

## Introduction

Central Asia presents the European Union with a uniquely problematic set of security challenges. Enumerated in their most basic form, without reference to context, the challenges are formidable enough: the threat of violent extremism, a well established conduit for smuggling illegal narcotics and potential instability rife with the possibility of conflict and humanitarian catastrophe. But these challenges are not stand-alone issues that can be treated individually; they are embedded in a regional context that creates additional difficulties for engagement. Namely, while Central Asian states may share a common understanding of 'security challenges', that understanding differs considerably from accepted definitions within the EU. More importantly, the Central Asian states themselves have evolved in various directions since gaining independence in 1991, and it is by no means clear that a 'regional policy' is the most effective means by which to engage them.

This paper examines security challenges in Central Asia in light of the recently adopted EU strategy. It begins with an examination of the differing definitions of 'security' and disjunctions within Central Asia before moving to a discussion of the linked challenges of extremism, drug trafficking and potential instability. Recommendations are presented in the conclusions.

## What do we mean by 'security'?

In established democracies with strong institutions, security challenges on the national level are broadly understood as serious, wide-ranging threats to the well-being of the citizenry that are best countered by concerted government action. This definition presumes the existence of robust, transparent institutions; elections in accord with international standards; and an elected political leadership that is accountable to voters. As a result, it does not envision a contradiction between the actions of government and the interests of citizens.

The assumption rarely holds in Central Asia. None of the Central Asian nations is a fully functioning democracy in the sense accepted by the EU, as

# Security Challenges in Central Asia

## Implications for the EU's Engagement Strategy

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indicated by numerous reports prepared by the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) on the monitoring of elections in the region. Some of the Central Asian nations lack all but the barest trappings of democratic governance. All of Central Asia's states are, to one degree or another, nations in which an elite partly or wholly consumed by the pursuit of its own material interests maintains power through the exercise of decorative democracy. With elections stage-managed and institutions weak, the elite, which breaks down into a welter of informal influence groups vying for control of material resources, is largely unaccountable.

Throughout the region, national elites have repeatedly demonstrated their commitment to a single overriding interest – the preservation of power to maintain a materially beneficial status quo. This does not preclude the existence of other interests, including the common good of ordinary citizens, but it by no means presumes them.

Elite commitment to the maintenance of the status quo is usually expressed in terms of a need to preserve 'stability', with Western calls for reform or the application of international standards frequently interpreted as menacing attempts to 'destabilise' the country. After Uzbekistan used massive force to quell unrest in Andijon in May 2005, for example, a number of Western nations issued calls for an independent international inquiry. In a typical example of an official Uzbek response at the time, the country's embassy in Kyrgyzstan issued a statement lambasting "the

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puppeteers who want to destabilise the Ferghana Valley by means of obedient international organisations and NGOs continue to exploit the fallout from the failed plan to bring off an armed coup in Uzbekistan in order to justify their step-by-step imposition of the so-called 'project to advance democracy'.<sup>1</sup>

An article in the government-controlled Uzbek newspaper *Pravda vostoka* on 24 June 2005, made a similar point: "Under the pretext of concern for human rights, there are unceasing attempts to interfere in the internal affairs of the independent state of Uzbekistan. Especially active in this respect is the United States, which uses the cover of the United Nations and the creation of an international commission to destabilise the situation."<sup>2</sup>

In a word, Central Asian elites are strongly inclined to define as a 'security challenge' anything that they perceive as a threat to their power, including calls for democratic reform. In extreme cases, this produces a near-total disjunction with the EU concept of a security challenge. For example, a Central Asian regime may perceive political pluralism as a security challenge and commit considerable resources to prevent this undesirable outcome. In less extreme cases, a Central Asian regime may commit scant resources, say, to narcotics smuggling both because it does not see the problem as a threat to its power and because elements of the ruling elite may view the financial rewards they reap from involvement in the drug trade as an enhancement to their power.

This disjunction puts the EU in a double bind. First, as in the case of political pluralism, a situation may arise in which the Central Asian regime views as a security challenge something that the EU considers a desired outcome. Second, the means the Central Asian regime employs to meet its perceived security challenge, which include the suppression of dissent in the case of political pluralism, may in fact create a situation that the EU views as a security challenge in and of itself – namely, a suffocating political system that increases the chances of instability.

This paper uses EU definitions of security challenges, but it does not presume that the definitions employed here match those of Central Asian regimes. The disjunction is of minor importance in the overview but of considerably greater importance in the recommendations for engagement with Central Asian states.

<sup>1</sup> See *Is Regional Turbulence Return of the Great Game?*, Daniel Kimmage, RFE/RL, 19 July 2005 (<http://www.rferl.org/featuresarticle/2005/07/5324D86C-D2EA-4FB4-8BE0-14C7B6B164D6.html>).

