

# Central Asia and Afghanistan: Insulation on the Silk Road, Between Eurasia and the Heart of Asia

Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO)  
PO Box 9229 Grønland, NO-0134 Oslo, Norway  
Visiting Address: Hausmanns gate 7

Centre for the Study of Civil War (CSCW)  
Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO)  
PO Box 9229 Grønland, NO-0134 Oslo, Norway  
Visiting Address: Hausmanns gate 7

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# Central Asia and Afghanistan: Insulation on the Silk Road, Between Eurasia and the Heart of Asia

Paper 3 of the PRIO Project 'Afghanistan in a  
Neighbourhood Perspective'

Shahrbanou Tadjbakhsh

Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO)



Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO)  
Hausmanns gate 7  
PO Box 9229 Oslo  
NO-0134 Oslo, Norway  
Tel. +47 22 54 77 00  
[www.prio.no](http://www.prio.no)

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**About the author:** Shahrbanou Tadjbakhsh is a Research Associate with PRIO, and directs a specialization on Human Security as part of the Master of Public Affairs (MPA) at L'Institut d'Etudes Politiques (Sciences Po) in Paris. She is co-author (with Anuradha Chenoy) of *Human Security: Concepts and Implications* (Routledge, 2007) and Editor of *Rethinking the Liberal Peace: External Models and Local Alternatives* (Routledge, 2011). She holds a PhD and a Master's degree from Columbia University.

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Is Afghanistan the heart of Asia, from where regional security can be threatened and cooperation induced? Or is it an artificial heart whose beat does not echo the genuine security interests of neighbouring countries? This question is the essence of the PRIO research project 'Afghanistan in a Neighbourhood Perspective', which this third paper in the series aims to answer from the point of view of the Central Asian Regional Security Complex (CA RSC).

In the lead-up to the Bonn II Conference by the end of 2011, the USA and Coalition partners had broadened their 'regional approach' to peace in Afghanistan from its initial narrow focus on the AfPak region, to a new 'Heart of Asia' concept which cast Afghanistan as the political and economic hub of a conglomeration of regional countries, near and distant. The widened approach was based on two assumptions: First, that potential insecurity instigated by the destructive behaviour of non-state actors necessitated new collective security arrangements for all neighbouring countries; and second, that the stabilization of Afghanistan would herald positive externalities and economic dividends, which the US administration envisioned as a New Silk Road. Yet, the 'Heart of Asia' concept had two conceptual limitations in addition to a number of political impediments. First, it fundamentally underestimated the potential for non-cooperation among states, even if they shared common concerns for dangers emanating from non-state actors. Second, by assuming that there was a large region where interests merged for cooperative security, the 'Heart of Asia' vision failed to recognize genuine security dynamics within sub-regions and how Afghanistan is surrounded by three Regional Security Complexes (RSCs), each with its own security dynamic.

Extending the RSC framework to the case of Central Asia (CA), this paper examines the degree to which the nature of the conflictual/cooperative relationship between CA countries shapes their interactions with external powers and with Afghanistan. The paper makes three broad arguments:

- 1) The CA countries are locked into a distinct RSC that originates from their common geography, historical legacy and common security concerns and interests. The main security dynamic of the region is the rivalry among the strong states (Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan) and animosities between the strong and the weaker ones (Uzbekistan–Tajikistan), punctuated by patterns of hostility over the sharing of natural resources. While rivalries and fear of dominance diminish prospects for cooperation, relationships are durable because the security of CA states is interdependent.
- 2) The nature of rivalry within the CA RSC is an extension of geopolitics and external alliances shaped by the strategic and economic interests of Russia, USA and China. By the same token, CA countries draw in global powers along the lines of their own rivalries. If there is a Great Game being played, the CA countries are as much actors as are external powers.
- 3) The (lack of) involvement with Afghanistan is a reflection of the security dynamics of CA which are shaped by internal rivalry and the common need to balance external actors. While CA countries are concerned about insecurities stemming from Afghanistan, their main security problems lie elsewhere.

Rivalry between CA countries, fear of loss of sovereignty and the need to balance the interests of global power prevent CA countries from 1) proper regional integration, 2) a consolidated front against external influences and 3) a unified position for a collective regional engagement with Afghanistan. These factors also lead to centrifugal rather than centripetal tendencies as a main characteristic of the CA RSC.

### **The Central Asia Regional Security Complex**

CA states share a number of common concerns about threats to their national security and regime stability which originate both from factors internal to the states as well as external to them. These common threats are discussed in terms of terrorism, extremism and criminality, including the trafficking of narcotics. For each of these concerns, however, the paper discusses how they are not just cross-border threats imported from an unstable Afghanistan but are also the result of factors inherent to the CA RSC: Rising extremism, sometimes violent terrorism, is mostly home-grown in the region, instigated by groups with the explicit ideology to overcome the secular regimes, but also reacting to repression, or taking advantage of socio-economic factors that create a demand.

Similarly, the booming narco-trafficking is not to be blamed only on increased production in Afghanistan but also on high demands in Russia and Europe, the lucrative and quick cash nature of trafficking at times of high unemployment for CA populations, insufficient border controls, corruption in the law enforcement agencies and among customs officials and border troops, as well as in some cases vested interests by political elites.

While regional cooperation is seen as imperative for shared security concerns such as extremism, terrorism, criminality and non-proliferation, there are other issues that have led to increased tensions. Among them, the paper discusses shared water resources as the main potential for inter-state conflict in the CA RSC. Energy endowments among the three wealthy countries (Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan) also fuel competition for international markets and raise the possibility of instability in the long term. While ethnicity may not be a major fault line, conflict lines are within states, where the strength of sub-national identities based on other criteria such as geography and genealogy challenge the unity of the CA nation-states.

Despite common security concerns, CA states prefer bilateral over multilateral approaches to cooperation in the region. Among factors internal to the CA RSC that hamper regional cooperation, the paper discusses three:

First is the skewed distribution of power and economic resources among the CA countries. The CA RSC consists of not just one strong state but at least two, creating a competitive dynamic that limits the manoeuvring space for the other weak states, whose fear of being dominated in turn forces them to adopt strategies of bandwagoning. Skewed distribution of economic resources also fosters competition, with each state looking at its resources as independent and at its neighbours as competitors rather than partners in international markets. As a result, economic relations with countries outside the region are prioritized.

A second factor that hampers cooperation is the type of personality driven regimes in the CA RSC. Liberal regimes may be more conducive to regionalism, but it is the personal ambitions of leaders that truly drive, or inhibit, this commitment in the region. As a result, cooperation depends on the goodwill of leaders and is vulnerable to the unpredictability of future generations of successors. Concentration of power at the top also impedes the emergence of a more diversified type of 'soft' regionalism, a bottom-up institutional process which could

emerge from interactions between civil society and private actors.

A third factor that hinders effective cooperation is the fear of loss of sovereignty, which CA countries guard vehemently as the prize of their independence after the collapse of the Soviet Union. While declarative statements have frequently promised collective action on countering narcotics and terrorism, etc., implementation mechanisms for collective action have been lacking, much of it because of the fear of being dominated either by regional hegemonies or external powers. Inaction is seen as more beneficial than surrendering some of that sovereignty for increased security or economic benefits.

### **Relations with Major Global Powers**

If, in the immediate years following independence, lack of regional cooperation was the legacy of Russia's regional hegemonic influence and ambition, two decades later, the USA has been able to displace some of that hegemonic power through its War on Terror in the wider neighbourhood. Newcomer China has also increasingly projected a strong economic presence to assure its strategic influence with the cash-strapped CA states.

Two different hypotheses are developed in terms of how external actors interact with and impact relations within the CA RSC: A great game from outside, and a great game from within.

#### **Great Game from Outside**

A first argument developed in the paper focuses on how external actors impact the rivalries and lack of cooperation within. Lack of cooperation among CA countries, the asymmetry of power that exists within the CA RSC, and the fear of domination makes them vulnerable to external strategic interests. This further hampers cooperation within because of the tendency of powerful external actors to promote incentives for bilateral and centrifugal relations in pursuit of their own interests.

There are two different narratives that explain the interactions between Russia, the USA and China as global powers in CA. From one point of view, no external state views the CA RSC as crucial for its economic or security interests, with the region being peripheral to the world system. This makes the CA RSC in fact another buffer zone, much like Afghanistan, with a similarity that great powers are present through their armies in both zones, but are interested in checking each other's power more than anything else. When attention has been elsewhere, the powers have made irregular, unpredictable and short-term efforts at cooperation, which have in the long term prevented a stable environment for regionalism.

The alternative theory sees CA as a heartland of Eurasia, strategically important for global powers and worthy of a renewed Great Game/strategic competition for dominance. In its revived version in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the game has transformed into a Great Energy Game, with the three powers seeking dominance over the region for gaining monopoly of access to the region's rich hydrocarbon resources.

A position in between the two points of view is that the region, from the great powers' point of view, is important, but the interest waxes and wanes with great fluctuations. This stage-in-between also explains why external actors value their bilateral relations more than multilateral efforts. Each external power is exerting influence over regional and international organizations in which they dominate. Yet, whether the CA RSC is periphery or the heart of global competition leads to the same results for the CA states: They are vulnerable to

unpredictable foreign policy changes and short-term attention spans. Regional politics, in consequence, remain fluid and unpredictable.

### **Great Game from Within**

The second subsequent argument developed in this part is that if there is a Great Game, it does not mean that the CA countries are weak actors. To the contrary, they are active players who draw in external actors along the lines of their own interests and rivalries. Competing agendas among regional and international powers benefit the CA states by creating more room for independent action. CA countries in essence use external rivalries to their own advantage, playing contradictions for their own benefits. Their response is to maximize strategic benefits without compromising their newfound autonomy. This strategy translates into a multi-vector foreign policy which allows them to remain on good terms with all the major powers in order to play on their rivalries to gain strategic goods for themselves *and* against each other.

The outcome of competitive dynamics is more conducive to centrifugal tendencies than centripetal ones. External rivalries may force CA countries to develop strategies to balance between external powers, but this then translates into little ability to coordinate security and defence policies within the sub-region.

CA countries play up cooperation on defence and security with Russia (through cooperation with Russian sponsored regional organizations such as CIS, CSTO and SCO) versus what they can gain from cooperation with the USA and NATO forces (assistance to their militaries and rent from US bases). The external economic competition gets reflected by the Kazakh and Turkmen governments alternatively opening of their oil and gas fields and pipeline transportation to Russian, Chinese and Western companies. This allows them to gain leverage against their rival Uzbekistan on the one hand, and ensures that continued EU and US pressure and option would keep Russia paying commercially competitive prices. CA countries are all also engaging in cooperation with Iran, Turkey, Pakistan and India as part of their multi-vector strategy that allows them to make pragmatic choices instead of basing cooperation on ideological grounds. Keeping options open is the strategy they have adopted in response to fluctuating interests in the CA RSC.

### **Impact on Relations with Afghanistan**

The asymmetric rivalry between CA countries and their need to balance between the interests of external actors has also resulted in the CA states' failure to put up a consolidated front for collective regional engagement with Afghanistan. This does not mean that they do not individually try to reap benefits from the US and Coalition's intervention in Afghanistan, however. In fact, CA republics saw an opportunity in joining the US-led war against al Qaeda and the Taliban in the region, not only to gain moral support for their own struggles against extremist organizations, but especially for the material support they received by opening their airspaces for over-flight rights, their territories to lease by military bases, and their routes for the Northern Distribution Network (NDN) supply route for NATO/ISAF and US troops.

While CA countries have gained from their collaboration with the USA in Afghanistan, they are, like Russia, China and Iran, hesitant about future expectations. On the one hand, prolonged presence of Western troops in Afghanistan within the framework of the Strategy Partnership Agreement raises the contentious question of sovereignty. Yet, they would also not want a premature US and NATO withdrawal. They also benefit from a prolonged stay of

NATO in Afghanistan for the fringe benefits and the rent that they can extract from allowing access to NATO and US bases and transportation infrastructure through the NDN.

Afghanistan represents both a threat and an opportunity for CA states: Continued instability can be a substantial source for threats from bleeding extremism, terrorism, and organized trafficking of drugs and arms. At the same time, stabilization and reconstruction could lead to an opportunity for cooperation over electricity, gas, roads, pipelines, and hydroelectric power transfers. They also favour the prospect of Afghanistan becoming a trade and transit corridor between CA and South Asia, and are eager to participate in regional economic strategies which would help them secure alternative southern outlets for their raw material and energy exports, and, by implication, further enlarge their autonomy vis-à-vis Russia and China.

Despite the strong interest and common perceptions of threats and opportunities, however, there is very little coordination of efforts among the CA states regarding Afghanistan. Why is there an overall lack of engagement with Afghanistan in general and a lack of a unified regional approach specifically? The paper looks at this question from the point of view of the CA states and their calculations about the high cost of engagement. For one, they are sceptical about the chances of success in the long run and the clear vision of the international community for support after 2014. CA countries also realize that the situation in Afghanistan remains very unstable, with prospects of renewed conflict, which could bleed into their region in terms of refugees in the first place. CA leaders are also aware that engagement with Afghanistan comes at a domestic cost of making them more vulnerable to terrorist attacks in retaliation for their NDN cooperation for example. In the economic sector, their lack of investment and involvement is more the result of not being able to play a role rather than lack of will or even capacity. Finally, and most important, they are preoccupied with their own regional security concerns which have to do with balancing between their own rivalries and that of great powers. The lack of a common approach towards Afghanistan mirrors the lack of intra-regional cooperation and a common security strategy within CA itself. Caution, in such an environment, is preferable to quick reaction.

Yet, this does not mean that they have each not proposed a concrete political and economic strategy for the stabilization and economic reconstruction of Afghanistan unilaterally. Turkmenistan would like to broker negotiations to boost its position as a neutral country. It also hopes that reconstruction efforts would lead to a new market for its gas to Pakistan and India via Afghanistan through the revamped TAPI pipeline project. Uzbekistan sees in Afghanistan the opportunity to play a role in regional diplomacy, but not as part of a bloc that includes Russia, by proposing a unilateral diplomatic solution, the 6+3 initiative under the aegis of the United Nations. Uzbekistan also favours bilateral economic relations instead of multi-country ones which would lace it in competition with others within the CA RSC. Tajikistan's long borders and weak border management capabilities make it the most vulnerable to potential incursions. It would like to offer its own experience with settling its Civil War in the 1990s as a model for Afghanistan. Like Kyrgyzstan, it also hopes to benefit from stabilization and reconstruction as an opportunity to export its electricity to Afghanistan and beyond. Kyrgyzstan may be the most preoccupied with internal upheavals, having undergone two revolutions in the span of five years, but it has aptly exploited the situation in Afghanistan by leasing its territory to US troops and using that for leverage with the Russians in order to gain concessions and increase aid and rent from both powers. Kazakhstan has put strong emphasis on using instruments of multi-lateral diplomacy to promote a solution and its own wealth to offer humanitarian aid, economic and technical assistance to Afghanistan.

With the exception of Uzbekistan, CA states have been enthusiastic supporters of the New Silk Road initiative proposed by the USA, which includes a host of regional economic projects

that benefit them directly. Nonetheless, they are also aware that the initiative has a number of limitations that can affect its realization. These include practical modalities such as financial guarantees, the need to open trade barriers and the impractical scale of the projects. More important however are the political impediments, including the lack of reconciliation and peace in Afghanistan to begin with, as well as rivalries that hamper regional cooperation. Reactions to the parallel political process of the Heart of Asia confidence-building measures proposed by Western partners in the lead-up to the autumn 2011 Istanbul Meeting were even more cautious. From the CA states' point of views, similar to that of Russia and Iran, the proposed mechanisms duplicated the work of existing multilateral, trilateral or bilateral forums already available in the region. In essence, they were interested in reviving the 2002 Kabul Declaration on Good-Neighbourly Relations, which set out principles including non-interference in each other's internal affairs and respect for Afghanistan's territorial integrity, but without a verification regime.

Instability in Afghanistan is a major security concern for the CA states wary of bleed-out effects of trans-border terrorism, extremism, narcotics and weapons trafficking. In the final analysis, however, this is periphery to, and not the core of the main security dynamics within the CA RSC. This explains why CA countries are more interested in insulating themselves from Afghanistan than engaging with it. For the future, the CA RSC is poised to choose between developing closer relations with, and possibly being integrated in, South Asia, as the US administration may want it, or being part of Eurasia, as the Russians and Chinese would have it. Unless prospects for cooperation within CA are improved, the risk of absorption into one or another of the neighbouring regions remains high, putting into question the durability of the CA RSC in the long term.

# Introduction

By the end of the Bush administration, a ‘regional approach’ was commonly viewed as a necessary step toward a durable solution to peace in Afghanistan, with the assumption that neighbouring states would benefit from cooperation given the challenge of non-state actors’ destructive behaviour in the wider region. Because of the presence of al Qaeda and the Taliban in Pakistan, and the influence that Pakistan had on internal dynamics within Afghanistan, the ‘regional approach’ first translated into an AfPak strategy within the US policy circles, formally inaugurated in the administration’s March 2009 review. Focus on Pakistan continued with the new President Obama’s AfPak strategy, which set as its goal the defeat of terrorists and insurgencies through counter-insurgency and counter-terrorism. Within this logic, which assumed that change could only come about through the curbing of support for Taliban and insurgents, the Central Asian republics, Russia and other more distant neighbours such as Turkey and Saudi Arabia were seen as secondary actors because they were assumed to have less influence on the internal Afghan power balance. These countries came into the Afghan equation only to the extent that they could support or inhibit US efforts to eliminate al Qaeda and its affiliates, provide logistical support for the US and NATO operations in Afghanistan, or facilitate talks with the Taliban.

By November 2011, it had become clear that limiting the regional approach to Pakistan was not enough. Other countries such as Iran, Russia, India, China, the CA republics, Saudi Arabia and Turkey also had strong stake in the stabilization of Afghanistan. A new concept had to be coined to widen the AfPak strategy and cast a wider net for involving a larger array of states. Thus was born the idea that Afghanistan represents the ‘Heart of Asia’, borrowed from the poem of poet and philosopher Muhammad Iqbal Lahori (1877–1938), leader of the All-India Muslim League and fundamental in the creation of modern Pakistan, but who was also known for his quest for the revival of Islamic civilization, ‘the East’ and Asia. In a poem penned in Farsi, he had claimed that “Asia is a body of water and soil, where the Afghan nation is the heart; its prosperity brings prosperity to Asia, and its decay brings decay to Asia.”<sup>1</sup>

The widening of the regional strategy for Afghanistan was based on two assumptions: First, it put emphasis on the need for collective security to counter threats coming from non-state actors: criminal groups, trans-border traffickers of narcotics and arms, extremist groups and terrorists. This line of thinking was the continuation of a trend emerging from the post-Cold War period when non-state actors’ behaviour had come to challenge the notion of states as the primary actors in international relations. By bringing non-state actors into the regional security equation, writers such as Barnett Rubin and Edmund Herzig had deduced new patterns, which were referred to as “Regional Conflict Formation”<sup>2</sup> or “negative sub-regional dynamic”<sup>3</sup>. States were considered weak or strong according to the degree to which they were impacted by threats coming from non-state actors, and their cooperation depended on their perception of the origins of such threats. Second, the widened regional approach assumed that there was a large region, indeed a ‘Heart of Asia’,

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1 Quoted in the speech of President Karzai at the opening of the “Istanbul Conference for Afghanistan: Security & Cooperation at the Heart of Asia”, November 2, 2011. <http://www.gmic.gov.af/english/index.php/features/249--statement-by-hamid-karzai-at-istanbul-conference-for-afghanistan>. See also Thomas Ruttig, “Afghanistan Conference in Istanbul: The Clogged Arteries of the ‘Heart of Asia’” blog posted on Afghanistan Analyst Network website, November 1, 2011 <http://www.aan-afghanistan.org/index.asp?id=2201>

2 Barnett R. Rubin, ‘Russian Hegemony and State Breakdown in the Periphery’, in Barnett R. Rubin & Jack Snyder (Eds.), *Post-Soviet Political Order, Conflict and State Building*, London: Routledge, 1998, p. 144; Barnett R Rubin and Andrea Armstrong, “Conference summary: Policy approaches to regional conflict formations”, New York: Centre on International Cooperation, November, 2002, p.5

3 Edmund Herzig, “Islam, Transnationalism and Subregionalism in the CIS”, in Renata Dwan and Oleksandr Pavliuk (Eds.), *Building Security In The New States Of Eurasia: Subregional Cooperation In The Former Soviet Space*, New York: EastWest Institute, 2000, p. 240.

where interests merged for cooperative security. Cooperation was not only supposed to decrease the destructive behaviour of non-state actors, but could also lead to positive externalities, such as economic dividends to the neighbouring countries when Afghanistan would be transformed into a land bridge, a hub for trade and transit in the region, which the US administration envisioned as a 'New Silk Road'.

