of Afghanistan.

Kazakhstan has proposed the idea of a UN centre for Afghanistan, which would coordinate regional projects under Astana's leadership. Tajikistan has proposed the Dushanbe Four initiative involving cooperation among the Afghan, Pakistani, Russian, and Tajik governments to address various regional issues. Kyrgyzstan has advanced the Bishkek Initiative, which seeks to capitalize on its neutral role in the Afghan conflict by providing a venue for annual peace conferences. The most prominent idea, however, is Uzbekistan's 6+3 initiative. This plan calls for an international forum consisting of a group of Afghanistan's neighbours – Iran, China, Pakistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan – on one side, with the US, Russia and NATO on the other. The forum would develop regional solutions to security challenges emanating from Afghanistan.

The joint Russian-Chinese initiative to invite Afghanistan to participate in the SCO as an observer state was a rare multilateral effort to raise the profile of the Afghan issue. On a bilateral level, China has been investing heavily in the reconstruction of Afghanistan. Russia has also started to catch up by resuming Soviet era projects and participating in "train and equip" programs with a twofold purpose: to balance against China, and to ensure a strategic foothold for any future action in the country.

Intra-regional security challenges

Afghanistan is becoming a low priority in the military security of neighbouring states. The latest versions of the Russian and Kazakh military doctrines, for example, list social issues, unrest and instability as the biggest threats to their respective states. In particular, asymmetric security challenges, such as drug trafficking, are now far more important than military ones. Addressing the issue of drug trafficking require close cooperation between regional governments and their Afghan counterparts. Issues such as these will elevate the political significance of Afghanistan for Central Asian states as its military significance declines.

Although the CSTO has been expanding its activities, its collective defence institutions remain weak. Politically, its members are divided on how to manage Afghanistan. When it comes to a common stance, the SCO is equally weak, with collective action rarely exceeding joint declarations and intelligence sharing. Despite efforts by the SCO and CSTO to hammer out a multilateral approach to address the problems that Afghanistan faces, each Central Asian state prefers to handle its relations with Kabul primarily on a bilateral level.

Neither organisation has offered a reliable initiative to solve intra-regional problems, such as ethnic tensions or water management. Taking into account ethnic and clan links between Central Asian states and Afghanistan, the sustainability of local and regional alignments will shape the security of Central Asia in the short-term as international forces withdraw from Afghanistan.

The major security challenge for Central Asia is therefore not the Afghan transition but domestic economic and social concerns, power transitions, and unresolved ethnic and demographic tensions. These are the problems that can be exploited by fundamentalist groups if the security situation deteriorates, and these are the problems that have the most potential for violence.

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