<sup>2</sup> See *Karimov Battens down the Hatches*, Daniel Kimmage, RFE/RL, 1 August 2005 (<http://www.rferl.org/featuresarticle/2005/08/33050805-e933-4780-9c9f-347688033ba2.html>).

## Does 'Central Asia' exist?

Like the nations that make up the EU, Central Asian nations share considerable historical, cultural and, at times, linguistic similarities against a backdrop of significant differences. Unlike the EU, however, Central Asia is not home to a regional integrationist project with a well developed institutional structure. While Central Asian nations belong to a variety of regional organisations, there is no regional organisation that consists solely of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, nor are any of the supranational organisations to which these countries belong remotely similar to the EU.

What's more, the nations of Central Asia have followed distinct trajectories of development since gaining their independence in 1991. Kazakhstan enjoys increasing oil wealth, along with the problems of an extraction-based economy, and has embarked on limited democratic reforms. Resource-poor Kyrgyzstan has suffered from economic malaise and, since 2005, political turmoil, yet it has achieved a degree of rough-hewn political pluralism that is unique in the region. Tajikistan endured a destructive 1992-97 civil war, and has been economically battered and politically quiescent ever since. Turkmenistan veered into extreme isolationism and mounting socio-economic peril under the despotic rule of President-for-life Saparmurat Niyazov and now faces uncertain prospects under the leadership of President Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov. Uzbekistan confronts considerable socio-economic problems with few venues for dissent and a disturbing history of violent incidents.

This overview perforce treats Central Asia as a region. Nevertheless, while grouping security challenges under thematic rubrics, it looks also at national specifics within each rubric. The recommendations deal in more detail with the problem of EU engagement with a 'region' that is really composed of five distinct and disparate nations.

## Extremism

The security challenge most commonly associated with Central Asia is religious extremism; more precisely, the threat of radical Islam. Despite the attention this issue has received, both from Central Asian governments and foreign powers, it is by no means clear that it is truly the most serious security challenge facing the region. Moreover, the efforts undertaken by Central Asian governments to stamp out extremism provide a textbook example of differing EU and Central Asian definitions of 'security challenges', posing additional questions about the possibility of effective engagement on this issue.

Central Asia is home to at least one internationally known terrorist organisation and one widespread movement espousing extremist views. The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), which grew out of radical tendencies in the Uzbek section of the Ferghana

Valley in the 1990s, eventually adopted a violent, extremist ideology not unlike that of Al-Qaeda, with which the IMU established strong organisational ties in Afghanistan in the late 1990s. Recognised as a terrorist organisation by the US State Department, the IMU carried out armed incursions into Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan in the late 1990s.

After 9/11, the US-led military operation in Afghanistan, where the IMU had come to base itself, seriously impacted the organisation's operational abilities and drove it to seek refuge in the lawless hinterlands of Pakistan. Though occasional reports have indicated that the IMU may be regrouping in Pakistan, and may be widening its target theatre as the Islamic Movement of Turkestan, it is not certain that the organisation retains any real capability to carry out terrorist operations in Central Asia. Recent fighting in Pakistan appeared to degrade the IMU's operational capacity even further.<sup>3</sup>

Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT), an organisation that emerged in the Arab world in the 1950s, seeks to unite all Muslims in a restored caliphate ruled by Islamic law. HT employs stinging anti-American and anti-Semitic rhetoric, and its ultimate goal would seem to imply the overthrow of secular regimes throughout the Muslim world, including Central Asia, yet the organisation claims that it pursues change by non-violent means. In Central Asia, HT operates through a clandestine cell structure and reportedly has thousands of followers, leading some to speculate that HT could potentially mount a Bolshevik-style coup attempt should it abandon its avowed commitment to non-violent means.

A number of incidents in Uzbekistan, including a series of bombings and shootouts in Tashkent in 2004 and a popular uprising in Andijon in 2005, underscored the potential for violence in the region, although the extent of the role played by extremist ideology and violent Islamists in these events is somewhat unclear. There were substantial indications that the 2004 violence in Tashkent was the work of an extremist group, but the absence of a credible investigation has left many questions unanswered.

The unrest in Andijon in May 2005, which Uzbek authorities crushed with the use of massive force, neatly illustrated the ambiguities surrounding the issue of religious extremism in Central Asia. The Uzbek authorities asserted that the violence was perpetrated by an Islamic extremist group called Akramiya, although there were credible indications that the uprising had a strong socio-economic component. Moreover, accounts by independent witnesses that the Uzbek security services massacred demonstrators were never properly

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<sup>3</sup> See *Has the IMU Reached the End of the Line?*, Daniel Kimmage, RFE/RL, 30 March 2007 (<http://www.rferl.org/featuresarticle/2007/03/7a04b472-5c21-498d-8d62-dab6f7f31b32.html>).

investigated, and the trial of individuals involved in the violence failed to meet international standards of fairness and impartiality.