Yet, the conceptualization behind the 'Heart of Asia' approach can be analysed as having two limitations. First, it fundamentally underestimates the potential for non-cooperation among states, even when they share a common concern for dangers emanating from non-state actors. It neglects factors that shape relations between states, be they durable and tangible such as geography and history or intangible and competitive, such as national interest, ambitions for power, economic rivalry, etc. Problems of terrorism, extremism and criminal trafficking of narcotics and arms certainly present threats for all countries of the wider neighbourhood surrounding Afghanistan. What however explains the countries' lack of cooperation on Afghanistan, including that of Pakistan? The PRIO research project on 'Afghanistan in a Neighbourhood Perspective' takes as premise that although many of Afghanistan's direct and extended neighbours view the al Qaeda and the Taliban as threatening to their national interests, they are often locked into various types of security competition with one another that trumps cooperation over the common interest in fighting terrorism and insurgency. In the first case study on South Asia, this author argued that latent conflict and rivalry between India and Pakistan, which has simmered since the 1947 partition, dictated the priority focus for these two states and created a negative dynamic through which the problem of Afghanistan should be viewed.<sup>4</sup> Inter-state security dynamics create more of an impetus for conflicts and rivalry than motivate cooperation based on common concerns for non-state actors' behaviours. Other scholars have also hinted at parts of this problem. Ashley Tellis and Aroop Mukherji of the Carnegie Foundation, for example, have argued that while Afghanistan is important to many of its neighbours, its importance usually derives from how it impacts other strategic goals. Because these goals are often competitive, the success of a regional approach is inevitably impeded.<sup>5</sup>

Second, by assuming that there is a large region where interests merge for cooperative security, the argument for a 'Heart of Asia' and a 'New Silk Road' also overlook the dominant role of security dynamics within sub-regions. Yet, it is within sub-regions that states form patterns of enmity or amity based on their core security dilemmas. Interactions between states within Regional Security Complexes (RSCs), and not the actions of non-state actors or actor quality, should form the basis of analysis for what dictates conflict and cooperation dynamics in the region. As Kristian Berg Harpviken explained in the first overview paper of the PRIO research series, the extent of the engagement of neighbouring states in Afghanistan is primarily a reflection of security concerns within their own region.<sup>6</sup> As such, the PRIO project examines the distinctness of the three RSCs surrounding Afghanistan, each with its own security dynamics, and the role of the latter as an 'insulator' caught in between. Such an analytical framework proposes a different practical approach towards the stabilization of Afghanistan, one based not on counter-insurgency and counter-terrorism, but primarily on eradicating the sources of conflict, rivalry and non-cooperation among states, with diplomacy as the main tool to 'calm the regions'.

As the second case study in the series, this paper focuses on security dynamics within the Central Asia Security Complex (CA RSC) by asking the following questions:

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4 See Shahrbanou Tadjbakhsh, *South Asia and Afghanistan: The Robust India-Pakistan Rivalry*, PRIO Paper, Oslo: Peace Research Institute Oslo, 2011

5 Ashley J. Tellis and Aroop Mukherji (Eds.), *Is a Regional Strategy Viable in Afghanistan?*, Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2010, p.119

6 See Kristian B. Harpviken, *Afghanistan in a Neighbourhood Perspective: General Overview and Conceptualization*, PRIO Paper, Oslo: Peace Research Institute Oslo, 2010.

- 1) To what extent is there a distinct CA RSC and what are its core security dynamics? Instead of looking at the so-called ‘-stans’ as a whole, this paper analyses how the dynamics between them prevent the formation of a collaborative regional security framework.
- 2) How do these dynamics lead the CA states to draw in global powers along their own lines of division, and how are they in turn reinforced by rivalries between global powers? Much has been said about how external powers are engaged in a ‘Great Game’ in CA, but how do the CA countries in turn use these rivalries to their own advantage?
- 3) How does Afghanistan play the role of a buffer zone at the periphery and not the core of the security problems of the CA RSC? As such, how is the engagement of CA countries a reflection of their own security dynamics? Why is it that the CA countries are not active participants in problem solving for Afghanistan? Is it because they are not allowed to play a more active role, because they cannot formulate a consolidated position, or because they do not want to be engaged?

### Conceptual Framework

The definition of a Regional Security Complex (RSC) used in this paper is informed by Buzan and Wæver, who see them as “a set of units whose major processes of securitization, desecuritization, or both are so interlinked that their security problems cannot reasonably be analysed or resolved apart from one another”.<sup>7</sup> To qualify as a RSC, a group of states need to have a certain level of security interdependence, sufficient in form to both establish them as a linked set and to differentiate them from surrounding security regions. Within this cosmology, three elements are key to the dynamics within and between regions:<sup>8</sup>

- 1) Mutually exclusive RSCs, which consist of states with historical relations and patterns of amity and enmity that are durable.
- 2) Global powers which are interlinked to the regional dynamics of RSCs through the mechanisms of penetration and overlay either in the RSC or in the insulator.
- 3) Insulators, or buffer zones, where larger regional security dynamics stands back-to-back.

According to Buzan and Wæver, security interaction tends to be more frequent among neighbours than among states located in different regions, simply due to physical adjacency. Geographical proximity therefore defines patterns and intensity of security interdependence, and most states fear their neighbours more than distant powers.<sup>9</sup> In this pattern, relationships follow a pattern of enmity and amity, in the Buzan and Wæver view, or, in the alternative conceptualization of Jonson and Allison, patterns of suspicion and friendship and dynamics of cooperation and conflict.<sup>10</sup>

Both set of authors believe that dynamics in a given RSC tend to be so strong that external powers intervening in the region fall in line with the existing pattern of power relation and dividing lines.

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<sup>7</sup> Barry Buzan and Ole Weaver, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, p. 44. Also see Barry Buzan, Ole Waever and Japp de Wilde, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*, Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1998.

<sup>8</sup> Buzan and Wæver, 2003, pp. 40–45.

<sup>9</sup> Buzan and Weaver, 2003, pp. 45–49.

<sup>10</sup> Roy Allison and Lena Jonson, “Central Asian Security: Internal and External dynamics”, In R. Allison & L. Jonson (Eds.), *Central Asian Security, The New International Context*, Washington D.C., Brookings Institution Press, 2001, pps.1–23.

The RSC model envisages that “where there is rivalry among the global powers, a regional security complex in conflict formation mode draws in outside interventions along the lines of its own internal split.”<sup>11</sup> This explains the patterns of alliance between the countries of the RSC with global powers as a reflection of the power relationship within. If Buzan and Wæver keep the global and the regional levels as two separate entities in analytical terms, Lake and Morgan provide an alternative view by conflating the two levels of global and regional into one. In their position great powers can be counted as members of a remote RSC where they project force.<sup>12</sup> Global powers should be understood as part of an RSC if their involvement is a) central to the great powers’ foreign policy and their conception of security and b) central to the dynamics of the RSC. Geographic proximity is no longer a criterion for a RSC, as external powers may be present through influence and power, despite their principled ability to withdraw.

In our view, external powers, while not formally part of distant RSCs, may nevertheless change the nature of the core security dynamics within. Relations between great powers at the global level may cause a spillover effect into the region and shift priorities and relations between states.<sup>13</sup> In this regard, it is precisely the interplay between internal (states of the region) and external factors (external powers) that can shape regional dynamics.<sup>14</sup>

Afghanistan, within the RSC approach, may be defined as a durable ‘Zone of Chaos’ that is likely to continue to fulfil its function as an insulator between other regional complexes (the Persian Gulf, South Asia and Central Asia). The long-lasting conflict in Afghanistan has created a mini-complex, characterized by durable features of political fragmentation, political turbulence and internal divisions. Domestic dynamics drive the conflict within Afghanistan, while the insulation is robust and durable. In the words of Buzan and Wæver, it “draws in the neighbouring states along the lines of the internal rivalries, but its internal dynamics are strong enough to keep the larger dynamics separated.”<sup>15</sup> Afghanistan’s status as a failed state makes it incapable to generate wider security dynamics or become the centre of new large regional formations.

### The Central Asian Regional Security Complex

Extending the RSC framework to the case of Central Asia, this paper examines the extent to which the nature of the relationships between CA countries shapes their interactions with external powers and with Afghanistan. In this paper, we shall present three arguments laid out in three distinct sections:

***Argument 1:** The countries of the region are locked into a distinct RSC that originates from their common geography, historical legacy and durable patterns of amity and enmity, conflict and cooperation. Yet, despite geographic proximity, common historical legacy and common security interests, the CA RSC is characterized by centrifugal characteristics rather than centripetal ones.*

Within the CA RSC, this is as a result of an internal dynamic caused by the presence of two types of states, strong ones in terms of power (territory, population, economy, forces) (Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, as well as Turkmenistan as a country transitioning to strength) and weak ones (Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan). The main security dynamic of the region is defined by the rivalry between the strong states (Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan) and between them and the weaker ones

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11 Buzan, 2001, p.4

12 David A. Lake and Patrick M. Morgan, “The New Regionalism in Security Affairs”, in Lake, D & Morgan, M, P. (Eds), *Regional Orders: Building Security in a New World*, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997, pp. 12–13 and 28–29.

13 Jonson & Allison, 2001, p. 11.

14 Jonson & Allison, 2001, p. 9.

15 Buzan and Weaver, 2003, p. 111.

(Uzbekistan–Tajikistan), punctuated by patterns of hostility over the sharing of natural resources. While rivalry over leadership and economic power and conflicts over environmental goods such as water have diminished prospects for cooperation between the CA countries, their securities are nonetheless inter-dependent. None of the countries are able to effectively ‘divorce’ the region.

***Argument 2:** The security dynamics within the CA RSC are reinforced by the rivalries between global powers. Hence, the nature of rivalry within the region is an extension of geopolitics and external alliances shaped mainly by the strategic and economic interests of Russia and China versus those of the USA. By the same token, the CA countries draw in global powers along the lines of their own rivalries.*

The overlay of the global influence within the CA RSC intensifies the durable nature of rivalries within the region. Yet, if there is a Great Game being played in Central Asia, the CA countries are as much actors as are external powers.

***Argument 3:** Afghanistan plays the role of an insulator, a buffer zone between the security dynamics of the three regions surrounding it. The involvement with Afghanistan, and in the case of the CA countries, the lack of it, is a reflection of their own security dynamics.*

The inter-play between strong and weak states within the CA RSC impacts not only on relations with global powers, but also with Afghanistan. If the nature of this asymmetrical inter-dependence prevents regional integration and a consolidated front against external influences, it also prevents a unified regional engagement with Afghanistan.

Here too, as was the case of the paper on South Asia, the problem of Afghanistan is periphery to, and not the core of, the security problems of the CA RSC. CA countries are concerned about cross-border threats emanating from Afghanistan, but the main sources of their insecurity are not located within Afghanistan. In contrast to India and Pakistan who project their rivalry within Afghanistan, CA countries are more interested in insulating themselves from their southern neighbour. By implication, following the withdrawal of US and NATO troops by 2014, the countries of the region will not seek to replace them and ‘enter’ Afghanistan, even if they seek further containment by cultivating buffer zones of influence within northern Afghanistan.

The analysis in the paper points to challenging conditions for the institutionalization of regional security arrangements within the CA RSC. CA countries’ mistrust for formal commitments reveals mistrust of collective actions which they believe might endanger their sovereignty. Hence, propositions for cooperative regional mechanisms may be a long way from realization, be that the New Silk Road, the Heart of Asia Consortium of the Istanbul process or those proposed by the CA countries themselves – such as the ‘High level Forum on Security, Peace and Cooperation in Central Asia and the Caspian Basin’ proposed twice from the podium of the UN General Assembly (GA) by the President of Turkmenistan.

# Part I) The Central Asia RSC and its Characteristics

In this paper, we refer to Central Asia as consisting of the five republics of the former Soviet Union, south of Russia and East of the Caspian Sea, namely: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. The independent states of CA emerged in the context of the dissolution of the USSR, a phenomenon that created the necessary functions of anarchy so central to Buzan's theory under which sub-regional security complexes can be consolidated. The end of the Cold War removed bipolarity, leaving post-Soviet states in an anarchic situation of competition externally and to their own devices for ensuring security within. The countries found common legacy in a historical trajectory that saw them transforming from agrarian societies under Khanates and Emirates to Socialist Republics of the Soviet Union ruled from Moscow, and since 1991, to independent states adopting quasi-liberal models of open economic systems and democracies with multi party presidential systems with varying degrees of success. Despite common experiences, each of the countries have reached different levels of strength related to their point of departure, their natural resources endowments and their success in managing the transition process since the 1990s.

The CA RSC has not experienced any inter-state military conflict, despite tensions over such water sharing and borders, and despite alarmist predictions from those who expected the break-up of the Soviet Union to lead to ethno-nationalist conflicts similar to the experience of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. If some analysts have seen the particular need to 'calm' the Ferghana Valley,<sup>16</sup> a sub-region at the intersection of eastern Uzbekistan, northern Tajikistan, and southern Kyrgyzstan particularly vulnerable given a mosaic of ethnic and Islamist groups, weak government control, artificial borders, economic decline, environmental crisis and rapid population growth, the region as a whole has proven remarkably resilient to inter-state conflicts. Intra-state conflicts have not been absent however, among them a civil war in Tajikistan (1992–1997), violent riots in Uzbekistan (Andijan in 2005), two forceful regime changes in Kyrgyzstan (2005 and 2010) and riots among oil workers in Kazakhstan (2011). Despite these episodic outbreaks of violence, and with the exception of Kyrgyzstan, regime stability has been the rule.

## Factors that Lock the CA RSC in a Durable Relationship

### Common Geography, Common History

Unlike non-state actors, which can form alliances by mobility, states are immobile, as Buzan reminds us. And unlike global powers, which can project power over long distances, states are threatened more by their near neighbours than by others. Geography thus matters. Common geography creates common histories where patterns of amity and enmity develop.<sup>17</sup> The nation-states of CA were formed as independent republics following the demarcation of borders in the 1930s. They share a common cultural historical legacy as borderline conquests of the Russian empire in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a land which until then had been inhabited by Turkic steppe nomads and settled Iranian people under the Khanates of Khiva and Kokand and the Emirate of Bukhara.

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<sup>16</sup> Roy Allison and Lena Johnson, *Central Asian Security: The New International Context*, Brookings Institute Press, 2001. For predictions of conflict, see Nancy Lubin, Keith Martin and Barnett R. Rubin, *Preventing Conflict in Central Asia: The Ferghana Valley*, New York: The Council on Foreign Relations, 1999.

<sup>17</sup> Buzan, 1991, p. 191.

Since the seventeenth century when the Silk Road effectively discontinued as a trade route, the region had become isolated from surrounding empires. During much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as part of the socialist family in the Soviet Union, societies transformed to a hybrid between European socialist modernism and the Islamic cultural heritage of the region.

The CA RSC is delimited from other RSCs by mountains and deserts in the south and east. External borders with China and Russia have been contested in the past, but are now largely settled with the delimitation and de-militarization process concluded in the mid-1990s supported by the creation of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). If the CA RSC is insulated physically from other regions, borders within remain more contested. The border demarcations of the 1930s were supposed to create homogeneous republics but led to an uneven distribution of ethnic groups to different countries, resulting in ethnic enclaves and communities linked through patterns of extended family across borders. In places ill-defined, borders remain porous at best and their delimitations contested during the past decade in several areas, marked by what an International Crisis Group Report states as “strong-arm politics, economic pressures, shadowy backroom deals, nationalist sentiments, public dissatisfaction and an environment of mutual mistrust.”<sup>18</sup> The desire to contain against trafficking in narcotics and other illegal trade has led to strict restrictions on cross-border movement (and even mining in the case of Uzbekistan), manifesting deep distrust between states and threatening the livelihoods of local communities.

### Internal Stability as Ultimate Goal, Strong Regimes and Leadership as the Means

If, as argued above, the formation of the CA states was carried out in the context of international anarchy following the dissolution of the USSR, one particularity of the CA RSC is that the states remain poorly placed to shape the security processes unfolding in the wider region. In Part II of the paper, we shall examine how this characteristic makes them susceptible to intimidation or manipulation by external powers,<sup>19</sup> and how it also allows them to take advantage of ‘chaos’ for their own national interests. As for the implications for inter-state relations, Mohammad Ayoub and Brian Job make the important argument that within an anarchic system, the weakness of states in being able to manipulate external influences creates security dilemmas within the region. This weakness results in shifting the focus of security from inter-state conflicts towards intra-state ones: centrifugal challenges, secessionist threats, terrorism, etc.<sup>20</sup> As Robert E. Kelly also argues, “weak state-dominant regional complexes generate a shared internal security dilemma that trumps the external one.”<sup>21</sup> This partly explains the predicament of the CA states whose regime stability and national security is challenged by a host of factors internal to the states: tension exacerbated by economic problems, high unemployment rates among the youth, as well as widening gaps among the different strata of the population that have access to income, social benefits, and welfare services. CA leaders have the common challenge of creating viable states with legitimate, democratic governments that can provide socio-economic opportunities while avoiding corruption. Those that have not been able to provide economic opportunities, such as Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, have seen a mass labour out-migration mostly to Russia but also to the stronger economies of the region, notably Kazakhstan.

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18 International Crisis Group, “Central Asia: Border Disputes And Conflict Potential”, *ICG Asia Report N° 33*, Osh/Brussels: ICG, April 2002. See also Katarzyna Czerniecka, “The State at its Borders: The Internal Dimensions of Kyrgyzstan’s Border Security”, *Central Asia Security Policy Brief # 4*, OSCE Academy in Bishkek and the Geneva Centre for Security Policy, January 2011.

19 William Tow, *Subregional Security Cooperation in The Third World*, Boulder and London: Lynne Rienner, 1990, pp. 4–5.

20 Muhammad Ayoub, “The Security Predicament of the Third World State: Reflections on State Making in a Comparative Perspective”, in Brian Job (Ed.), *The Insecurity Dilemma: National Security of Third World States*, Boulder : Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1992. See also Mohammed Ayoub, *The Third World Security Predicament: State Making, Regional Conflict and the International System*, Boulder : Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1995.

21 Robert E. Kelly, “Security Theory in the ‘New Regionalism’”, *International Studies Review*, Vol. 9, No. 2, 2007, pp. 197–229.

But if they share the same internal types of challenges, mistrust between states is exacerbated by a fear of contagion and a lack of trust in each other's capacity to contain domestic problems. The 1992 Civil War in Tajikistan, although successfully regulated with the implementation of the UN brokered Peace Accords in 1997, created such fears among neighbouring countries that they adopted drastic measures such as closing and mining of borders, establishment of visa regimes and tightening of control on their own opposition movements. Similarly, the 2005 and 2010 Kyrgyzstan civil society-led revolutions were feared by CA elites for their possible contagion effect, leading the Tajik and Uzbek governments to close borders and tighten control over the mass media. Following in the footsteps of the colour revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine, the Kyrgyz experience also made the other CA ruling elites wary of external manipulations of civil society movements, leading to more control over registration and communication. From CA leaders' point of view, even if opposition to the Kyrgyz rulers was fuelled by grievances over poverty and inequalities, the uprisings were made possible by external support and criminal networks, and in the final analysis, lax security measures that failed to contain them. The most democratic, and 'soft' leader among them, President Askar Akayev of Kyrgyzstan, was in fact unable to preserve himself through democratic means by failing to control his police forces, a lesson other leaders learned for themselves in order to prevent the domino effect. Regime power thus depends to a large degree on the willingness of authorities to use force against dissent, as demonstrated by the Uzbek government with the suppression of the 2005 riots in Andijan.

Internal regime type thus features in the conception of national security. Although there are important variations in terms of openness, the CA states have strong presidential systems where the presidents rule by decree, with the exception of Kyrgyzstan, which is struggling to make a parliamentary democracy work. The leaders all come from within the former Soviet *nomenclature* of the Communist Parties, and have been able to secure themselves multiple extended terms, which may keep them in power well into the 2020s. Concentration of power in presidential offices means weak parliaments, political parties, opposition groups and civil societies, as well as little transparency in decision-making. As a result, hallmarks of democracy, such as human rights, can be repressed, curtailed, weakened, and even made irrelevant in the quest for stability and order which is the desired goal for strong, stable and secure regimes. The closed political systems are, in a way, manifestations of the fear of violent oppositions and chaotic political revolutions, precisely what CA ruling elites witnessed in Tajikistan during its civil war and in Kyrgyzstan during its revolutions.

This brings us to the question of what a 'strong' or 'weak' state means. From a conventional security-based analysis – a realist position – a failed or weak state is one that is unable to maintain monopoly on the use of force, provide security from external and internal threats, control borders and territory, ensure public order and provide safety for its citizens. It is the more liberal conception of what a strong state is that gauges the state's ability and will to provide fundamental political goods associated with statehood; not only physical security, but also legitimate political institutions that permit broad citizen participation, sound economic management with a legal and regulatory climate conducive to entrepreneurship, private enterprise, open trade, natural resource management, foreign investment and economic growth, as well as social welfare for its population. From a realist perspective, therefore, the CA states, with the exception of Kyrgyzstan and to an extent Tajikistan, can be considered 'strong' states, while from the liberal perspective, the category can only be applied to resource rich and relatively more liberal Kazakhstan. It is precisely the realist conception of strength, and not the liberal one, that is enshrined in the psyche of CA ruling elites.

Domestically, the ideal of strong leadership (more than a strong state) may actually be coveted by the population, which through the Soviet system had been made more familiar with an individualized form of governance embodied in the leadership of the Communist Party rule,

instead of a de-individualized one as in a parliamentary democracy. The Soviet legacy was also a continuation of the pre-Soviet experience with governance which had traditionally bestowed authority on a Khan (supposedly a just leader) or a single clan leader who was responsible for the well-being of his followers. As the Soviet state guaranteed many of the basic needs of people (access to free education and healthcare, social welfare, job security, etc.), collective expectations have also come to cherish the memory of an all-providing system. Instead of cultivating a sense of personal initiative, much of CA society expects change to come through top-down measures. The nuance, however, is that while citizens expect strong leadership to manage a strong liberal state that provides for security, development and rights, the ruling elites may see the virtue of strong leadership for a strong realist state that prioritizes security first.

### Trans-Border Security Threats: Extremism, Terrorism and Criminality

While the potential domestic threats to regime security have led to concerns about the merits of opening up the political and economic systems, the traditional security narrative of the CA ruling elites has long concentrated on the external factor: trans-border threats from extremism, terrorism, and the proliferation of arms and drugs originating in the wider region (particularly in Afghanistan and Pakistan) but crossing the borders within Central Asia. The culprit, as seen from the point of view of CA states, is not only the neighbourhood with an unstable Afghanistan, but in particular the porous borders within the region. Weak management of internal borders of the CA RSC presents a security dilemma for the states unable to trust each other. While Uzbekistan has largely mitigated the militant threat through strict security measures inside the country, for example, it considers itself vulnerable to incursions from Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, whose containment capacities it does not trust.

Militant Islamism is not only imported from Afghanistan, but is primarily a home-grown phenomenon. Distinction should be made between the constructive role that Islam and Islamic values have played in CA societies, and the politicization and manipulation of Islam by organizations that use religious identity for their ideological goals to challenge the secular constitutions of the states. Islam is part of the renaissance for common religious identity in all the states. Under Soviet rule, the elites became secularized, and because the Soviet state saw religion as the 'opium of the people', Islam remained within the boundaries of the home: unofficial, ritualized and mixed with remnants of Sufism that had historically risen in regions periphery to the centres of Islamic orthodoxy in the Middle East. In the post-independence period, while the political elite and state institutions remained largely secular and religion became separated from the state in the constitutions of all the countries, the renaissance of Islam attracted new believers, especially among the young, perhaps filling a void created by the collapse of the Communist value system. CA governments initially embraced the religious revival, but in the aftermath of the Civil War in Tajikistan, they intensified efforts to check the development of political opposition in the form of political Islam. They feared that extremist groups would take advantage of the lack of proper religious education and superstition among the population to challenge their secular regime. The opening up of the countries in the early 1990s had allowed a massive inflow of imams, supported by Saudi Arabia, Iran, Turkey and other countries in the Gulf, sometimes preaching traditions which departed from the home grown Hanafi school of Islam of Central Asia. Much of religious extremist ideology grew as a result of the spread of Salafism and Wahhabism by imported preachers, although the terrain was ready with increase pressure on political action and socio-economic grievances. Ruling establishments also exaggerated themselves the Islamic threat to generate support when they joined the Global War on Terror, as will be explained in Part III.

The Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRP) is the only legal Islamist Party in the region that has participated in the parliament and in the government following a peace deal that

instigated a 30% quota for representation for members of the opposition United Tajik Opposition (UTO). Other Islamic groups have been banned, labelled either as terrorist or extremist organizations. One major group, officially labelled as ‘extremist’ in all the CA republics, is the Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT), an international organizations founded in 1953 and currently headquartered in London, with the stated purpose of establishing a worldwide caliphate. In CA, the HT draws inspirations from the Wahhabi movement and propagates for the overthrow of secular governments, although it claims to use non-violent means and popular protest. Judging from the increasing number of arrests of its members, the HT has growing support in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan.

The HT’s disdain for guerrilla war puts it in a separate category from the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), officially labelled as a ‘terrorist’ organization. Founded in the 1990s with the initial aim of transforming Uzbekistan into an Islamic state, it has since grown in ambition and scope, targeting not only the other CA secular regimes, but also US and NATO troops, after it aligned itself with al Qaeda and Taliban forces in Afghanistan and the tribal areas of Pakistan. The IMU was held responsible for terrorist acts in Uzbekistan in 1999 and 2004, and has conducted military operations in three states of the region since the late 1990s. After 2001, harsh crackdown by the CA governments drove them out of region and into Afghanistan, where in late 2001 the group lost its founder and then-leader Juma Namangani in a US airstrike. It is thought that the IMU then split into two groups: One group apparently hid in South Waziristan from where it concentrated on the Jihad in Afghanistan, but became engulfed in friction between local groups and subject to Pakistani security operations and to strikes by the USA, which also killed Tahir Yuldashev, the successor to Namangani. The other IMU faction apparently withdrew to North Waziristan and founded the Islamic Jihad Union (IJU).<sup>22</sup>

Instability in Afghanistan and training camps in Pakistan therefore has provided sanctuary to some anti-regime forces from CA. Yet, despite fears of militant Islam originating in the AfPak region, it is the CA-origin militant groups, such as the IMU and IJU, which are today fighting US and NATO forces in Afghanistan. What the CA regimes now fear is the return home of their own extremists, fuelled by the training, allies, weapons and new motivations they received in Pakistan’s tribal belt and the experience they gained in Afghanistan.<sup>23</sup> Rising pressure through drone strikes and attacks by the army in Pakistan, as well as expanding Coalition efforts in southern Afghanistan that may push insurgent activity to northern regions could eventually be forcing CA jihadists homeward. Yet, Sanderson & al. argue that returning fighters do not pose an existential threat to stability in CA because they lack a base of popular support and are too weak to stand up to the strong security apparatus of the CA states.<sup>24</sup> Their activities could also be hampered by the lack of arms, finances and leadership and increased intra and inter-regional cooperation by states to counter terrorism. Yet, it is hardly possible to predict the future of radical movements in the region. For one, there has been fragmentation as a result of loss of leaders and the absorption of members of different nationalities and ethnicities from several other militant groups. Motivations are no longer clear: The IMU has long since strayed from its original mission of overthrowing the Uzbek government to the point where it is no longer clear whether its terrain of operation is at the local, regional or global level. Some militants remain true to their original cause and prioritize a presence in CA, while others have adopted new causes such as al Qaeda’s global Jihad. Coalitions are also not straight forward, with differences in ideology and tactics

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22 Michael Feldholm, *From the Ferghana Valley to Waziristan and Beyond: The Role of Uzbek Islamic Extremists in the Civil Wars of Tajikistan, Afghanistan, and Pakistan*, Department of South and Central Asian Studies, Stockholm University; Eugene Chausovsky, “Tajikistan Security Sweeps and the Possible Return of the IMU”, *STRATFOR*, November 11, 2010; Thomas M. Sanderson, Daniel Kimmage and David A. Gordon, *From the Ferghana Valley to South Waziristan: The Evolving Threat of Central Asian Jihadists*, Washington DC: Centre for Strategic and International Studies, March 2010.

23 Sanderson et al, 2010

24 Ibid.

between HT and IMU, as well ethnic tensions and ideological disagreements between CA Turkic militants, the Pashtun-dominated Taliban and the Arab al Qaeda. The motivations of the CA extremist groups may differ from that of the Taliban; the latter seeking to dominate Afghanistan, while the former pursuing an Islamic order that challenges the rule of secular regimes in the wider region. In the meantime, a variety of home-grown groups have sprung up in CA itself, such as the Jund al-Khilafah (the Soldiers of the Caliphate), inspired by the northern Caucasus insurgency, which was responsible for terror acts in Kazakhstan during 2011.

CA regimes have taken different routes and hold different view on how to respond to extremism and terrorism, informed by their perception of the root causes of militancy, as well as the capabilities of their security apparatus. All have developed institutional mechanisms and intelligence capacities – within their national security committees, the ministries of interiors and the prosecutors' offices – for dealing with terrorism or extremism. Yet, the overall conditions in the armed forces remain poor, and the security sector, like most public service areas, suffers from under-funding, lack of qualified personnel and corruption. The degree to which they focus on militancy and their capabilities varies from country to country, with the national security services of Uzbekistan being the region's best resourced and most experienced. All states have also pursued a hard-line search-and-destroy policy. An International Crisis Group report issued as early as 2001 argued that the greatly exaggerated threat of violence by militant Islamic movements in CA has been used to legitimate repressive measures by the governments of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and, especially, Uzbekistan.<sup>25</sup> For these analysts, governmental reprisal strategies have been ineffective in eliminating or reducing the spread of radical Islam and have merely driven Islamists temporarily underground. From this point of view, a vigorous region-wide crackdown on radical Islam could result over time in more militancy and radicalization, as well as generate widespread sympathy for the oppressed in the broader population.

But the rise of extremism cannot simply be explained by the repressive character of regimes. It is also due to socio-economic factors that create a demand in addition to external support for radical groups. Opportunities exist in the presence of transnational drug and arms trafficking networks and the presence of small arms, as well as weak, under-funded, corrupt and mistrusted security sector. In the meantime, occasional incursions by alleged IMU fighters into Tajikistan and the appearance of new groups such as the Jund al-Khilafah (Soldiers of the Caliphate) in Kazakhstan expose the challenges to regional cooperation on response and prevention.

The official security narrative of CA states also puts emphasis on organized crime and the trafficking of narcotics, goods, and weapons because of their perceived potential in increasing the military capacity of groups that challenge their legitimacy. Presumably, criminality has been used to mobilize and bankroll popular unrests, as may have been the case in Southern Kyrgyzstan in 2005 and 2010.<sup>26</sup> Although criminal networks operate at the national level, their linkages with political elites and networks in the various countries present an added regional security dimension. Criminal trafficking, especially of narcotics, is also said to have served as source of financing for terrorist and extremist groups,<sup>27</sup> although some scholars dispute the linkages.<sup>28</sup>

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25 International Crisis Group, "Central Asia: Islamist Mobilization and Regional Security," *ICG Asia Report 14*, Osh/Brussels: ICG, March 2001

26 Niklas L.P. Swanström, Svante E. Cornell and Anara Tabyshalieva, *A Strategic Conflict Analysis of Central Asia With a Focus on Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan*, prepared for the Swedish Development Cooperation Agency, June 2005

27 Svante E. Cornell, "Narcotics, Radicalism and Security in Central Asia: The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan", *East European Studies Working Paper No. 84*, December 2004; Ted Galen Carpenter, "Drug Prohibition is a Terrorist's Best Friend," Cato Institute, January 5, 2005, found at <http://www.cato.org/dailys/01-05-05.html>

28 Pierre-Arnaud Chouvy, "Narco-Terrorism in Afghanistan" *Terrorism Monitor*, Volume 2, Issue 6, March 25, 2004, <http://www.geopium.org/terrorism-monitor-afghanistan-narcoterrorism.html>

As a regional threat, the exponential growth in narco-trafficking is often blamed on the *laissez faire* attitude of US-led Coalition troops in Afghanistan, who sidestepped the eradication of narcotics in the initial years of the intervention. The missed opportunity to target opium poppy crops before they were cultivated in the spring and summer of 2003 resulted in a remarkable increase in drug production. Since CA countries cannot influence the actions of the Coalition in Afghanistan, they have concentrated their efforts instead on seeking a security belt to insulate themselves from Afghanistan, a commitment they took as part of the 2000 Tashkent Declaration. Increase in production in Afghanistan is however not the only factor: High demands in Russia and Europe, the lucrative and quick cash nature of trafficking at times of high unemployment for CA populations, insufficient border controls, corruption among law enforcement agencies, customs officials and border troops, as well as the very important factor of vested interests by political elites are all factors that have contributed to the growth of the drug trade in the region. Even if production were curbed in Afghanistan, the possibility of a balloon effect where opium cultivation moves across the borders to CA should not be dismissed lightly.

In the meantime, common security concerns for trans-border criminal networks, extremism and terrorism are for CA ruling elites a manifestation of weaknesses in border controls in general. While regional economic cooperation between the CA countries requires better flow of goods and people, security imperatives have instead led to tightening of borders and controls.

### Nuclear Non-Proliferation

One area in which the CA countries have found common ground is in preventing the region from becoming a zone of proliferation of nuclear weapons. The idea of a Central Asian Nuclear Weapons Free Zone (CANWFZ) was introduced through the Almaty Declaration in 1992 and the treaty, which prohibits them from manufacturing, acquiring, testing, or possessing nuclear weapons, was adopted by all five states at Semipalatinsk, the main Soviet test site in Kazakhstan on September 2006. The CA countries had involved all the five major nuclear states in the all the stages of preparation of the treaty but only received support from China and Russia. Despite the objection of the USA, UK and France who voted against the UN GA Resolution that welcomed the signing of the treaty in December 2006, the CANWFZ was an important contribution to disarmament. It reinforced their interest in relinquishing all aspects of the remnants of Soviet nuclear complexes within their territories and entailed additional disarmament responsibilities. It also ensured disarmament ‘pocket’ in a region that hosts two recognized nuclear powers (Russia and China) and two countries that possess nuclear weapons (India and Pakistan). Kazakhstan in this region possess advanced nuclear technology, but its keen enthusiasm for the nuclear-weapon-free zone makes it unlikely that it will use its know-how to pursue nuclear weapons or to help another country develop them. It had gotten rid of the stockpiles of strategic nuclear weapons under treaty arrangements made with the USA and Russia.

Despite their interest in a Nuclear Weapons Free Zone, however, CA countries are not against the use of nuclear technology for civilian use. In a conference in 2007, the Caspian Sea states (including Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan) declared that they would support all Caspian states’ rights to peaceful nuclear programs:

The parties confirm the inalienable right of all states- signatories to the treaty on the non-proliferation of nuclear weapons to develop research and the production and utilization of nuclear energy for peaceful purposes without discrimination and within the framework of the provisions spelt out in this treaty, as well as those of the International Atomic Energy Agency mechanism.<sup>29</sup>

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29 “Caspian Nations Hold Exclusive Rights To Caspian Resources,” Central Asia And Caucasus Business Weekly, October 23, 2007

Because of this belief, and given their geopolitical location, all CA countries have largely held back from the public debate over Iranian nuclear enrichment, although some leaders have expressed concerns for the international community's potential response. While they oppose the use of nuclear enrichment for nuclear purposes, CA states collectively believe that diplomatic means must be employed to resolve the dispute over Iran's nuclear program.<sup>30</sup> Uzbek President Islam Karimov has argued against military strikes targeting Iran's nuclear facilities and supported diplomatic methods to resolve the conflict.<sup>31</sup> Tajik Foreign Minister Khamrokhon Zarifi has also voiced scepticism over the use of sanctions against Iran,<sup>32</sup> while his Deputy Nizomiddin Zohidov called war against Iran "a tragic mistake".<sup>33</sup> The Turkmen Foreign Minister Rashid Meredov also voiced support for Iran's peaceful nuclear research.<sup>34</sup>

The overall position of the CA states is clearly explained in the official foreign policy of Kazakhstan: As a state that voluntarily denounced nuclear weapons, Kazakhstan is committed to the principles of non-proliferation. Iran's nuclear program remains therefore a major concern. However, Kazakhstan, as are the other CA states, is committed to peaceful civilian use of nuclear energy. As the foreign policy statement declares,

Kazakhstan supports the Treaty of the Non-proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, which allows nations to undertake nuclear research and use atomic energy for peaceful purposes. However, they must cooperate closely with the UN and comply with the transparency and non-proliferation safeguards under the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA).<sup>35</sup>

## Factors that Contribute to Rivalry and Latent Conflict

While extremism, terrorism, criminality and non-proliferation are shared security concerns for which regional cooperation is seen as an imperative among the CA states, there are some areas, such as natural resources as well as ethnicity and national identity, where tensions create potential fault-lines for future conflicts.

### Conflictual Water/Energy Swaps

While community conflicts over water sharing are frequent in the fertile Ferghana Valley, disputes between upstream and downstream countries over the water-energy swap have also increased considerably, making water supply and sharing of trans-border water resources the most important fault lines for future conflicts in the CA RSC. The problem stems from the skewed distribution of natural resources in CA exacerbated by poor management of water resources and inadequate infrastructure: The western half, consisting of Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, possess the oil and gas resources, while water, a scarce resource, originates entirely from the mountains of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. All states are dependent on

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30 Marat Yermukanov, "Kazakhstan Seeks Iran's Reconciliation with the West," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Vol 3: 117, June 16, 2006. Also see a brief analysis of each CA country's views on the Iranian nuclear program in [www.irantracker.org](http://www.irantracker.org).

31 Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, "Uzbek President Warns Of Dangers Of Possible 'Nuclear' Strike Against Iran," RFERL, May 10, 2006. at <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1143630.html>

32 "Tajikistan Urges Dialogue to Resolve Iran's N. Issue", Fars News Agency, June 25, 2010. <http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=8904040315>

33 Avaz Yuldoshev, "War Against Iran Would be a Tragic Mistake, Says Tajik Deputy Foreign Minister", *Asia Plus*, January 27, 2012. <http://news.tj/en/news/war-against-iran-would-be-tragic-mistake-says-tajik-deputy-foreign-minister>

34 "Turkmenistan Supports Iran's Nuclear Programme", Iranian radio, Voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran, July 30, 2008 quoted in Erin Fitzgerald and Varun Vira, *U.S. And Iranian Strategic Competition: Competition in Afghanistan, Central Asia and Pakistan*, Washington DC : Center for Strategic and International Studies, September 12, 2011

35 See Kazakhstan's Foreign Policy on the website of its Embassy in Washington for example. <http://www.kazakhembus.com/index.php?page=foreign-policy>

water, and Uzbekistan, with its reliance on water intensive crops such as cotton, is the biggest consumer. Downstream countries need water in the time of cultivation for irrigation purposes, while upstream countries need water for electric power during the winter season, given their lack of access to fossil fuels. To overcome energy shortages in the winters, upstream countries have to increase the use of electric power generated by their hydropower stations by discharging water from the reservoirs, consequently decreasing the amount of water that the reservoirs can deliver to downstream countries in the summer. The Soviet system of transfers between republics to satisfy water needs in downstream countries and hydrocarbons for upstream countries collapsed with independence. Oil and gas-producing states began to demand payment for deliveries while refusing to accept the notion of paying for water,<sup>36</sup> a particular problem for the cash poor upstream countries. With the foreign exchange income (emanating from the Kumtor gold mine in Kyrgyzstan and the aluminium factory in Regar in Tajikistan) being insufficient for acquiring oil and gas, their proposed scheme for swaps of water for energy has been strife with political disputes.

Tajikistan's answer to its energy crisis has been to embark on the construction of the world's highest (335 meters) hydroelectricity dam, Rogun, on the Vakhsh River. In addition to solving shortages within the country, the ambition is to export electric power to Pakistan and Afghanistan, and eventually to India and China. Uzbekistan, however, is vehemently opposed to the construction of the power plant, officially raising concerns about the irreparable damage to the environment and livelihoods in the event of breakage considering that the dam is being built in a seismically active area. Uzbek authorities requested an independent feasibility study and an environmental assessment from the World Bank that would confirm, in their view, the serious impact on existing water flows and dangers ahead. Uzbekistan, which favours the construction of small hydropower plants instead, also put pressure by halting gas supplies to upstream countries during the winters as well as by preventing rail freight transits for Tajik goods during the spring and summer of 2010, provoking a rise in food prices.