Uzbekistan has adopted the harshest policies on extremism, with thousands of people believed to be imprisoned there on flimsy charges of Islamist activity.<sup>4</sup> Other Central Asian governments have also employed tough tactics to deal with the threat, and credible allegations of human rights violations by security services in the battle against extremism have emerged in virtually every Central Asian country. A considerable body of expert opinion argues that the methods adopted by Central Asian governments, and particularly the Uzbek authorities, are counterproductive, and have in fact contributed to the rise of extremism in the region.

Viewed in the context of extremist movements worldwide, Central Asia's threat does not appear to warrant the draconian measures often employed by regional governments. The number of terrorist attacks in Central Asia is relatively low, and the involvement of Central Asian extremists in globally active terrorist organisations is minimal (with the notable exception of the IMU's close ties to Al-Qaeda, although that phenomenon appears to be geographically limited to parts of Pakistan, and perhaps Afghanistan, at present).

This does not mean that violent extremism is not a threat in Central Asia. The region has numerous features that make it a potential breeding ground for terrorists. Poverty in and of itself does not foster extremism, but the same cannot be said of serious socio-economic problems left to fester by unaccountable, undemocratic governments that err on the side of brutality in their efforts to combat extremism.

## Narcotics

Central Asia is an important corridor for the smuggling of illegal narcotics produced in Afghanistan through Russia to European markets. The problem is most acute in Tajikistan, which shares a long, porous border with Afghanistan, but it is present in all of the other Central Asian countries as well. Moreover, the growing presence of cheap illegal narcotics, and particularly heroin, is fueling drug abuse within Central Asian countries. This has resulted in rising rates of HIV/AIDS, with the use of contaminated needles the most common route of infection. The UN has warned that if the spread of HIV/AIDS is not contained, a serious public health crisis could emerge in coming years. Finally, the same channels used by drug smugglers to move illegal narcotics could serve as conduits for extremists to ferry weapons and explosives across borders.

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<sup>4</sup> See *Creating Enemies of the State: Religious Persecution in Uzbekistan*, Human Rights Watch, 2004 (<http://hrw.org/reports/2004/uzbekistan0304/>).



## Instability

Instability remains a looming threat in Central Asia. As 2003-05 upheaval in Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan demonstrated, post-Soviet regimes – of which the Central Asian nations are outstanding examples – cannot be assumed to be stable. What's worse, since the regime changes in those three countries do not seem to have made a fundamental impact on the underlying system of flawed governance, there is no guarantee that history will not be repeated. If anything, the post-Soviet world's clan-ridden, decoratively democratic and often kleptocratic regimes appear to become less stable as they age, their dysfunctional political systems incapable of imparting legitimacy or resolving internal contradictions. Bungled elections are only one potential flashpoint. In the more authoritarian systems, where the greatest power is concentrated in aging presidents and repressive mechanisms are most prominently employed to maintain order, succession poses grave risks.

Since the end of the Tajik civil war in 1997, the centre has held in Central Asia, despite violent outbursts in Uzbekistan and the tumultuous fall of President Askar Akaev in Kyrgyzstan in 2005. Even the sudden death of long-ruling Turkmen President Saparmurat Niyazov in December 2006, saw Deputy Prime Minister Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov ascend to the presidency in what appeared to be a smoothly orchestrated succession (although the true extent of the new president's power remains somewhat unclear).

But it would be foolish to assume that the tenuous centre will hold indefinitely. Broadly speaking, the region's political systems are as opaque as its socio-economic problems are clear. More specifically, instability could result from infighting in Turkmenistan's new leadership, from renewed violence or a succession struggle in Uzbekistan, or from unchecked political turmoil in Kyrgyzstan. Even in Kazakhstan, which has benefited from windfall oil profits, one should remember that it is not poverty that spawns conflict, but inequality.

Instability in any Central Asian country could open a Pandora's box of problems with significant spillover potential for neighbouring countries. Violent conflict along ethnic or regional lines could wreak havoc in a number of places, but most devastatingly in the densely populated Fergana Valley. Conflict would cause refugee flows for which the regional infrastructure is woefully unprepared. And conflict zones are often the greatest incubators of extremism.

## Governance

As the preceding overview suggests, the issue of governance is of dual relevance to the EU as it implements its strategy for engaging Central Asian nations. First, in each of the security challenges reviewed here – the threat of extremism, narcotics smuggling, and instability – governance is of crucial importance. Central Asian governments share a

penchant for repressive, and possibly counterproductive, measures to combat extremism. Law enforcement agencies are rife with corruption to an extent that eases the flow of narcotics through the region. And the overall lack of good governance in Central Asia creates preconditions for instability.