With no framework agreement in place, the region has relied on short-term *ad hoc* arrangements. Competition for water resources in the region would probably increase additionally when Afghanistan develops its energy and agricultural sectors. One solution would be the creation of a regional consortium and an international convention that can create a legal base for water management, as well as more efficient use of water especially for irrigation purposes. Yet, personal rivalries between the presidents of Uzbekistan, Islam Karimov and that of Tajikistan, Emomali Rahmon, have hampered the possibility of a regional water consortium. Hostilities have been increasing between the two countries, despite mediating efforts by the UN, including through its Special Envoy for CA and the UN Regional Centre for Preventive Diplomacy (UNRCCA), as well as a proposal of the Turkmen President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov for subsidized energy supplies to Tajikistan in exchange for keeping the current level of water discharge at source.<sup>37</sup>

Besides the question of water, energy security is in itself a source of conflict between the region's stronger states. On the one hand, significant hydrocarbon reserves in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan provide an opportunity to obtain long-term and stable sources of foreign revenue. On the other hand, however, lucrative energy endowment fuels competition between the three stronger CA states for access to international markets while preventing better planning for the diversification of the sources of their revenue to avoid dependence on exports markets. Furthermore, the politicization of the oil and gas sector has also made them vulnerable to

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36 Ibid.

37 See the speech of the President of Turkmenistan to the 64th session of the United Nations General Assembly, New York, September 2009.

competition by global powers and forged them towards centrifugal tendencies to attract investors to their fields and develop new oil and gas supply routes instead of exploring joint regional initiatives.

### Nation State Identity versus Localism and Ethnicity

Ethnicity has not been a major fault line in the region, although its potential was demonstrated during bloody clashes between the Kyrgyz and Uzbeks in Osh in 1990, and again in 2010 in southern Kyrgyzstan. When ethnic tensions erupt at the community level, state authorities tend to blame external manipulation. In the summer of 2010, as southern Kyrgyzstan became engulfed in violent inter-ethnic clashes between the Kyrgyz and the Uzbeks in the aftermath of the overthrow of the president, the official explanation, as for example voiced by Uzbek President Karimov at the UN GA in September 2010, was that these riots were organized “by a third force” with the purpose to draw Uzbekistan into an inter-state confrontation with Kyrgyzstan.<sup>38</sup> This is not to say, however, that the ethnic ‘problem’ does not exist within the region in itself. As discussed above, the Soviet policy of creating titular republics on the basis of ethnic majorities during the 1930s divided ethnic communities in the region and politicized ethnicity. Most of the titular Tajiks today live either in Afghanistan or Uzbekistan, and large parts of Uzbeks live in border areas of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. All states have a major minority group that is also the titular majority of one of its neighbours.

If Soviet measures had been successful in creating a non-ethnic sense of nationhood at the national level, the more tangible threat to unity comes from the strength of sub-national identities based on other criteria such as geography and genealogy. Within states, politics is largely coloured by loyalties that reflect territorial-based social structures: clan-based or tribe-based identities for the Turkic populations of nomadic origin and geography-based loyalties in Tajikistan with its settled Persian speaking populations (*mahalgaroi*, translated loosely as localism or sub-regionalism). The Tajik Civil War, for example, was largely fuelled by sub-state localist tendencies that united the elites of northern Khojand with the foot soldiers of southern Kulob against political groups formed in central Dushanbe, Gharm and eastern Gorno Badakhshan.<sup>39</sup> Loyalties based on kinship and genealogy are still manifested in the political system in Kazakhstan, with so-called clans (or ‘hordes’) forming the basis of patronage among political and economic elites that bolster the leadership. For Uzbekistan, whose populations had nomadic origins but had settled centuries earlier, identity is more complex, related to clans but also formed around the historical cities of the region: Tashkent, Samarkand, Ferghana, Jizzak, Surkhandarya, and Urgench. Geography also keeps the divisions within countries strong. Both Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are divided into northern and southern halves by mountain ranges, with only one road connecting the two parts, and with significant communication problems in wintertime. In both countries, northerners dominated the Communist Party leadership in the Soviet era and tried to continue their rule after independence, which led to war. Similarly, the Kyrgyz Revolution in 2005 began in the southern, impoverished and marginalized regions of the country, whose elites had long felt discriminated against by those of the wealthier North. Political identities among Central Asians may be formed at the local level, based either on kinship or territory, but gets reflected in patterns of client-patronage that influence politics at the national level. Clans and regional groupings provide the informal structures which support leaders in their political ambitions, i.e. the Ulu Zhus (Great horde) in Kazakhstan, the Akhalteke tribe in Turkmenistan, the Samarkandi regional grouping in Uzbekistan, and the Kulob territorial affiliation one in Tajikistan.

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38 Speech by President of Uzbekistan Islam Karimov at the plenary session of the UN Summit, “Millennium Development Goals”, New York, September 2010.

39 See among this author’s writings on the subject of the Civil War in Tajikistan: Shahrbanou Tadjbakhsh, “National Reconciliation in Tajikistan: the Imperfect Whim”, *The Central Asian Survey*, No. 1, 1997; “Tajikistan: From Freedom to War”, *Current History*, April 1994, and *Tajikistan: A Forgotten Civil War* (with Nassim Jawad), London: The Minority Rights Group, 1995.

The combination of these factors – the need to consolidate ethnic groups within borders, and identities and loyalties tied to clans, tribes and location – all contribute to weakening the states' national identities, which in turn factor in when states try to negotiate regional cooperation with each other.

### **Factors that Hamper Regional Cooperation**

Despite their common experiences of governance, interests in political stability and regime security, and perceptions of trans-border threats, CA states show limited interest in regional cooperation and multilateral approaches. One reason for this, which will be explored more in Part II of this paper, may be the inability of the CA countries to shape the security processes unfolding in the wider region, which then translates into the imperative to develop unilateral strategies to manipulate external powers. Yet, lack of cooperation is also informed by intra-state and inter-state factors within the CA RSC itself, among them the asymmetry of strength among countries, the nature of regimes and the fear of loss of sovereignty.

### **Large Gaps in Terms of Strength and Weakness**

One element that can produce cooperation is the perception by states that they are on equal footing and can gain from dealing with equals. Therefore, lack of complementarities in capacity, such as economic might, reduces incentives to pursue cooperation. State capacity therefore matters for regionalism: Weak states do not on the whole make good partners as they are perceived by others as being unable to deliver on commitments they make through formal and informal institutions of cooperation. In a RSC where there is one hegemonic power, the dominant state can in principle encourage cooperation and affect regional structures in order to institutionalize its dominance further. Weaker states, however, can resist, and display counter-hegemonic reactions that inhibit regional cooperation.<sup>40</sup> The CA RSC is a much diversified region when it comes to economic, political and military capability and consists of at least two states with hegemonic ambitions (Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan), creating a competitive dynamic that limits the manoeuvring space for the other weak states to comply or resist.

With 26 million people, Uzbekistan is the most populous country and by far the most important actor militarily. It is strategically central to the region despite being one of the two double landlocked countries of the world, which means it is surrounded only by other landlocked countries. It is fast developing its mineral and oil resources while continuing to rely heavily on cotton cultivation and has least opened up its Soviet-era centralized command economy. The government holds a strong grip over protests and dissent in the country, manifested by the crackdown on a bloody uprising in Andijan in May 2005. Its interest in regionalism has waxed and waned in the past twenty years, and it has increasingly tended to abstain from endorsing regional strategies and institutional mechanisms proposed by regional and international organizations. With its hegemonic ambitions, Uzbekistan has adopted pressure tactics in lieu of negotiations in its relations with neighbouring states, most notably on the question of water distribution in the region. It has also threatened to use force to solve the problem of terrorism should the IMU find sanctuary in neighbouring states and has enforced a harsh visa regime and secured its borders. Uzbekistan's hegemonic tendency has shaped behaviour in the other countries in two ways: First, it has led to more collaboration between the others against the hegemon, and second, it has led them to draw in external players such as Russia in regional groupings as a counterweight to Uzbekistan. This, for example, is precisely what happened with one of the very few regional institutions that was created by the CA countries themselves: When

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40 S. Neil Macfarlane, "The United States and Regionalism in Central Asia", *International Affairs*, Vol. 80, No. 3, 2004, pp. 447–461.

the Central Asian Cooperation Organization (CACO), a regional organization created in 1991 by four of the five republics (Turkmenistan, with its neutral status, abstains in principle from regional groupings), became dysfunctional for not finding common ground among the four, it opened up to Russia in 2004. This, in turn led CACO to become absorbed into the Eurasian Economic Community (EAEC or EurAsEC), which Russia as the new member proposed in 2005. Uzbekistan applied to the Eurasec but then withdrew its membership in 2008, preferring to go its own way instead of accommodating with Russia.

Kazakhstan, geographically the largest state, is also the most powerful one from a comprehensive sense of national power, with a small but well trained armed force and a lead on such criteria as GDP per capita and economic growth. With the world's second largest uranium reserves, Kazakhstan could have been a nuclear power had it not decided to disarm and destroy or move to Russia the thousands of nuclear weapons left on its territory after the collapse of the Soviet Union and closing the Semipalatinsk nuclear testing site. It is a country with strategic interest for both Russia and the West, with its vast energy (oil and gas) resources and its image as a moderate, pro-Western state that contains a large Russian population. The variety of ethnic groups is represented in a Council of National Unity which allows for regular dialogues. Nonetheless, the power in the President Nursultan Nazarbayev, who has ruled since 1991 and was re-elected in 2011 for another five years, raises concerns for the future of succession given the open system of nepotism and corruption around the ruling family. Until the end of 2011, when the country was shaken by terrorist activities and violent riots in the western parts by oil workers, Kazakhstan was considered the most politically stable country in the region. While the country's wealth distribution assures little socio-economic grievances, terrorist activities have risen, perhaps due to the open system that attracts extremists pushed out by Russia and Uzbekistan. In response, the government passed a restrictive religious law in October 2011, banning prayers in state institutions and requiring registration of religious organizations. By the end of 2011, the country was also the seat of a bloody upheaval among industrial workers in the western parts, to which government authorities responded harshly. Despite these incidents, however, the wealth, size, strategic location and regime stronghold of Kazakhstan combine to ensure its position as a powerhouse in the CA RSC.

On the other side of the spectrum, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan can both be considered weak, unstable states that remain vulnerable to internal instability, criminality and border violations. Without natural endowments in oil and gas, these countries are also relatively poorer, ridden by debt, and their populations are immigrating to other states in search of jobs. During the 1990s, Kyrgyzstan was the first to open up its system to the liberal credo of open markets and open society, with President Askar Akayev being considered a darling of the West. It went through two revolutions since then, however: a 'Tulip Revolution' of 2005 which ousted Akayev, and a 2010 one which toppled his successor Kurmanbek Bakiyev. Despite being the most unstable republic, Kyrgyzstan is also the first one that gradually transitioned to a parliamentary democracy with the October 2010 elections of the Jogorku Kenesh (Supreme Council). In November 2011, however, after the election of former Prime Minister Almazbek Atambayev as President, questions remained about the real power of the executive. By December 2011, the Speaker of the Parliament had resigned under pressure from corruption investigation and the former Speaker had joined the opposition. Both politicians hailed from the southern parts of the country while the new President was from the traditional seat of power in the north. Internal political divisions endure, following clan rivalries and a north-south divide. As will be discussed in Part II, Kyrgyzstan also best represents the geopolitical divide in the region, hosting both US and Russian troops on its territory. Its small economy depends heavily on rent from US bases and donor aid (with its foreign debt estimated at 80% of its gross domestic product), as well as some mineral resources, including gold and hydroelectric power.

Tajikistan is one of the weaker states. It underwent a decrepit Civil War between 1992 and 1997 which came to a formal end with the signing of UN brokered Peace Accords between the Government of Emomali Rahmon and the United Tajik Opposition (UTO). Although peace has largely prevailed, Tajikistan remains fragile, especially given political rivalries between geographical groupings as well as high poverty rates that have pushed a large part of its male population to seek work abroad, mostly in Russia. It also has the longest border with Afghanistan, making it vulnerable to incursions from traffickers of weapons and narcotics into the region. It too is highly indebted, with a limited economy based on mineral resources, aluminium export and hydroelectric power. Much of its natural resource potential remains untapped.

Turkmenistan is considered a country fast transitioning to the category of strong states. It is one of the richest countries of the region with large oil and gas wealth and a very small population of about 5 million people. Under the rule of its first President Saparmurat Niyazov (known as Turkmenbashi), who ruled from 1990 to his death in 2006, the country officially pursued neutrality in a form that led it to isolationism. His successor, Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov, has strived to give more international exposure to Turkmenistan as a neutral country that can mediate conflicts within the larger region. The country is courted both by Russia, China, USA and the EU for contracts for extraction of its oil and gas and for pipelines to export them, an advantage that the Turkmen government has increasingly exploited for its budding regional diplomacy. Because of its neutral position, Turkmenistan does not have hegemonic ambitions in CA and, by principle, does not participate in military organizations and blocs. Instead, it tries to play the role of mediator between the states, be it for offering to negotiate between upstream and downstream countries to reduce tensions over the energy for water swaps, or even to broker talks for a non-military solution for Afghanistan.

Lack of economic compatibility and complementarity between states may create a push and pull effect that can accommodate labour migrants, but it is not conducive to regional integration. It fosters competition instead, with each state looking at its resources as independent and at its neighbours as competitors rather than partners in international markets. As a result, economic relations with countries outside the region are prioritized, leading to high trade dependence externally and low intensity intra-regional trade among the CA countries, hampered by policies of border controls, tariffs and regulations. Poor infrastructure also poses a significant problem for economic cooperation, as does reliance on transit routes through third countries. Kazakhstan has explicitly tried to forge an economic union by providing capital and assistance to its neighbours, initially through regional organizations such as the now dysfunctional CACO, and more recently bilaterally through the creation of a new institution, KAZAID. This may bode well for Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, but the idea has not been welcomed by the competitors Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, the latter fearing an alignment of Russian and Kazakh interests in the region. Kazakhstan alone cannot pull the region together economically.

Kazakhstan's interest in uniting the region economically and Turkmenistan's ambition to act as mediator does not solve the problems of the CA RSC. The skewed distribution of power has consequences for cooperation, given the reluctance of the ambitious hegemon in the region – Uzbekistan – to decrease its own leverage over the lesser powers, and the weaker states' fear of being dominated.<sup>41</sup> Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, for example, because of their common fear of Uzbekistan and their common predicament of poverty, share one of the best bilateral relations in the region despite a number of troubling border issues. Yet, weak states are still strategically important, even to the stronger ones. Tajikistan for example, has strategic importance because of its control over the region's watersheds, its long borders with Afghanistan, as well the military

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41 Niklas L.P. Swanström, "The Prospects for Multilateral Conflict Prevention and Regional Cooperation in Central Asia", *Central Asian Survey*, Vol. 23, No. 1, March, 2004, pp. 41–53

outposts of Russian armed forces that consider it part of the frontier zones of the CIS. In this case, the problematic relationship between Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, which started during the Tajik Civil War and continues over water and energy disputes, shows how much Uzbekistan, in principle the strong hegemonic state of the region, is tied down by its conflict with a much weaker Tajikistan. Even the strong states of the region remain insecure and doubtful of their strength.

### Personality-Driven Regimes

A second factor that hampers cooperation is the personality-driven character of regimes in the CA RSC. Annette Bohr has argued that the higher the degree of economic and political liberalization in a CA state, the more likely it is for its regime to engage in regional projects.<sup>42</sup> In her calculations, more liberal states – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan – have been eager regionalists. This may be true in the case of Kazakhstan, which has been a forerunner in the elaboration of regional ideas such as the CIS Customs Union, CACO, and even the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA) modelled on the OSCE. However, while President Nazarbayev has used the country's economic and political liberalization as an entry point for the creation of CA-based organizations, his real ambition has been to act as the unifier between Russia and CA. Kazakhstan also adheres to regionalism in order to gain influence over the weaker republics within the region as 'quasi clients' that it can assist. Liberal regimes may be more inclined to regionalism, but it is the personal ambitions of leaders that truly drive, or inhibit, this commitment. A case in point is the most problematic relationship in the region between Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, characterized by a lack of personal trust between the leadership of the two countries. Furthermore, the most closed republic, Turkmenistan, has made overtures to bring the CA countries together to solve regional problems; not because of its liberal system but as a reflection of the ambitions of both former President Saparmurat Niyazov and the incumbent President to carve out a diplomatic niche for the neutral country. It is therefore not the degree of openness that dictates interests in pursuing regionalism, but, as Roy Alison claims, the pursuit of power and security for a particular state for which inter-state cooperation may provide a platform.<sup>43</sup>

The personality-driven pattern of relationships has two pitfalls. First, it relies on the good will of leaders who can choose to compete (as in the Tajik/Uzbek case) or cooperate (as in the Uzbek/Kazakh case) regardless of objective factors. The sustainability of relations is put to the test when faced with the unpredictability of future generation of successors. Second, the person-centred regimes of CA impede the emergence of a more diversified type of 'soft' regionalism, a bottom-up institutional process which could in principle emerge from interactions between civil society, private traders and migrants. Instead, as Bohr argues, a different type of dependency has emerged between ruling elites and the private sector – both legal and illegal – which provides for loyalty to regimes, a degree of stability, as well as profit for ruling elites.<sup>44</sup> The net result is that regional projects have to compete with internal loyalties and vested interests.

### Fear of Loss of Sovereignty

Another factor that impedes effective cooperation and integration is sovereignty, gained after the collapse of the Soviet Union and guarded vehemently. In the immediate years after independence, the countries came together under the framework of CACO as an economic organization, but they did not create a formal collective security alliance. While the influence of Russia as an external

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42 Bohr, 2004, p. 498

43 Roy Allison, "Regionalism, Regional Structures and Security Management in Central Asia", *International Affairs*, Vol. 80, No. 3, 2004, pp. 463–483 at p. 467

44 Bohr, 2004, pp. 498–501.

actor in this process will be explored in Part II, we argue here that the absence of a formal security agreement can be associated with the unwillingness of the CA states to subordinate the pursuit of their narrow self-interest to the broader goal of system stability. While declarative statements have frequently promised collective action on common threats such as narcotics or terrorism, collective implementation mechanisms have been lacking. Much of this is because of the fear of being dominated either by regional hegemony or external powers. At the same time, the states are neither strong nor confident enough to commit themselves to any form of regional organization that would limit their ability to act unilaterally and that would impinge on their sovereignty.<sup>45</sup> Under these circumstances, inaction is seen as more beneficial than surrendering some of their sovereignty for increased security or economic benefits. At the same time, lack of cooperation has made them more vulnerable to the influence of dominant external powers for coordinating security policies.

Another factor that could explain hesitancy for formal cooperation on security matters is the fear that it would further weaken national identity at the expense of a regional one. As seen above, the fragmentation of identities at the sub-state level, with loyalties to the nation-state competing with clans and localism, as well as the distribution of ethnic groups across borders, do not necessarily breed the confidence necessary to engage in regional integration. It also explains why CA leaders have put more efforts into revising national histories, national languages, and creating new iconographies rather than directing their policies towards a pooling of sovereignty and the formation of supra-national structures.<sup>46</sup>

Despite declarative statements on the need for effective institutions for regional cooperation, no effective solution has been found to make the five states of the region subordinate national interests to overarching regional ones. It is not due to a lack of regional organizations. In fact, Central Asian countries are members of numerous ones: CIS, CSTO, SCO, OSCE, OIC, and ECO, to list a few. Part of the problem is a lack of effectiveness of these organizations, which is both a cause and a consequence of the failure of the states themselves to cooperate. The most successful attempts come from regional organizations with strong international engagement or backing by extra-regional powers such as Russia, China, USA, Turkey and Iran. Yet, it is exactly engagement by extra-regional actors that hampers the ability of these organizations to engage all the CA countries equally and induce them towards cooperation. Because of the fear of domination by strong extra-regional powers, regional organizations are prevented by their members from becoming strong and effective. This reflects the lack of trust between the CA states as much as the reality of geopolitics in the region, which the next section will explore.

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45 Swanström, 2004, p. 42.

46 Annette Bohr, "Regionalism In Central Asia: New Geopolitics, Old Regional Order", *International Affairs*, Vol. 80, No. 3, 2004, pp. 485–502 at p. 495.

# Part II) CA RSC – Global Interactions

Having examined internal factors that shape durable patterns of regional non-cooperation, we turn to how actors outside the region affect these processes.

For Buzan and Wæver, security dynamics within a region draw in external players along existing conflict lines. In the case of the CA RSC, we shall argue that rivalry and lack of cooperation among CA countries make them vulnerable to external strategic interests, but are also exacerbated by global and extra regional rivalries. External powers can in fact hamper cooperation, given that incentives are provided for bilateral relations and the pursuit of concrete interests, such as strategic or economic access, at the expense of durable structures for regionalism and cooperation.<sup>47</sup>

As MacFarlane argues, if states perceive a common threat from an extra-regional power, they may engage in cooperative balancing with each other and against that external power.<sup>48</sup> But because of preference of great powers in bilateral relations, regional elites are likely to bandwagon bilaterally rather than balance multilaterally through regional cooperation. Our proposition in this section is that because of the asymmetry of power that exists within the CA RSC and the fear of domination and loss of sovereignty, individual states draw in external players along their own lines of interest. CA states have thus adopted a multi-vector diplomacy in response to external powers' interest in the strategic geography of the region.

## **Regionalism Outside In: The Great Game From Outside**

Powerful actors outside a region can actively promote effective cooperative structures, but they can also negatively affect regional cooperation through either inaction or by incentivizing bilateral and centrifugal relations in pursuit of their own interests. A history of interventions from outside can in principle generate a shared sense of threat that can act as incentive for security and defence cooperation.<sup>49</sup> However, when more than one external power is pursuing control over the region, competing patterns of 'sponsored regionalism' could limit the region's own capacity to engage in cooperation.

For Roy Allison, writing in 2004, the lack of regional cooperation during the 1990s was the legacy of Russian hegemonic influence.<sup>50</sup> The overbearing (albeit fluctuating) influence of Russia as a regional hegemon in CA and its interest in promoting supra-national structures preserved at least some of the effects of the superpower 'overlay' of the Cold War period, with Russia seeking to maintain its once hegemonic position. By 2011, however, the USA had been able to displace some of that hegemonic power; not primarily through presence in CA per se, although it did establish bases in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan for a while, but rather through its War on Terror in the wider neighbourhood. The USA may be primarily preoccupied with eradicating the sources of terror in the AfPak region, but it is also keen to prevent Russia and China from dominating the region and gaining monopoly of access to the region's rich hydrocarbon resources. Newcomer China has also

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47 S. Neil MacFarlane, 2004, p. 447.

48 Ibid.

49 Ibid.

50 Allison, 2004, p. 481 and p. 464.

increasingly projected a strong economic presence to assure strategic influence with the cash-strapped CA states. As a result of these new headways, the solidary presence of Russia has been transformed, with new competitive arrangements of major powers casting new consequences within the CA RSC.

In his study of the USA and regionalism in CA, MacFarlane noted contradictory impulses. On the one hand, there was recognition among American policy-makers of the need to address threats at the regional level. On the other hand, they displayed considerable ambivalence towards regional cooperation, preferring short-term bilateral relationships because “these are perceived to generate influence more reliably.”<sup>51</sup> The USA was lukewarm towards regional initiatives sponsored by other powers, suspecting them to be competitively motivated. The findings can be extended to all external actors who value their bilateral relations more than multilateral attempts, with each exerting influence over regional and international organizations: Russia behind the CIS and CSTO; USA behind the NATO and OSCE; China behind the SCO.

The preference for short-term cooperation on immediate security threats, as opposed to long-term collaboration in areas such as development or democratization, may also be explained by mistrust in the capacities and loyalties of the CA states. It can also be an indication that the CA RSC is actually peripheral to the world system, with no external actor – not even Russia – sufficiently interested in the region to engage seriously with its problems. From this point of view, no external state views the CA RSC as crucial to its economic or security interests, despite the centrality of the Eurasian geography. The contest for influence in the region, from this position, does not directly challenge the vital national interests of China, Russia, or the USA. China’s main security challenges lie in the East, Russia is more concerned with the Caucasus and its relations with the West, Iran with the Persian Gulf, Turkey with the European Union, and the US with the AfPak region and South Asia. When attention has been elsewhere, the powers have made irregular, unpredictable and short-term efforts at cooperation, which have in the long term prevented the emergence of a stable environment for regionalism. This makes the CA RSC in fact another buffer zone, much like Afghanistan, with the similarity that great powers are present through their armies in both zones, but are more interested in checking each other’s power over anything else. As one American writer sees it, Moscow, Beijing, and Washington are unlikely to pursue policies in a lower priority region such as CA that could disrupt their overall ties, as long as their general relations remain non-confrontational.<sup>52</sup> They would, in principle, find it more efficient to collaborate, pool resources and pursue common objectives, even if it is more for their own sakes than those of CA states. Evidence in favour of this position is found in the way Russia and the USA have negotiated with each other to allow for the US bases to operate out of Manas, Kyrgyzstan, and for the Northern Distribution Route (NDN) to become operational. Russia, for example, gains maximum benefit both from the USA and the region by providing this support.

The alternative theory, however, sees CA as a heart of Eurasia, strategically important for global powers and worthy of a renewed Great Game strategic competition for dominance. So strategic was this region at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that the geopolitical thinker Halford J. Mackinder referred to it as “the Heartland”. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Great Game between Imperial Britain and Tsarist Russia sought to prevent the territory of CA from being used against each other’s imperial presence around the peripheries. In his 1997 book *The Grand Chessboard*, Zbigniew Brzezinski referred to the region as the “Eurasian Balkans” representing “a power vacuum” in the “Black Hole” that emerged with the collapse of the Soviet Union.<sup>53</sup> In its revived version in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the Great Game may be seen in terms of a conquest of the resources of

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51 S. Neil MacFarlane, 2004, p. 449.

52 Richard Weitz, “Averting a New Great Game in Central Asia”, *Washington Quarterly*, Summer 2006, pp. 155–56.

53 Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard, American Primacy and its Geostrategic Imperatives*, Basic Books, 1997

the region – oil, gas and strategic minerals – in a region which is potentially a buffer zone. The Great Energy Game, if there is one, seeks to break the CA countries free of their dependence on Russian pipelines and infrastructure to sell their resources independently. The US backing for the Baku–Ceyhan pipeline, which carries Caspian oil to the West without Russian participation, is seen in this light. So is China's strategic move to buy key Kazakh oil companies and construct pipelines to export Kazakh and Turkmen oil to China.

A position in between the two contradictory points of view expressed above is that the region, from the great powers' point of view, is important, but the interest waxes and wanes, making the region vulnerable to fluctuations in attention. One possible result is that shifting alliances between the three great powers could change the regional scene. In this scenario, the Sino–Russian alliance is a given while a potential thaw in American–Russian relations may also be considered for the future. China and Russia's close cooperation in the region is motivated by a number of mutual interests: primarily to combat the drug trade and to eliminate the threat of extremism, terrorism and separatism (the so-called 3 evils codified as the essence of SCO, coined mainly by China concerned about its Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region but also echoed by Russia worried about uprisings in the Northern Caucasus). They are also united in their interest of eliminating, or at least diminishing the US military presence, given their common resentment against a unipolar system dominated by the USA and their fear of encirclement. It was under Chinese and Russian pressure that member states of the SCO called on the USA and its allies to establish a timetable for withdrawing from its bases in CA in July 2005, which subsequently led to the closure of the Khanabad base in Uzbekistan. Mutual interests warrant for now a marriage of convenience. In the long term, however, the potential for rivalry for influence over the region is high, especially with the more assertive entry of China into the pipeline politics of the region.

The rivalry would most likely be of an economic nature, however. Militarily, China is more cautious and is unlikely to engage in the region or allow for the regional organizations in which it dominates, notably the SCO, to take up a military position, something that Russia pursues independently through the CSTO. China also depends on Russia for the modernization of its military technology ever since the 1989 EU and US arms embargo on China. China and Russia have also pledged not to interfere in each other's domestic affairs, leading to Chinese support for Russia's military force in the North Caucasus and Russia's support for the Chinese policies in Taiwan, Tibet and Xinjiang. In the meantime, the two powers hold considerable leverage on developments in the region through their strategic partnerships with most of CA states, legitimized through the multilateral institutions they sponsor as well as through bilateral dialogues. They are both able to cultivate relationships by not accusing CA leaders of instigating policies that increase threats and insecurities, such as human rights violations and backing of terrorist organizations. Russia and China have both also been willing to make military and financial contributions to the domestic political survival of CA ruling elites, irrespective of their political characteristics or of normative concerns.

If the Sino–Russian strategic partnership is in essence counterbalancing the US influence, a second scenario could in fact be a rapprochement between USA and Russia. Although Russia is cautious of the growing US presence in the region, it is unlikely to favour a total US withdrawal, not only because of the potential and destabilizing vacuum it could create in Afghanistan, but also because the presence of the US may counterbalance the growing influence of China.<sup>54</sup> In 2011, the Russia–NATO Council approved a military cooperation plan to deepen and broaden military alliance in the area of terrorism and piracy, logistics, joint search and rescue operations at sea, as well as theatre missile defence and military academic exchanges. The close proximity of the

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54 Weitz, 2006, pp. 157–158.

Russian military at the CSTO's Kant airbase in Kyrgyzstan and the US Transit Centre at Manas, 40 km apart, could also become a symbol of grand cooperation through joint exercises, consultations and cooperation in concrete areas such as humanitarian relief and counter-terrorism.

At least one analyst, the Indian commentator Bhadrakumar, suggests another possible scenario, that of a Sino–US alliance against Russia. Basing his thesis on a core agenda in US policy as being the desire to create a wedge between Russia and China, he maintains that it suits the US regional strategy that China is increasingly competing with Russia in the energy sectors. His evidence lays in the US (and Norwegian) supported construction of the Dusti Bridge over the river Pyanj separating Tajikistan from Afghanistan in 2007. By doing so, the USA is supposedly following up on a strategy to facilitate an efficient access route for China that leads to the markets in South Asia and the Persian Gulf while bypassing Russian territory.<sup>55</sup> According to Bhadrakumar, the thrust of the US so-called Great Central Asia strategy, the 'New Silk Road', is to pull Central Asia towards South Asia and away from Russia, with Afghanistan acting as a hub. This strategy needs to appease the Chinese by providing incentives, though. The US-funded bridge in Tajikistan acts as such, allowing access of China's Xinjiang Uyghur autonomous region to a communication link with Karachi port through the newly developed roads in Tajikistan, which the Karakorum Highway cannot. However, evidence against Chinese compliance with any such US plans was the Chinese rejection of the New Silk Road initiative in favour of bilateral economic developments in the region in the run up to the Bonn II meeting in November 2011.

The possibility for cooperation between the three powers should also not be discounted. Cooperative rather than competitive strategies might reduce the possible rise of any of them as regional hegemon. However, this tripartite cooperation is for the moment hampered by different goals, methods and interests, the limited resources they have available, and by priorities elsewhere.<sup>56</sup> Any cooperation also requires that the three powers have a clear strategy for CA instead of indulging in short-term reactions to fast changing alliances and opportunities.

Whether or not the Great Game is revived and whether it has metamorphosed into a Great Energy Game, is subject to dispute between political analysts and diplomats. In the meantime, whether the CA RSC is periphery or core to global competition leads to the same consequence for regional dynamics. The first result is that CA states are not conceived of as actors that shape extra-regional processes playing out on their territories. Second, they are vulnerable to unpredictable foreign policy changes. In a fluid and unpredictable environment, CA countries have developed a multi-vector foreign policy as a response to the competitive dynamics between major powers.

### **Slave of Many Masters is Free: The Great Game from Inside**

Yet, if the game in Central Asia is about competition between external powers, the countries of the region are also avid players themselves, using the inherent contradictions for their own benefit, unlike the times of the original 19<sup>th</sup> century chessboard. Competing agendas among regional and international powers benefit the CA states by creating more room for their manoeuvre and independent action. The CA countries' response is to maximize strategic benefits without compromising their newfound autonomy, a strategy that Allison calls accommodation and balancing.<sup>57</sup> Their multi-vector foreign policy allows them to remain on good terms with all the major powers in order to play on their rivalries to gain strategic goods for themselves. As Daniel Kimmage puts it, this strategic gamble relies on

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<sup>55</sup> M K Bhadrakumar, "Afghan Bridge Exposes Huge Divide", *Asia Times*, September 5, 2007

<sup>56</sup> Weitz, 2006, pp. 164–165.

<sup>57</sup> Allison, 2004, p. 467

cooperation with Russia and China premised on a common acceptance of authoritarian political practice and driven by economic interests, often in the energy sector; cooperation with the West, primarily the United States, premised on the primacy of security concerns and driven by common opposition to Islamic extremism; and just enough tension between the big outside players to let the smaller Central Asian players extract concessions with the occasional move to and fro.<sup>58</sup>

CA states play up cooperation on defence and security with Russia (through cooperation with Russian sponsored regional organizations such as CIS, CSTO and SCO) versus what they can gain from cooperation with the US and NATO forces (rent from US bases etc.). Uzbekistan, as the dominant security actor, has entered in and out of security deals with Russia (by joining and leaving the CSTO) and with the West (by allowing and then closing down US bases on its territory). It has been consistent in its policy to play Russia against USA to serve its needs. When the US and the EU criticized the regime for the harsh handling of the unrest in Andijan in 2005, Uzbekistan reacted by developing a close cooperation with Russia. Since 2009, it has been again seeking to soften its policies and repair relations with the West by allowing for example NATO to use the Navai airport as a transit hub for equipment being sent to Afghanistan and refusing to join the CSTO Rapid Reaction Force. Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have sought to counterbalance the strategic partnership that Uzbekistan has formed with the USA by strengthening their own bilateral relations with Western countries and by revitalizing their regional alliances with Russia.<sup>59</sup> Kazakhstan backs up the CIS and SCO (major structures headed by prominent Kazakhs), while also chairing the OSCE (2010) and the OIC (2012). Its alignment with the Russia dominated CIS helps move the centre of regionalism in CA to the north and away from Uzbekistan. Similar balancing acts seem also to inform the dealings of the weaker republics, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, with the major powers, motivated by strategic economic and military concessions that can assure their economic futures and create strategic balance. Kyrgyzstan has allowed for the continuation of the military presence of both Russia (Kant bases housing CSTO troops) and the USA (Ganci base at Manas Airport), getting considerable concessions and aid from both and rent from the USA. Even though the country had two revolutions, both presidents assured the continuation of the Manas airbase but raised each time their bargaining capabilities to discuss future payments and receive hiked up rent, support for modernization of armed forces and military aid from both Russia and the USA. Soon after coming to office at the end of 2011, President Almazbek Atambaev cited his intention to shut down the Transit Centre at Manas in 2014. Even though this was seen as a pro-Russian orientation, it was in fact not a revolutionary statement, given that the US and NATO troops are supposedly ending military operations in Afghanistan by 2014. Tajikistan is home to Russia's most important foreign military base, the 201<sup>st</sup> Mechanized Division. In 2007, it agreed with Russia to take over the command of the Russian Border Forces, a decision that by 2011 was being negotiated for reversal. Even Turkmenistan, despite declarations of neutrality by both its presidents, has allowed a limited US presence at the Ashgabat Airport to refuel aircrafts carrying non-military cargo to Afghanistan. Turkmenistan is also dependent on Russia for military hardware and is eager to buy more equipment without antagonizing the USA.

Cooperation on counter-terrorism is also characteristic of the multi-vector approach. The USA is the largest donor for most CA states' infrastructure needs for border security. Yet, while the CA countries receive such aid, they bandwagon with the Chinese and Russian position by echoing official statements against double standards in the global fight against terrorism, hinting at the

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58 Daniel Kimmage, "Central Asia: A Year In Review", Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, *rfe1.org*, December 31, 2004.

59 Bohr, 2004, pp. 485–502.

selective approach of the USA in international fora. CA states prefer the Russian and Chinese tendency to conflate terrorism with extremism and criminality, which allows them to go after the Hizb-i Tahrir (an extremist organization) and IMU (classified as terrorist) with the same vigour. They are also wary of the US and EU position that denounces human rights violations by states in the region in the name of counter-terrorism. CA countries were also disappointed when their loyalty to the Global War on Terror fell short of expectations. In July 2011, a leaked document of the Homeland Security included Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan (but not Kyrgyzstan) on a list of “nations that tend to promote, produce, or protect terrorist organizations or their representatives”, prompting a stern response from these countries, especially Kazakhstan.<sup>60</sup>

The economic competition between China and the West gets reflected by the Kazakh and Turkmen alternatively opening their oil and gas fields and pipelines to Russian, Chinese and Western companies. Catering to the Chinese and Russian openings against the West not only ensures commercially competitive price offers from all sides, but also grants them leverage in their competition vis-à-vis Uzbekistan. Turkmenistan, for example, has been shrewdly exploring its options, playing off the Chinese interest in its oil and gas exports to get more concessions from the USA and the EU for the Nabucco pipeline. CA governments also turn to China to enhance their independence from Moscow and increase their ability to diversify supplies to other markets in Asia. Kazakhstan has used this opportunity to boost its role as the regional economic power by building a pipeline to ship gas to China and offering to assist in constructing the Turkmenistan–China pipeline. Kyrgyzstan made concessions to China by going ahead with the construction of a Chinese–Kyrgyz–Uzbek railway. All former Kyrgyz presidents had tried to appease China: In 1999, Askar Akayev had ceded land to Beijing as a measure to resolve a border dispute, and in 2009 Kurmanbek Bakiyev’s government allegedly offered Zhetim-Too, an iron-rich, mountainous territory in Naryn Province, as bait for China’s railroad scheme. Yet, the new President Atambaev made membership in the Moscow-led Customs Union a cornerstone of his presidential campaign, even though making good on such a pledge could threaten the crucial trade relationship with China by muddling tariff policy.

CA countries are all also engaging on economic projects with Iran and Pakistan at the risk of irritating the Americans and the Russians. They have been open to the overtures made by Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and even Israel. The only predictability, or recognizable variant that characterizes these dealings over time is the interest that CA countries gain financially from overriding any particular ideological preference they may have. The multi-vector policy allows the CA states to explore all their options by aptly manoeuvring global rivalries. In the next sections, we explore relations with individual countries.

## Primary Relationships

### Dependence on Russia

Despite the more recent entry of China and the USA, Russia remains the most significant external actor with the most durable relationships in the political, economic, security and cultural spheres in CA. It sees the region as its ‘near abroad’, part of the strategic frontiers with an unstable Afghanistan, and security engagement with the CA RSC as a necessary step towards preventing the spread of terrorism and narcotics given the long borders and the migratory flow. Russia therefore exerts influence bilaterally as well as through collective security instruments that it sponsors, notably the CIS and CSTO, but also to an extent the SCO. With its own capabilities boosted by energy revenues and strong and stable leadership in recent years, Russia has regained

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<sup>60</sup> See “Astana puzzled over inclusion into the US Homeland Security Department’s list of “specially designated countries” *Tengri News*, July 22, 2011 at [http://en.tengrinews.kz/kazakhstan\\_news/3338/](http://en.tengrinews.kz/kazakhstan_news/3338/)

confidence to act as the broker in the relations between the states, to invest in the infrastructure projects of the region and to provide guidance and leadership for security interests such as the fight against terrorism or trans-border trafficking of narcotics. It shares the CA ruling elites' pragmatic interest in regime security, suspicion of internal opposition and a shared belief that democracy cannot be imported or imposed on the region. It has been able to gain the trust of the CA leaders by refraining from intervening in domestic politics, including not reacting to the Andijan events in Uzbekistan, and expressing concerns for the 'coloured revolutions' that toppled regimes in its periphery. That, in turn, has laid the foundations for maintenance of military bases in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan and cooperation with the CSTO. If, during the early 1990s, Russia was suspected of intervening in the Civil War in Tajikistan with its 201<sup>st</sup> Division and Border Guards, it is more cautious now: The CSTO for example, despite being called on by the Kyrgyz government, did not intervene in Kyrgyzstan during its two revolutions.

Given CA's landlocked status, the states continue to rely on Russia for access to markets. Russia remains the lead trade partner for CA countries, and it is a destination country for the region's illegal migrant flow whose remittances contribute significantly to the GDP of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. The Russian Aluminium Company (Rusal) invested up to two billion dollars in Tajikistan's hydropower stations and a new aluminium plant that will use some of the power generated. Lukoil is active in Kazakhstan, and Gazprom is active in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. Russia also has an advantage of shared legacy of a Soviet culture that has shaped the CA leaders, all of whom, with the exception of Kyrgyzstan leaders, have risen from the echelons of former Communist parties and Soviet *nomenclature*. Russian remains the language of CA elites as well as the medium for all inter-state communication.