Nevertheless, there is no way to engage Central Asia effectively without engaging Central Asian governments. While some countries, such as Kyrgyzstan, boast relatively numerous and vibrant non-governmental organisations (NGOs), the pervading attitude in the region towards NGOs is suspicion, even outright hostility. In Turkmenistan, NGOs are for all practical purposes non-existent. In Uzbekistan, they operate under heavy surveillance and tight constraints. Moreover, the crucial role played by national governments in efforts to combat extremism, narcotics trafficking and instability underscores the need to confront the issues of governance that have hamstrung the effectiveness of these efforts in Central Asia.

In its efforts to engage Central Asian governments, the EU should remain aware of the above-noted regional tendency to view Western reform initiatives as potentially damaging to their hold on power and, thus, as security threats. Russia and China reinforce this view, with the Russian- and Chinese-dominated Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO: China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan) a case in point. As this author argued elsewhere: "for SCO member states, 'terrorism, separatism, and extremism' are viewed not as distinct abstract phenomena with global relevance to be dealt with globally, but rather as a single phenomenon that is locally defined by the ruling elite and left to sovereign states to combat by any means they see fit".<sup>5</sup> To this end, the SCO's charter lists among its aims and objectives "joint opposition to terrorism, separatism, and extremism in all their manifestations," but the organisation's first principle is "mutual respect for states' sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity and the sanctity of borders, nonaggression, noninterference in internal affairs, the non-use of force or the threat of force in international relations and renunciation of unilateral military superiority in contiguous areas".

## Recommendations for EU engagement

- The EU should take care to ensure that it sticks to its definitions of security challenges and remains vigilant to the differing definitions used by Central Asian governments. Because the former are explicit, while the latter are often implicit, the EU must carefully examine the real definitions employed on a case-by-case basis and target for engagement those areas where it can make progress

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<sup>5</sup> See *Does the Road to Shanghai go through Tehran?*, Daniel Kimmage, RFE/RL, 12 June 2006 (<http://www.rferl.org/featuresarticle/2006/06/1af793c3-bbb9-4688-87f4-c71c53791ea7.html>).

on security challenges as they are explicitly defined within the EU, and not as they are defined implicitly by Central Asian governments. The strategy states: "To align expectations of Central Asian partners with those of the EU will be a mutually beneficial and reinforcing process." EU representatives should be mindful, however, that the alignment of expectations may prove somewhat more difficult in practice.

- The EU should not make excessive efforts to engage Central Asia as a region. Instead, the EU should pursue a policy of targeted engagement directed at specific issues in specific countries. This is particularly important in light of the limited availability of resources, since nationally targeted engagement can make effective use of resources in areas where they can produce results, while a region-wide policy will necessarily waste resources by spreading them across five countries when they are likely to be effective only in some parts of the region. The current strategy rightly accords 'special importance' to bilateral cooperation, but also advocates a 'regional approach' for a welter of issues including organised crime, human, drugs and arms trafficking, terrorism and non-proliferation issues, inter-cultural dialogue, energy, environmental pollution, water management, migration as well as border management and transport infrastructure. While this is conceptually appealing, the less-than-encouraging record of regional cooperation in Central Asia suggests that the regional approach to these issues should be subject to regular review with an eye to alternate bilateral approaches.
- The EU can and should engage Central Asian governments, both because governments are key interlocutors in meeting security challenges and because the quality of governance is a crucial factor in combating extremism, narcotics smuggling, and potential instability.
- The EU should focus primarily on the quality of governance in the fight against extremism and narcotics trafficking, and not on efforts to bolster existing approaches to these problems. The emphasis, in other words, should be on qualitative change, not quantitative improvement.
- Moving from the regional to the national context, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan present the most attractive options for heightened EU engagement. Kazakhstan is committed to maintaining solid ties with the West through its multi-vector foreign policy, and it has invested considerable prestige in its bid to chair the OSCE in 2009. This renders it amenable to properly formulated and targeted reform efforts, and its political system, while far from ideal, affords possibilities for positive change. Kyrgyzstan, despite its unsettled domestic politics, has a thriving civil-society sector, and the country's small size makes it a good target for the allocation of limited resources. On security issues, neither country is beholden to the rigid security conceptions shared by the leaderships of Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. For example, both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan make fewer efforts to control their citizens' movements than Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan and are thus likely to be significantly more receptive to cooperation on border issues.
- The EU can and should engage Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, but with realistic expectations of what can and cannot be achieved. As Turkmenistan begins to open up to the outside world in the wake of Niyazov's death, opportunities for limited engagement will arise, and these should be seized upon, particularly in follow-up efforts to ensure the implementation of stated reform policies in education, health care, and social services. Current levels of engagement with Uzbekistan should be preserved, with an emphasis on maintaining lines of communication with an eye to expanded engagement if and when the opportunity presents itself.

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