Yet, Russia's ability to continue to project its influence in the area rests on its economy, which itself depends on oil and gas revenues from fluctuating global markets. The rise in global prices for Russia's energy exports allowed it to increase public and private Russian investment into large projects in CA, but its own budgetary vulnerabilities means that it prefers to pursue commercial and political goals without large financial expenditures, leaving the West to provide aid and assistance, including for security transfers.

The one country that actively opposes the growing military projects of Russia in CA is Uzbekistan. Although re-entering CSTO in 2006, after its withdrawal in 1999, Uzbekistan refrained from signing the 2009 agreement to create the Collective Rapid Reaction Force (KSOR), has not participated in any CSTO military exercise and has not ratified any significant document of the military organization. Uzbekistan also opposed the deployment of the CSTO Rapid Reaction Forces in Kyrgyzstan in July 2009. As one analyst saw this, Uzbek authorities do not trust CSTO presence close to its borders in Kyrgyzstan because of fears that the organization can use terrorist groups such as the IMU, believed by Uzbekistan to have ties to Russian intelligence services, to create instability.<sup>61</sup>

Other CA republics have more cautious relations with Russia based on their continued dependency. Tajikistan, which heavily depends on the remittances of its migrant workers in Russia, hosts Russia's 201<sup>st</sup> Motorized Rifle Division and had the Russian border guards on the Tajik Afghan border until 2005, when they gave the control to Tajik border guards and remained as advisers. Tajik and Russian leaders agreed in September 2011 to sign a deal allowing Moscow to extend its military bases for another 49 years, but the deal does not extend to the re-deployment of Russian border guards along the Tajik–Afghan border, despite speculations to the contrary.

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61 Turgut Demirtepe, "The Last Tango in Bishkek", *Hurriyet Daily News newspaper*, August 11, 2009 found at <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/n.php?n=the-last-tango-in-bishkek-2009-08-10>

Kazakhstan has had tensions with Russia over border issues, oil and gas pricing and regional security. But the two countries have strong energy cooperation, spearheaded by an agreement for the joint development of the Imashevskoye natural gas field in the Caspian Sea, and a cooperative agreement signed in 2004 over the joint use of the Baikonour cosmodrome until 2050. The nature of the relationship has changed with Kazakhstan's emergence as an economic powerhouse and an international player, however. Analyst Martha Olcott holds that Russia no longer has the ability to dictate the terms of the relationship with Kazakhstan, which is becoming "Russia's junior partner", with Putin recognizing Nursultan Nazarbayev's "greater international experience."<sup>62</sup>

Overall, the CA ruling elites have a cautious attitude vis-à-vis Russia. The strategy they adopt is to accommodate but balance with rival suitors when they do not perceive benefits. They use their borders as leverage with Russia by presenting themselves as a shield against drug trafficking and extremism. While CA countries remain heavily dependent on Russian markets and on its infrastructure for export, they are additionally tied through blue collar migration, both legal and illegal, with remittances making up an increasingly important source of income for the populations. If Russia were to close its doors to this labour force, as Russian nationalist groups regularly press for, social pressures would increase in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and even Uzbekistan.<sup>63</sup>

### The Chinese Option

China may not see CA as its main security priority, but it has made a considerable entry into the region in the past decade. As a new player on the scene, its primary interest is to benefit from the region's resources to answer its growing energy needs, but China is also concerned with potential instability in the CA RSC affecting its Xinjiang province, given the geographic proximity and long shared borders. China's main instrument for power projection or influence is through economic investments, although it also nurtures cooperation through the SCO.

In the past decade, China established trade missions in all the CA countries and invested heavily in infrastructure projects linking the Chinese mainland with CA. In 2005, the China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) purchased Petrokazakhstan, the largest oil company in Kazakhstan, for \$4.18 billion. Since then, China has engaged in constructing a Kazakhstan–China oil pipeline and a Turkmenistan–China natural gas pipeline that crosses Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan to Xinjiang. China's move into the oil and gas pipeline markets has presented new challenges not only to the traditional dominance and near monopoly of Russia, but also to the Western supported Nabucco project, which is expected to tap into the gas routes of Western parts of Turkmenistan to deliver gas to the EU by 2014. In 2009, China and Tajikistan signed four new deals for Chinese companies to build power stations, power transmission grids and roads in Tajikistan. In the midst of the global financial crisis and Tajikistan's difficult times, these loans were especially welcomed because they came without political conditionality attached to them. Much as it has demonstrated in Afghanistan by investing billions in the Aynak copper field, China is not concerned about the nature of the regimes in the region. In the aftermath of the Andijan events, Chinese leaders received President Karimov in Beijing and pledged \$1.5 billion in investments, half in the energy sector.

But Chinese investment in CA is not only for the purpose of securing the energy supply; there are

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62 Martha Brill Olcott, "Revisiting The Twelve Myths of Central Asia", *Carnegie Paper No. 23*, Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, September 2001, p. 7.

63 Erica Marat, "Labor Migration in Central Asia: Implications of the Global Economic Crisis", *Silk Road Paper*, Central Asia-Caucasus Institute and Silk Road Studies Program, Washington DC: John Hopkins University-SAIS and Stockholm: Institute for Security and Development Policy, May 2009.

also underlying strategic motivations. China views the CA states as a critical buffer for stabilizing and developing its Xinjiang region, a region that Chinese officials fear would intensify its separatist tendencies, and where the Uighur population share religious and cultural links with populations in neighbouring Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. Fears that Uighur separatists might join forces with Islamic extremists have prompted China to increase border and intelligence cooperation with CA countries in recent years and moving quickly to resolve border issues with Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan as well with Russia. In the process, China not only settled the disputed borders and contributed to the demilitarization of the zone, but also undertook confidence-building measures, which helped deepen relations within the SCO. Back home, the development of trade and transport routes with neighbouring countries has allowed China to benefit from its policy of ensuring economic development as a means to stability in Xingjian. The province is being propped up as the centre of China's oil and gas industry with added resources, boosting its potential as the gateway to CA's energy fields.

Economically, China may have been able to surpass the USA, which is preoccupied in the Afghan and Iraq wars, and Russia, whose fortune, and hence power, has been at the whim of the global financial crisis.<sup>64</sup> China's capacity to intervene militarily in CA, however, still lags far behind that of the USA or Russia, although it also pursues limited military cooperation through joint exercises under the auspices of the SCO and provides technical support to the CA militaries, including aid for training, especially to Kazakhstan.<sup>65</sup>

Chinese diplomacy has been rather successful with the CA governments, who favour the construction of infrastructure and transport in the region more than support to political reforms or cooperation on security matters. This is because of a need to consolidate and legitimize their rule by providing goods and improved standards of living to their populations. China provides loans at extremely favourable terms with an opportunity to defer payments for 10–15 years, for example, which other powers cannot afford. The readiness of loans dispersed without strings attached has been popular with the CA elites, who look towards China for a model of achieving economic development without, necessarily, political liberalization. Perceptions of money with no strings attached mean that Tajikistan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, who have benefited the most, view China as an emerging dependable and strategic partner. The reality, however, may be different. For one, Tajikistan, through an agreement that was ratified again in 2010, ceded about 1,000 square kilometres in the Pamir Mountains to China (3.5% of what China had claimed originally), which triggered a strong and public nationalist backlash.<sup>66</sup> China also tends to use its own manpower for the construction of projects it sponsors, and some workers choose to settle in the countries after the projects are completed. In the long term, the massive demographic presence of the Chinese in the region could raise problems.

In the meantime, CA countries seem comfortable in their ability to manage their relationship with China as a source of support and diversification for their markets. China is seen as a benevolent power, offering grants and loans to the poorer states (Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan) and opening up choices for the export of oil and gas from the strong countries (Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan) while ensuring that rivalries between them, for now, is abated by designing pipelines in a way that benefit from cooperation between the states.

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64 See Alexander Cooley, "Cooperation Gets Shanghaied. China, Russia, and the SCO", *Foreign Affairs*, 14 December, 2009.

65 Sebastien Peyrouse, "Military Cooperation between China and Central Asia: Breakthrough, Limits, and Prospects", *China Brief*, Vol. 10, No. 5, March 5, 2010

66 Stephan Blank, "China Reaches Out", *Asia Times online*, March 24, 2011  
[http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Central\\_Asia/MC24Ag01.html](http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Central_Asia/MC24Ag01.html)

## US Offset

Neil MacFarlane sees a marked evolution of US policy in Central Asia.<sup>67</sup> During the early years (1992–1994), US policy focused on developing relations with the newly independent states and transferring liberal values of democracy, economic freedoms and human rights, with little engagement in military and security in order not to alienate Russia, but also because the region was seen as peripheral to US security interests. It tied its foreign aid to individual regimes' records in protecting human rights, and backed institutions such as the OSCE, USAID, National Democratic Institute (NDI) and the Soros Foundation, which became early advocates of democratization in the region. In the mid-1990s, the USA became interested in the region's potential sources of energy outside the Middle East and explored trans-Caspian energy routes for the export of oil and gas which would bypass reliance on Russia. In the 2000s, the debate over the centrality of CA appeared to have been resolved as support for the war Afghanistan could be organized more efficiently from the new bases in CA with Russia providing a green light.

By 2010, Assistant Secretary of State Robert Blake outlined the five priorities that came out of the Obama administration review of policy towards CA as follows:

First, to expand cooperation with Central Asian states to assist Coalition efforts in Afghanistan; second, to increase development and diversification of the region's energy resources and supply routes; third, to encourage political liberalization and respect for human rights; fourth, to foster competitive market economies and economic reform and lastly, to prevent the emergence of failed states, or in more positive terms, to increase the capacity of states to govern themselves effectively.<sup>68</sup>

In a sense, that leaves the USA with a number of goals that have been analysed as contradictory priorities or policy choices. The most important one is the trade-off, notably, between maintaining security relations and upholding human rights standards, for which the CA regimes are universally criticized. In this lies the dilemma of engagement for the USA, more than China and Russia that do not have such normative concerns and have based their relations with the CA countries on pure pragmatism. The USA is caught between the short-term goal of increasing security assistance to reach immediate goals of limiting the spread of terrorism and extremism, and the long-term objective of tackling the root causes through economic and political reforms. From the US point of view, for long-term and durable security policies to be effective, they need to be based on human rights, democracy and rule of law. Yet, the problems are that the USA does not have the possibility to force behaviour change in CA, that it itself presents an ambiguous example in Iraq (Abu Ghraib) and Guantanamo where human rights are violated in the name of security, and, more importantly, that it has had to tone down its criticism of the CA regimes given the dependence on CA routes for US and NATO operations in Afghanistan.

In 2002, after Uzbekistan allowed US access to the Karshi-Khanabad base, the two countries signed a Strategic Partnership and Cooperation Framework Agreement. However, when Uzbekistan failed to make progress on human rights and democracy, which was a conditionality for US assistance worth \$18 million a year, the USA did not certify the Declaration for Strategic Partnership with Uzbekistan starting in 2003. By 2005, the relationship had significantly deteriorated, as a result of differences in interpreting and reacting to the Andjian events. This culminated in the closure of the Khanabad base, the suspension of NATO activities in Uzbekistan, and EU imposed sanctions on the country. Uzbekistan counter-balanced these moves the same

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67 S. Neil MacFarlane, 2004, p. 451.

68 See "U.S. Policy Toward Central Asia: A Conversation With U.S. Assistant Secretary Of State Robert O. Blake, Jr. for South and Central Asian Affairs, U.S. Department of State", Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, July 30, 2010.

year by signing a Treaty on Allied Relations with Russia. US–Uzbek relations saw a renewed thaw by mid-2007 when cooperation on security issues was renewed and aid to Uzbekistan bypassed Congressional restrictions on the State Department by going through other sources of the Department of Defence.<sup>69</sup> The launch of the Northern Distribution Network (NDN) in 2008 further allowed the US government to renew efforts to expand military cooperation with Uzbekistan through military contacts, supply of equipment and procurement opportunities. Uzbekistan in the meantime exploits its relations with the West to keep its options open, and lukewarm relationship with the CSTO illustrates the point. If Uzbekistan counted on its bilateral military-security relationship with Russia to access training, equipment and specialist advice for its armed forces, it also understood that working through the CSTO multilateral framework could hamper any potential Uzbek rapprochement with NATO or Washington.<sup>70</sup> Uzbekistan's hesitation to full-fledged cooperation on regional multilateral projects and security arrangement is a manifestation of its strategic interest to avoid making long-term choices between Russia and the West, on the one hand, and preventing the rise of its regional competitor, Kazakhstan, on the other.

US courting of Kazakhstan, in the meantime, has been more stable but also more cautious, given its geostrategic location and close relationship with Russia. Kazakhstan was brought into NATO's Partnership for Peace programme (PfP) in 1994. In 2003, Kazakhstan and the USA signed a Military Cooperation Plan for five years (since then renewed until 2012) that covers training and equipment for military personnel, developing peacekeeping capabilities and assistance with security in the Caspian Sea in return for additional Kazakh support to the USA in combatting terrorism. Kazakhstan also plays an important role in the NDN by allowing NATO to ship non-lethal cargo through its territory. Tajikistan, which already hosts Russian troops, is allegedly courting the USA as a way to tap into the funds for Afghanistan and has requested greater benefits from the transit traffic through the NDN, which it claims Uzbekistan benefits from more.<sup>71</sup> In the meantime, security support to Tajikistan is strong, especially for equipment for Tajik Border Services and training for armed forces in counter-terrorism and counter-narcotic capabilities. Kyrgyzstan, as described above, has been able to receive considerable rent from the USA by blackmail: After threatening to close down Manas in 2009, then President Kurmanbek Bakiyev received 2 billion dollars from Moscow but subsequently went back to the bargaining table with the Americans to receive a threefold rental hike and additional financial assistance.

In the meantime, the USA has manifested a primary interest in bilateral relations, especially on matters of security. Although officials stress the need for regional cooperation, there is little evidence of funding for regional projects, neither as material incentives nor as penalties for non-compliance. Where the USA has put emphasis on regional cooperation, it has been mostly linked to drawing the CA states into the Afghan theatre, either through the NDN or the proposed New Silk Road initiative, which will be discussed in Part III. In fact, the USA may have inadvertently created incentives against regionalism in the CA RSC by fostering competition between the states and building bilateral relations that can act as deterrence towards Russia. According to Bohr, the relocation of CA from the periphery to the centre of the US' zone of strategic interest at the end of 2001 served to deepen existing fault-lines within the region.<sup>72</sup> Rather than precipitating a new regional order in CA, the US military presence and the ensuing Russian–US competition deepened regional dynamics that had taken shape before the arrival of American troops. For

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69 Joshua Kucera, "U.S. Military Aid to Uzbekistan, Through Thick and Thin", Eurasianet.org October 20, 2010 <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/62200>

70 Roy Allison, "Security Cooperation between Western States and Russia over Central Asia/Afghanistan: The Changing Role of Uzbekistan", *Chatham House Programme Paper: REP 11/08*, London: Chatham House, 2008, p. 2.

71 <http://www.cablegatesearch.net/cable.php?id=09DUSHANBE840>

72 Bohr, 2004, pp. 485–502. For example, in Tajikistan, the US Central Command is planning for a National Training Center which will build the counterterrorism and counternarcotic capabilities of the Tajik armed forces.

example, support to Uzbekistan in the context of the War on Terror and the operations in Afghanistan may have removed incentives for the country to participate in regional security structures, forcing others to seek balancing support from Russia and China and serving ultimately to alter power relations. The reason for the US hesitancy to support regionalism in CA may have to do with its rivalry with Russia and China, but it also manifests the US' own indecision over the centrality of the CA RSC, whether it is the heartland of the region, as Brzezinski has argued,<sup>73</sup> or the “backwater lying between essentially marginal regions – the periphery of the periphery.”<sup>74</sup> Since perceptions of the centrality of the region shifts over time, the USA too would like to keep options open.

Incentives for bilateral relations with CA countries coupled with discussions about the long-term presence of US troops in Afghanistan beyond 2014 in the context of a Strategy Partnership Agreement risk alienating the other allies of the CA countries, namely Russia, China and Iran. This in turn leaves the CA states in a difficult position of having to negotiate their interests in between those of extra-regional powers, near and distant. The balancing act has meant a default multi-dimensional policy that sees them continuing to engage with the USA while also taking part in regional structures sponsored by the other powers and developing secondary relationships with countries at odds with the USA, all in the search for maximum benefit.

## The Secondary Relationships

### Iran

If the USA has been cautious in openly turning the CA countries away from Russia, it has showed a less ambivalent hostility towards Iran. Sanctions imposed on Iran since 1996 mean that the USA withheld its own companies from engaging in the potential of the southern route for Caspian energy development. It also meant strongly discouraging CA states from exploring energy cooperation with Iran.<sup>75</sup> Despite US pressure, however, CA countries have maintained good relations with Iran. They are concerned about the possibility of Iran acquiring nuclear weapons, especially given their own commitment to nuclear disarmament. But a more immediate concern is the possibility of hostility between the USA and Iran forcing them to choose sides and be caught in a new conflict on their borders. For landlocked countries of CA, Iran also represents the shortest route to the open seas, and hence access to world markets, a factor that comes into the equation of choosing sides. They therefore favour diplomatic means for resolving the stand-off between the USA and Iran over the latter's nuclear program.

Iran's approach to CA countries is both a pragmatic quest for economic benefits, a ‘natural’ relationship with neighbours with which it shares common history and culture, as well as a political desire for engagement as a potential counterweight in the difficult relations with the USA and the EU. As Abbas Maleki, a former Deputy Foreign Minister in the 1990s, writes, Iran's highest priority in regard to Greater Central Asia is to safeguard its security and its territorial integrity.<sup>76</sup> It has, as a result, accorded significant space to regional relations and collation building in its foreign policy. It engages the CA states bilaterally as well as multilaterally through the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) framework, while waiting to upgrade its observer status into full membership in the SCO, a move not likely in the near future given SCO rules that

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73 Brzezinski, 1997.

74 MacFarlane, 2004, p. 449.

75 MacFarlane, 2004, p. 453.

76 Abbas Maleki, “Iran” Chap. 5 in S. Frederick Starr (Ed.), *The New Silk Roads: Transport and Trade in Greater Central Asia*. Washington, D.C. and Uppsala, Sweden: Central Asia-Caucasus Institute and Silk Road Studies Program, 2007, p. 176 <http://www.silkroadstudies.org/new/docs/publications/GCA/GCAPUB-06.pdf>

no member should be under UN sanctions. Iran's interest in the SCO and, by extension, in cooperation with CA countries, Russia and China; is also coloured by its search for ways to counter Washington's policy of containment. It uses for this purpose regional and international organizations that are not susceptible to western domination, such as the SCO, but also the ECO and the OIC in the region.<sup>77</sup>

Most CA countries have chosen to foster relations with Iran out of interest and in disregard of ideological differences, as long as Iran is not seen as trying to export its Islamic revolution. Both Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan have oil-swap arrangements with Iran which involve Iran importing oil in the north on its Caspian Sea coast for domestic refining and consumption, while exporting compensatory quantities to the world market from its southern ports on the Persian Gulf. Tajikistan received Iranian assistance for its infrastructure projects, including the construction of the Sangtuda-2 hydroelectric power station and the Shahrstan tunnel (Anzob), which connected the north to the south in the winter. In 2004, Iran pledged to cover half of the cost of the hydroelectric plant on the Vakhsh River and a road link to connect the two countries via Herat, Afghanistan. In the same year, Iran, Afghanistan and Uzbekistan announced the building of a road from Uzbekistan through Afghanistan to the Chabahar port in the Persian Gulf. While these grand economic projects may not bear fruit, given the continued instability in Afghanistan, political impediments in the region (including reactions to the dam construction in Tajikistan), and Iran's own economic difficulties, Iran tries to keep up engagement in the region through a variety of small scale projects involving both the government and the private sector.

Of all the CA countries, Tajikistan has nurtured the closest relationship with Iran. There is a strong cultural and linguistic affinity, even though the Sunni but secular Tajik leadership differs ideologically with the Shiite theocracy of Iran. President Ahmadinejad even called Iran and Tajikistan "one spirit in two bodies".<sup>78</sup> Iran has sought to strengthen cultural relations between Persian speakers and in 2006, the leaders of Iran, Afghanistan and Tajikistan agreed to set up a joint TV channel with an office based in Dushanbe. Yet, Tajikistan has been cautious in launching the TV station, based on disagreements over what can be shown (or not tolerated), partly due to cultural differences such as for example headscarf for female TV presenters being obligatory in Iran but banned in Tajikistan.<sup>79</sup> Religious differences have also created other tensions. In April 2011, the Tajik leader, in a move to curb the influence of Islam in Tajikistan's politics, closed down irregular Islamic schools and urged Tajik students of religious establishments abroad, including about 200 studying in seminaries in Qom, to return to Tajikistan. That said, the ideological differences are trumped by Iranian investments into the Tajik prestige projects of hydro-electrical plants, complemented by plans to open a hospital, health clinics and universities in Tajikistan and a planned \$5 million education grant for Tajik students to study at secular colleges and universities in Iran.

The special relationship between Iran and Tajikistan puts Iran at odds with Uzbekistan, with which Tajikistan is embroiled in energy and transport disputes, a factor that curbs Iran's interest in maintaining good relations with both sides. In 2010, Iran joined Tajikistan in accusing Uzbekistan of blocking rail transportation and delaying the construction of the Sangtuda-2 hydroelectric station. Iran even resorted to threatening to block Uzbek railway cars from crossing the Iranian territory as retaliation.<sup>80</sup> At the same time, it also offered to mediate between the two countries since it did not want to jeopardize relations with either country. After all, Uzbek-

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77 Maleki, 2007, p. 170

78 Iran Forges Closer Ties with Tajikistan, Eurasianet.org, January 24, 2006.  
<http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav012506.shtml>

79 Alexander Sodiqov, Eurasia Daily Monitor Volume: 8 Issue: 72, April 13, 2011

80 Roman Muzalevsky, "Iran Maneuvers Uzbek-Tajik Squabbles", *ISN Insights*, March 1, 2011

Iranian trade is four times the level of Iranian–Tajik trade and the two countries are cooperating on transport initiatives. Yet, the future of Uzbek–Iran relations cannot but take into consideration a few political realities such as the military partnership that Uzbekistan has developed with the USA, the growing disputes between Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, and the special affinity that Iran continues to show for the latter.

But Iran’s regional ambition encompasses more than influence over Central Asia; it focuses largely on the future of Afghanistan in anticipation of the departure of US and Coalition forces in 2014. It was for this reason that in the summer of 2011, Iran hosted an International Conference on the Global Fight against Terrorism, bringing together the Presidents of Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan and the Foreign Minister of Turkmenistan, among others. The conference was an opportunity to forge among regional leaders the idea that the continuation of the presence of the US and NATO troops was against these countries’ national interests as well as that of regional security. However, for reasons that will be examined in Part III, CA countries are hesitant to take sides against the USA in Afghanistan. Here too, the Central Asians are forced to put to use their multi-vector foreign policies and keep their options open.

## Turkey

Turkey does not share borders with the CA RSC, but has cultural and linguistic affinities with the Turkic peoples of Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. The cultural linkage became an opportunity which Turkey sought to explore at the beginning of the 1990s by reviving the idea of a Pan-Turkic unity. During the first years of independence, the West also encouraged a more active role for Turkey in CA to balance the potential Iranian influence. For Turkey, this was an opportunity to prove itself as the bridge-builder between the West and CA, especially at a time when its accession to the EU was not being looked at favourably by Germany and France. In contradistinction to Iran, that sought to promote regional and international organizations not dominated by the West, Turkey sought to engage the Central Asians in Western-led institutions that it had itself been a founding member of, such as NATO (which Turkey was one of the first countries to join in 1951) and the OSCE (then called CSCE), as well as CICA, an organization based in Almaty but headed by a Turk and developed on the model of the OSCE. Cooperation with the CA states through ECO, however, meant closer coordination between Turkey and Iran, something Turkey had been wary of in the past. Most importantly, by launching active regional diplomacy before international donor conferences on Afghanistan (January 2010 and November 2011 in Istanbul, prior to London and Bonn II, respectively), Turkey engaged in building a bridge between the US-led Coalition efforts and UN peacebuilding efforts in Afghanistan, on the one hand, and the wider region, on the other,. Yet, as the next part will analyse, these initiatives did little to forge a regional consensus on the future of Afghanistan.

Using culture and linguistic commonality as a political tool, Turkish assertive aperture to the CA states in the early 1990s included political statements made by the then Prime Minister Demirel in his 1992 visit to the region in favour of establishing a Union of Turkish States, and the hopes of then President Ozal to announce the creation of a Turkic Common Market at the first of a series of summit meeting launched in 1992, the Summits of the Turkish Speaking States. These ambitions for a regional Turkic-speaking economic union were rejected by the increasingly more confident CA leaders, however, who proved unwilling to bind themselves exclusively to the influence of Turkey, cautious, as they were, to secure political and economic support from other states including Russia and Iran. During the 1992 Summit and since then, the Uzbek President opposed the creation of a unified Turkestan led by Turkey and Kazakh President Nazarbayev

opposed a separate economic zone.<sup>81</sup>

By the mid-1990s, Turkey had downgraded its ambition to a more pragmatic cooperation with the CA states. It launched cultural and educational initiatives, established an extensive network of air and telecommunications links that continues to serve travel between the CA republics, and allowed its private sector to take the lead in investing in the booming construction business of hotels and housing. During those years, Turkey's internal political divide along pro-Western segments and the Islamism Welfare Party (RP) paved the way for non-state actors to increasingly influence foreign policy. If the Turkish state, in contrast to Iran, was billing itself officially as a pragmatic, pro-Western and secular model to follow, it was ironic that it was one particular religious party that proved its most influential ally in CA. The Gulen movement, advocate of the moderate Islamic thinker Imam Fethullah Gulen, opened hundreds of modern schools in all the CA republics, including in Persian speaking Tajikistan. With their Western-oriented curriculum of English and computers and modern teaching facilities, they quickly became considered the best schools for the children of the CA elites. By the early 2000s, however, the Turkish schools of the Gulen movement underwent increasing scrutiny in the region, accused of fostering ulterior agendas of promoting Islam with Pan-Turkism combined. In 1999, Uzbekistan closed all Turkish lyceums, accusing them of spreading the ideology of the banned Nurcular group founded by Said Nursi.<sup>82</sup> In the final analysis, the Gulen movement may have helped Turkish foreign policy in CA along linguistic, cultural and economic lines, but both in CA and among some segments of Turkish society, the movement, with its secretive nature, was seen as a threat to secular establishments.<sup>83</sup>

While the Turkish state was not officially behind the Gulen movement, it did help the private sector build-up its influence. In 1992, the government established a new agency, Turkish International Cooperation Agency (TICA) under the Office of the Prime Minister to provide technical assistance to the CA countries in the areas of banking, training, private sector development and linking up Turkish and CA youth leaders, university rectors and representatives of the mass media. Much of the capital for TICA was provided through Western donors' support. The Turkish companies' own investments were in small to medium scale projects of hotels and small factories for two reasons: First, they were hampered by the initial poor infrastructure, inadequate banking, and lack of technical expertise in CA. Second, they did not want to compete with Russia, given the considerable amount of money that Turkish businessmen had invested in the Russian economy. In 1995, official trade between Turkey and the CA states only amounted to around \$650 million compared to over \$3 billion between Russia and Turkey.<sup>84</sup> If trade opportunities and private sector development were limited, it was with the big pipelines alternative projects that Turkey could play big league politics with Western backing. The Baku–Ceyhan oil pipeline via Georgia and the Trans-Caspian gas pipeline from Turkmenistan via Azerbaijan to the port of Ceyhan were supported by the West even though they made little economic sense. As routes to bypass Russian and Iranian rivals in the region, they represented major political currency.

Overall, expectations that Turkey would play a significant role as a bridge between Europe and CA proved disappointing. The anticipated Iranian–Turkish rivalry over influence, which dominated

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81 See Hooman Peimani, *The Future of Central Asia: The Competition of Iran, Turkey and Russia*, Greenwood Publishing Group, 1998, p. 50.

82 Farangis Najibullah, "Turkish Schools Coming Under Increasing Scrutiny in Central Asia", *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, April 26, 2009. See also Bayram Balci, "Fethullah Gulen's Missionary Schools in Central Asia and their Role in the Spreading of Turkism and Islam", *Religion, State and Society*, Vol. 31, No. 2, 2003.

83 Roman Muzalevsky, "Fethullah Gulen's Movement In Central Asia: A Blessing Or A Curse?", *CACI Analyst*, 09/01/2009

84 Gareth M. Winrow, "Turkey and the Newly Independent States of Central Asia and the Transcaucasus", *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 1, No 2, July 1997.

the narrative of analysts on CA in the 1990s, also did not materialize for a number of reasons, not least because both Iranian and Turkish, with their internal economic and political challenges, proved incapable of veering away CA from Russia at first and from the US–China–Russia rivalry later. The CA states were also not interested in limiting their newfound independence and national identities to cater to the big brotherly ambitions of neither Turkey nor Iran.

### India and Pakistan

If the countries above have had a more direct interest in the countries of CA, considering them significant to their national security and energy policies, India and Pakistan see them through the prism of their own rivalry.

The CA RSC, from the Indian point of view, serves both as buffer and bridge to the Eurasian landmass beyond the Himalaya. As a buffer zone, CA is strategic in terms of preventing the creation of an ‘Islamic belt’ allied to Pakistan, of forestalling encirclement by either China or the USA, and for insulating India from the narco-trafficking that now plagues its northern borders.<sup>85</sup> This security concern has driven Indian investments in Afghanistan and military cooperation with Tajikistan. India established a small and quaint military footstep in CA, something that it has not done in Afghanistan, by agreeing in November 2003 to renovate and upgrade the Ayni air base in Tajikistan. The purpose of the airbase has been shrouded in mystery, however, and the motivations of India never publically commented upon. India only announced officially that it had been operational in 2006. Its creation could be conceived as a counterweight to Pakistani influence in Afghanistan or as a base for operations against CA insurgents, although India, in principle is against military interventions.<sup>86</sup> The Ayni base reflects perhaps India’s interest in supporting military capabilities for CA countries. To date, the airbase sits idle, however, and as Joshua Kucera speculates, it may be because Russia does not want other countries to use it.<sup>87</sup> In any case, the 2004 initiated renovation of the base put India on the map as a regional power, while the failure to actually deploy fighter squadrons both saves money and prevents strategic conflict with the superpowers. For Tajikistan, the base is symbolic for the alternative procurement modality and security assistance options that it could represent. Tajikistan has subsequently appealed to India to deepen existing military ties and provide weapons and equipment.<sup>88</sup> It also, speculates Kucera,<sup>89</sup> uses the upgraded airbase on its territory as an opportunity to get Russia to pay more money for an exclusive lease or to tempt the USA to consider it in case it is evicted from Manas in Kyrgyzstan.

With a consumer market of 55 million people and wealth in natural resources, CA also remains an attractive opportunity for access to new markets and energy supplies for India, even though Pakistan, which divides the region physically, has denied India overland access to the region. This interest forces India to develop alternative access to CA, including using more expensive routes by sea through Iran.<sup>90</sup> The Turkmenistan–Afghanistan–Pakistan–India (TAPI) pipeline proposal thus presents an alternative to the more contentious Iran–Pakistan–India (IPI) pipeline, but has its own set of political and financing challenges, which will be examined in Part III. Plans to export electricity from Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan to India have similarly fallen prey to political if

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85 Ajay Patnaik, “Comparing India’s and China’s Approaches in Central Asia”, *Central Asia Security Policy Brief # 2*, OSCE Academy in Bishkek and the Geneva Centre for Security Policy, 29 November 2010.

86 Stephen Blank, “Military Rivalry In Central Asia” In *The New Great Game WPR Feature* March April 2009

87 Joshua Kucera, “Why is Tajikistan’s Ayni Air Base Idle?”, *Eurasianet.org*, July 9, 2010  
[http://www.eurasianet.org/node/61503?quicktabs\\_11=2](http://www.eurasianet.org/node/61503?quicktabs_11=2)

88 Roger N. McDermott, “Tajikistan Diversifies Its Security Assistance,” *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Sept. 22, 2004

89 Kucera, 2010

90 Scott Moore, “Peril and Promise: a Survey of India’s Strategic Relationship with Central Asia”, *Central Asian Survey*, Vol. 26, No. 2, 2007, pp. 279–291.

not logistical challenges. In the meantime, India continues to invest in CA economies: Indian companies hold shares in Kazakhstan's oil fields and are exploring investments into hydropower projects in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. But if the potential for Indian influence is perhaps greatest in the economic sphere, it has not been able to match China's significant inlay into CA markets. India's economic presence in CA remains small, handicapped as it is by the lack of direct land routes to CA that circumvent Pakistan. Consequently, India has chosen to concentrate its economic largeness on the Afghan terrain, concentrating instead on educational and cultural projects and small private sector joint ventures in Central Asia.

Pakistan has sought to improve relations with the CA states to gain strategic depth in the political rather than military sense. The instrument has been political influence and the objective has been access. But unlike India, Pakistan sees itself, and not the CA countries, as the bridge that connects the Eurasian heartland with the Arabian Sea and South Asia. It counts on the new openings provided by the signing of the 2010 Trade Agreement between Afghanistan and Pakistan to gain access to CA markets via Afghanistan to the west. Pakistan had the added advantage of being able to draw on multilateralism with the CA countries through the ECO, which expanded to include all the five republics of CA plus Azerbaijan and Afghanistan in 1992. On the downside, ECO has not been able to operate at the optimal level, given its member states' own financial difficulties, lack of investments and the political incompatibility between Pakistan, Iran and Turkey. Pakistan is therefore hoping that its close alliance with China will allow it to gain favourable support for full membership into the SCO instead, the same way that India is counting on its warm relations with Russia as the legacy of the Indo-Soviet friendship.

If Pakistan seeks to capitalize on its Islamic ties with the Muslim world and as the leader of the Umma, this however does not necessarily create sympathy with the CA republics given the latter's secular governments and leadership. Instead, CA leaders have a less favourable view of Pakistan than India because of Pakistan's involvement with the Afghan Taliban as well as its inability to control the tribal belt where extremist madrassas and training camps are allegedly drawing in CA extremists. Relations between Pakistan and Tajikistan, which has the largest borders with Afghanistan, are the most tense for these reasons.

In the rival struggle for political influence in the CA RSC, India has been more successful in establishing a larger trade and investment presence by virtue of its resources, its secular tradition, its traditional ties to the Soviet Union, and its support for the anti-Taliban northern alliance group comprising Afghan Tajiks and Uzbeks. Yet, Pakistan's position between India and CA has permitted it to block direct overland trade, complicating India's efforts in the region. For the future, it is likely that the dynamics of rapprochement between India and the USA, and the extent to which the India-Pakistan rivalry impacts the ascent of India would to a large degree shape relations not only with Afghanistan but also with Central Asia.<sup>91</sup>

In summary, the countries analysed above all tend to see the CA RSC either as a bridge or a buffer zone, an area that instigates both threats such as extremism and terrorism, as well as opportunities in the form of energy resources and large market potential. They all have interests in the region, but their security concerns are not tied to CA directly, making the CA RSC insulated as a distinct complex. Most are handicapped from exerting more influence by their own internal dynamics, be they economic or political pressures against long-term, sustained engagement. From these, it seems that China has the most prospective for a slow, growing and robust influence in the CA RSC in the future. CA countries understand these dimensions that lend an element of temporality to the engagement of other countries. They too take advantage of the

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91 For a discussion on the India-Pakistan rivalry, see Tadjbakhsh, 2011; also the conference report from "Afghanistan's Other Neighbors: Iran, Central Asia, and China", available [http://www.bu.edu/aias/reports/aon\\_conference.pdf](http://www.bu.edu/aias/reports/aon_conference.pdf)

moment for their maximum benefits, without necessarily venturing into a long-term strategy of engagement. Keeping options open is the strategy they have adopted as response. Overall, the lack of clarity about the long term is what inhibits the CA countries' own full-fledged commitment, including with Afghanistan, as the next section will show.

# Part III) Impact on Relations with Afghanistan

In this Part III, we shall argue that the rivalry between CA countries, asymmetrical as they are in terms of strength, has not only impacted cooperation within the CA RSC (part I) and been instrumentalized by the external power rivalry (Part II), but has also resulted in their failure to form a consolidated regional engagement with Afghanistan. Viewed from another angle, instability in Afghanistan, although a major security concern for the CA states wary of bleed-out effects of trans-border terrorism, extremism, narcotics and weapons trafficking, is periphery to, and not the core of, the main security dynamics within the CA RSC. This is why CA countries are more interested in insulating themselves from Afghanistan than engaging with it.

## **Ambiguous Relationship with Interventions in Afghanistan**

Although CA populations share ethnicity, language and religion with populations of northern Afghanistan, the legacy of the Soviet Union hindered close relations in a number of ways.<sup>92</sup> Borders created cultural and social disjunctions after CA became part of the Soviet Union, isolating communities from each other and setting them on distinct historical trajectories of modernization. While the Central Asians became increasingly secular, Islam continued to play a central role in Afghans' lives. Furthermore, the centralized economic system of the CA republics and their socialist system put them at odds with Afghanistan, for whom small trade and family-based agriculture continued as a livelihood system.

During the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, Central Asians played key roles as interpreters in the Red Army but were infrequently used for active combat. During the civil war that followed the withdrawal of Soviet troops in 1989 and during the Taliban years before 9/11, CA states were said to lend support to their co-ethnic groups which formed the Northern Alliance in Afghanistan: Uzbekistan cultivated close ties with the Uzbek warlord Dostum and Tajikistan with Ahmad Shah Massoud, both states motivated by the desire to create a buffer against the Pakistan-backed Taliban, whom CA leaders feared would advance their Jihad into their countries. Only Turkmenistan recognized the Taliban, partly as a principle of neutrality, but mainly out of an interest in developing pipeline routes through Afghanistan. Cross-border economic interactions continued, namely in the form of illegal drug trafficking and unofficial trade in certain agricultural products, carpets and wool from Afghanistan, and light manufactured goods and automobiles from CA.

CA countries looked at the change in Afghanistan with renewed interest in 2001. The Northern Alliance-backed coalition removal of the Taliban eliminated a hostile regime at their border, while hopes were raised that the presence of international troops would hamper cross-border trafficking. More realistically, however, the CA republics saw an opportunity in joining the US-led war against al Qaeda and the Taliban in the region, not only to for moral support for their own struggles against extremist organizations, but especially for material gains from opening their airspaces and territories to US and NATO forces.

Looking to balance foreign and security policy away from dependence on Russia, Uzbek President

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<sup>92</sup> Report of the Conference by the American Institute of Afghanistan Studies and the Hollings Centre for International Dialogue  
Istanbul, Turkey July 24–26, 2008, p. 9

Islam Karimov allowed US troops access to conduct Afghan operations from Karshi-Khanabad (a Soviet military base in southern Uzbekistan until 2005), as well as transit facilities at Termez from where humanitarian supplies could enter Afghanistan (a base Germany has leased from the Uzbek government since 2002 to supply its troops in northern Afghanistan). Kyrgyz president Askar Akaev allowed for NATO and US use of the Manas Air Base (Ganji) situated at the airport north of Bishkek, a base that has been subject to controversy: Akaev's family allegedly received inflated jet fuel prices in return for charging the United States low rents for the base. By 2009, when the continuation of the lease was questioned by the then-President Bakiev under Russian pressure, the USA accepted a substantial increase in rent and the downgrading of the facility from a base to a transit centre, meaning that US troops were subject to Kyrgyz law.<sup>93</sup> Tajikistan initially offered its bases, including that of Farkhor, to the USA but it was finally the French who concluded negotiations for access to a small base for military aircrafts at the Dushanbe Airport. Even neutral Turkmenistan, which officially offered its air space only for humanitarian cargo, also allowed an airport maintenance base where planes were refuelled on their way to Afghanistan. For the most part, Turkmenistan has used its neutrality to avoid tying itself closely to any potential US military actions in the region, but the offer to use its airspace was done in the name of 'humanitarian assistance' to the Afghans. By 2007, Kazakhstan had also expressed an interest in supporting reconstruction in Afghanistan, possibly through one of ISAF's Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs), but the proposal has not materialized yet.<sup>94</sup> Although most CA countries criticized the US unilateral intervention to remove Saddam Hussein in 2001, Kazakhstan sent a small contingent of its peacekeeping battalion (KAZBAT) (which then became a Brigade, KAZBRIG) to Iraq between 2003 and 2009 as part of the Coalition Stabilization Force.

Overall, CA countries have been hesitant to send troops to Afghanistan to fight against their co-ethnic groups, risk al Qaeda and Taliban retaliations and alienate Russia. While they prefer to abstain from direct military engagement, however, they remain keen on gaining maximum economic benefit from the on-going operations. All of them have for this reason also supported the establishment of the new supply route for the ISAF/NATO, the Northern Distribution Network (NDN), which reduces dependency on the Pakistan Ground Line of Communication (GLOC).<sup>95</sup> The NDN was initially negotiated with the Russians, who want NATO to succeed in Afghanistan but, as Martha Olcott writes, "not to stay too long in Moscow's backyard, and, ideally, to enhance Moscow's power in the process."<sup>96</sup> In short, NATO and US operations in Afghanistan have provided benefits, especially of the monetary type, for the CA states. Yet, this cooperation has been fraught with dilemmas, since it forces the Central Asians to seek balance between supporting NATO and avoiding conflict with Russia, which, in their view, is in a better position to guarantee their defence and security.

While the CA countries have gained from collaborating with the USA in Afghanistan, they are, like Russia, China and Iran, cautious about the future. On the one hand, prolonged presence of Western troops in Afghanistan within the framework of the Strategy Partnership Agreement raises questions about sovereignty. As newly independent states, they cherish the idea of sovereignty, and have been keen supporters of respect for the neutrality of Afghanistan. In 2002, China, Iran, Pakistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan signed the Kabul Declaration on good neighbourly relations, which was subsequently endorsed by the Security Council on

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93 Olcott, 2010, p. 54

94 See Partners in Central Asia, NATO Backgrounder, November 2007  
[http://www.nato.int/ebookshop/backgrounder/partners\\_central\\_asia/partners\\_central\\_asia-e.pdf](http://www.nato.int/ebookshop/backgrounder/partners_central_asia/partners_central_asia-e.pdf)

95 For more information on the transit routes that constitute the NDN, see Andrew C. Kuchins, Thomas M. Sanderson, and David A. Gordon, *The Northern Distribution Network and the Modern Silk Road: Planning for Afghanistan's Future*, Washington, D.C.: CSIS, December 2009.

96 Martha Brill Olcott, "Central Asia: Living in Afghanistan's shadow", *Noref Policy Brief No. 1*, Oslo: Norwegian Peace-building Centre, November 2009

Christmas Day 2002, an agreement which had as fundamental principle the inviolability of the sovereignty of Afghanistan. They pledged “constructive and supportive bilateral relationships based on the principles of territorial integrity, mutual respect, friendly relations, cooperation and non-interference in each other’s internal affairs.”<sup>97</sup> A prolonged presence of US troops in Afghanistan signals a break with the principle of sovereignty, something the CA countries hesitate to voice out but are keenly worried about.

Yet, on the other hand, they are also concerned about a US and NATO premature withdrawal from an unstable Afghanistan. The border countries fear a surge in drug and arms trafficking, while others fear the risks of increased terrorist attacks by Jihadi groups moving back to CA. They suspect that the Karzai government may fall with the US/NATO precipitous pull-out, creating a scenario similar to what followed the Soviet withdrawal. In this calculation, as long as NATO and US forces stay in Afghanistan, CA extremists would stay there to continue their Jihad against foreign troops. But CA states also benefit from a prolonged stay of NATO in Afghanistan for the fringe benefits and the rent that they can extract from allowing access to bases and transportation infrastructure through the NDN. Hence, there is, on balance, cautious interest in continued Western presence in Afghanistan.

### **Ethnic Sympathies as Factor of Foreign Policy**

As some analysts have argued before, ethnic sympathies may be a factor in the foreign policies of CA countries towards Afghanistan, but they are not a decisive one.<sup>98</sup> During the past decade, ethnic groups in Afghanistan may not have had separatist ambitions for a variety of reasons.<sup>99</sup> Their ambitions were more for gaining power over other ethnic groups within Afghanistan than joining other countries with whom they shared ethnicity but little else since the CA republics had undergone socialist transformation by the Soviet Union. Neighbouring countries to the north also did not encourage disintegration, especially as they themselves harboured multi-ethnic populations.

This lack of support for separatism does not preclude the development of alliances and ethnic sympathies, however. For example, ethnic solidarity between Tajikistan and the largest minority in Afghanistan was evident during the civil wars of both countries, as an estimated 500,000 Tajiks took refuge in Afghanistan during the Civil War in Tajikistan, and Afghan Tajiks moved to Tajikistan when the Taliban came to the north. The Tajik government nurtured close ties to Shura-e-Nazar, founded by Ahmed Shah Massoud in the mid-1980s, and continued to foster ethnic and linguistic sympathy for Burhaniddin Rabbani, who had contributed to the Tajik peace process. At the same time, however, President Rahmon has carefully avoided encouraging separatism as official policy, despite the intense lobbying of prominent Afghan Tajiks. This had three specific reasons: First, political elites in Tajikistan understand that alliances among Afghan political parties and groupings are temporary. After all, even though Tajik and Uzbek ethnic groups formed a military alliance during the Afghan Civil War, which culminated in the creation of the Northern Alliance, they have also fought against each other in the aftermath of the Taliban removal from northern Afghanistan, as has been the case between forces of Dostum and those of the General Atta Mohammed Noor in Mazar-i Sharif. Second, Tajikistan hesitates to pick a minority group for support if that is going to negatively affect Western support to Tajikistan.

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<sup>97</sup> [http://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/fr/IMG/pdf/3\\_-\\_Kabul\\_declaration\\_Dez02.pdf](http://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/fr/IMG/pdf/3_-_Kabul_declaration_Dez02.pdf)

<sup>98</sup> Joshua Kucera, *Post-Soviet Central Asian National Interests in Afghanistan*, Washington DC: The Century Foundation, 2010, p. 14. See also Martha Brill Olcott, “Central Asian Republics,” in Ashley J. Tellis and Aroop Mukharji (Eds.), *Is A Regional Strategy Viable in Afghanistan?*, Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2010, p. 53. <http://carnegieendowment.org/publications/index.cfm?fa=view&id=40760>

<sup>99</sup> Christian Bleuer, “Why No Ethnic Separatist Movements in Afghanistan?” *Ghosts of Alexander*, March 7, 2007, <http://easterncampaign.com/2007/03/06/why-no-ethnic-separatist-movements-in-afghanistan/>

Similarly, it hesitates to join a coalition with Uzbeks of Afghanistan, given its own tensions with Uzbekistan. Third, President Rahmon would be nervous about encouraging separatism and ethnic segregation elsewhere when the issue could also potentially be raised by Uzbeks living within Tajikistan.

Uzbekistan was General Dostum's supporter until 1997, then again in 2000–2002, providing arms, ammunitions and non-military supplies such as fuel. Uzbekistan opened a consulate in Mazar-i Sharif in 2002 and recognized Dostum's party Junbish-e Milli-yi Islami-yi Afghanistan as its official counterpart in north Afghanistan during the Taliban years, but as Antonio Giustozzi claims, financial support remained "puny if indeed there were any."<sup>100</sup> However, when Dostum was removed from his role as Chief of Army in 2008, he went to live in exile in Turkey and not in Tashkent, indicating the cooling of relations since 9/11. This may have been because Uzbekistan had been disappointed at Dostum for failing to protect Mazar-i Sharif in 1998, but other factors most probably came into play. As Uzbekistan had been trying to negotiate its favourable position with the US, it did not want to be seen as officially supporting specific ethnic groups against the Western-backed government of Hamid Karzai.

Support for ethnic affiliates does exist, but it hardly affects decision-making for the pragmatic and cautious Central Asians. Officially, the CA countries would prefer to leave the question of national reconciliation to the Afghans themselves, refraining to be seen actively pursuing ethnic meddling, as separatist tendencies would have negative consequences for them.

This said, it is possible that once the US and NATO forces leave the region, and in the case that insurgents move to the north, both Uzbekistan and Tajikistan would look for allies in Afghanistan among their co-ethnic groups in order to form a buffer zone between the insurgents and their respective borders. This may mean that the alliance between Uzbekistan and General Dostum may regain strength once the Coalition troops go. For Tajikistan, the choices are more varied because of the lack of unity among Afghan Tajik politico-military groups.

### **Central Asian Interests in Afghanistan**

From the international Coalition point of view, the CA region gains importance for Afghanistan in three areas, with the possibility of a fourth one: First, as a transit route for the NDN, especially as the alternative through Pakistan has proven unsafe. Second, investments in CA transport infrastructure, energy pipelines and electricity grids could allow jumpstarting regional economies by reviving the trade and transport routes in the region. This explains the US administration's interest in launching the New Silk Road project, discussed with neighbours of Afghanistan, multilateral organizations and donors during the UN GA meeting in September 2011, as well as support for the TAPI project to meet both Pakistani and Indian demands for natural gas. Third is the political consideration, so far officially unexplored, in which CA engagement could be a way to tap into linkages with non-Pashtun communities and political groupings within Afghanistan. Finally, with the Pakistani authorities demanding that the USA vacate the Shamsi Air Base in the Baluchistan province following an attack by NATO that killed 24 Pakistani soldiers along the Afghan border in November 2011, it may be conceivable that discussions could have begun with the CA republics on alternative bases for drones.

The CA countries themselves are in the meantime united in five areas as far as their views of peace and stability in Afghanistan is concerned:<sup>101</sup>

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100 Antonio Giustozzi, *Empires of Mud: War and Warlords of Afghanistan 2002-2007*, Columbia/Hurst, 2009, p. 137.

101 As stated for example by participants of the UNRCCA Roundtable among Institutes of Strategic Studies in Central Asia, organized in Ashgabad, April 2010.

- 1) That there cannot be a military solution to the Afghan problem and that the chosen strategy of the Coalition forces to pacify Afghanistan would not yield the expected results. From their point of view, much greater use should be made of intelligence rather than of military force and a political solution should be sought through national reconciliation.
- 2) That more priority should be given to peace through economic reconstruction as a way to achieve “security through regional integration”,<sup>102</sup> and for incentives such as tackling the problems of poverty, unemployment and quality of life of Afghans to reduce conditions conducive to instability in the region.
- 3) That any Afghan solution must show full respect for the traditions, customs and values of the religion of Islam of the people of Afghanistan.
- 4) That Afghan talks should be primarily Afghan-led and include all relevant actors. In other words, they should not only involve the Taliban but also representatives of the Northern Alliance, and that in the final analysis, they should lead to a reconciliation based on power-sharing between the different ethnic groups.
- 5) They also emphasize that the UN and its specialized agencies should be engaged more actively. As Turkmen President Berdimuhamedov for example voiced it, “The way out of this crisis is only through negotiations, through UNAMA and UNRCCA.”<sup>103</sup>

Afghanistan represents both a threat and an opportunity for CA states: Continued instability can be a substantial source of extremism, terrorism, and organized trafficking of drugs and arms. At the same time, stabilization and reconstruction could lead to an opportunity for cooperation over electricity, gas, roads, pipelines, hydroelectric power, equipment, technology transfer, agriculture know-how and technical support.

### Cooperation as Risk Prevention

CA countries would like to see the stabilization of Afghanistan given their fears that the trans-border trafficking in narcotics, arms, extremism and terrorism could present an existential threat to their national securities and regime survival. The 1,458 miles (2,246 km) of borders with Afghanistan create physical vulnerabilities to crossing militant groups and narcotics smuggling, even though unlike the Durand line, they are well delineated and tightly controlled. With the Taliban moving north and west to formerly secure provinces of Afghanistan close to CA borders, namely Balkh, Kunduz, Baghlan, Badghis and Faryab, the borders with Tajikistan are becoming increasingly strategic. But instability in Afghanistan also provides a justification for the CA leaders to use the security argument to hold onto power. As discussed in Part I, the consequence of joining the Global War on Terror has been greater repression against those deemed opponents of governments. CA leaders also hoped that the USA would be less critical of their human-rights violations once they joined GWOt. Yet, despite the fact that the terrorism problem in CA is often depicted as an external factor, the internal element is not negligible. The region is vulnerable to terrorism because of both supply, provided through linkages between criminal trade, narcotics, and radicalization (either in the Pakistani tribal areas or in Russia by the diaspora); as well as a

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102 As stated by President Berdimuhamedov of Turkmenistan about a slogan that summarizes their position: see “Peace in Afghanistan: Breakthrough in Sight?” *News Central Asia*, May 18 2011 <http://newscentralasia.net/2011/05/18/peace-in-afghanistan-breakthrough-in-sight/>

103 Press conference of Presidents Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov and Hamid Karzai at the occasion of President Karzai’ visit to Turkmenistan, 29 May 2011

demand, given adverse political and socio-economic conditions: repression, marginalization, social exclusion and unemployment especially among the youth.

Narco-trafficking along the northern route originating from Afghanistan is another concern that the CA countries share with Russia, which has been accusing USA and NATO of deliberately harming them by not doing enough to curb planting and trafficking.<sup>104</sup> CA countries are concerned that proceeds from narco-trafficking could provide support to groups that seek to destabilize the governments. For example, officials in Kyrgyzstan claimed that Afghan drug money financed local Islamist militants who were behind the unrest in the south. Similarly, Uzbek leaders have been blaming Afghan influence for the 2005 revolt in Andijan. But, as Andrew Kuchins and Thomas Sanderson note, ambiguities abound here too, with narco traffickers operating “with official connivance, if not collusion.”<sup>105</sup> Martha Olcott even labels Tajikistan and Turkmenistan “narco-states”<sup>106</sup>, referring to the involvement of politically powerful individuals in governments in the transit of narcotics. Linkages between terrorism and narco-funding are hard to prove and have been insufficiently explored.

A third potential threat that solicits cooperation with Afghanistan is the potential conflict over water sharing. Afghanistan shares river basins of the Amu Darya and the Pyanj with the CA states and is in constant need of water, especially given bouts of drought. It has used less than a quarter of the quota to which it became entitled through a 1946 treaty between the governments of King Zahir Shah and the Soviet Union, which allowed Afghanistan to draw nine million cubic metres of water per year. If Afghanistan were to use its full allocation, it could find itself at odds with its CA neighbours, not only Tajikistan, but because the Pyanj River is a tributary of the Amu Darya, also with Uzbekistan.<sup>107</sup> The stabilization of Afghanistan would mean more need for drawing on water for irrigation purposes. In order to ensure cooperation on a fair distribution of water resources, Afghanistan would then have to join the International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea (IFAS), the sole regional organization that brings together all five CA states in an attempt – so far futile – to find a fair solution to water distribution in the region. Afghanistan also has ambitious long-term plans in the area of hydropower development and intends to build medium and large hydro power stations over the next 10–20 years. That by itself creates new threats for the CA countries already in dispute over dam construction and water sharing.

### Cooperation for New Opportunities

From the CA states’ point of view, cooperation with Afghanistan is also motivated by perceptions of new opportunities.

The economic factor is not negligible. Officially, CA states emphasize development and the need for poverty eradication as the basis for a sustainable security or stability strategy for their own countries. Proposing the same remedy for Afghanistan represents a way to circumvent endorsement for the military solution pursued by Coalition forces while trying to carve a role for their own involvement. In the same vein, they favour the prospect of Afghanistan becoming a trade and transit corridor between CA and South Asia given its strategic location. They are eager to participate in regional economic strategies which would help them secure alternative southern

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104 Fred Weir, “Moscow Furious, Says US Not Pushing Drug War in Afghanistan,” *Christian Science Monitor*, May 19, 2010, <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Asia-South-Central/2010/0519/Moscow-furious-says-US-not-pushing-drug-war-in-Afghanistan>.

105 Andrew C. Kuchins, Thomas M. Sanderson, and David A. Gordon, *The Northern Distribution Network and the Modern Silk Road: Planning for Afghanistan’s Future*, Washington, D.C.: CSIS, December 2009, p. 9.

106 Martha Brill Olcott, “Preventing New Afghanists: A Regional Strategy for Reconstruction”, *Policy Brief No 11*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, January 2002. <http://www.carnegieendowment.org/files/Policybrief11.pdf>

107 Asian Development Bank, “Pyanj River Basin Project,” 2008, <http://www.pyanjriverbasin.org>.

outlets for their raw material and energy exports, and, by implication, further enlarge their autonomy vis-à-vis Russia.<sup>108</sup> All these ambitions are squarely compatible with the New Silk Road vision that the USA proposed for regional cooperation around Afghanistan.

Prospects for providing Afghanistan with electricity were initiated as part of the ADB and World Bank supported concept of a Central Asia–South Asia Regional Electricity Market (CASAREM) between Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Afghanistan and Pakistan, supposed to facilitate the export of summer surplus electricity from Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. The first phase of this ambitious project, CASA 1000, is currently undergoing a feasibility study by the International Finance Corporation (IFC) and is supposed to start in 2012. Yet, civil society organizations in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have voiced concerns that the construction of CASA 1000 would reduce the amounts of electricity available for domestic use and lead to increase in prices.<sup>109</sup> The political factor is also non-negligible: In 2008, a Power Purchase Agreement was signed between Tajikistan and Afghanistan for the annual export of 300 megawatts of Tajik electricity, but exports continue to be very limited, given the severe electricity crisis that Tajikistan is undergoing and the blocking of the controversial Rogun hydroelectric project by Uzbekistan. If the upstream countries face difficulties in exporting their electricity to Afghanistan, ironically the CA downstream countries, which are in conflict about water supply in the summer, have looked at power transfers to Afghanistan by themselves. Uzbekistan restored Soviet-era power supply lines to Afghanistan at the beginning of 2002 and began delivering 150 megawatts annually to Kabul since 2009, thanks to the construction of an ADB-funded line from Khairaton via Pul i-Khumri to the Afghan capital. Turkmenistan also constructed power stations and electric lines in the Balkh region in an effort to export electricity to Afghanistan.

Besides electricity exports, CA countries seek to develop the road and rail transportation system to tap into trade opportunities. Tajikistan built 5 bridges on the river Pyanj with the help of the USA and the Agha Khan Network. Uzbekistan won an ADB tender to build a 75-kilometre long line between Khairaton and Mazar-i Sharif. Uzbekistan is also supplying fuel, construction materials, metal-roll, fertilizers and wheat to Afghanistan. Kazakhstan, despite sharing no borders with Afghanistan, is the only CA country which has a comprehensive Assistance Programme for the Reconstruction of Afghanistan. The programme includes projects on water supply, infrastructure development, delivery of cement and construction commodities in addition to wheat export to Afghanistan.

### **Lack of Regional Approach or Realism About the Cost of Engagement**

Despite the strong interest in opportunities and common perceptions of threats, however, there is very little coordination of efforts among the CA states regarding Afghanistan. CA countries are cautious and more interested in insulating themselves from Afghanistan than engaging with it beyond some economic projects. Why is it that they have not featured more prominently in the reconstruction efforts?

Analysts from the West have offered their own reservations. Kuchins and Sanderson, in a 2010 report for the Washington-based CSIS, argued that caution is necessary in involving the Central Asians, as “persistent tensions, mistrust, paranoia, authoritarianism, and a near-exclusive focus on ‘regime preservation’ make some of them unwieldy and volatile partners.”<sup>110</sup> Barnett Rubin

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108 See a full analysis in Johannes Linn (Ed.), *Central Asia Bringing down Barriers: Regional Cooperation for Human Development and Human Security*, Regional Human Development Report for Europe and the CIS, Bratislava: Regional Bureau for Europe and the CIS, UNDP.

109 Bank Information Centre, Update on the proposed Central Asia – South Asia Regional Energy and Trade Project (CASA-1000), November 7, 2011. <http://www.bicusa.org/en/Article.12567.aspx>

110 Kutchins et al., 2009.

and Andrea Armstrong have argued that it has been because of their history with respect to Afghanistan that neighbouring countries have been excluded from participation in ISAF and from US and European efforts to build Afghan national security forces.<sup>111</sup> Afghanistan's reconstruction opportunities were supposed to have drawn in CA private sector contractors, but the contribution of the CA republics and Russia to economic reconstruction turned out to be modest. Ashley and Mukherji of the Carnegie Foundation, note that the lack of developed infrastructure and private sector limitations are what hamper a deeper involvement of CA countries in Afghanistan.<sup>112</sup> For these authors, the CA countries' own 'economic infirmities', weak private sector dependent on governments, low priority and suspicion about the merits of opening borders for trade are the reasons why the CA countries have not engaged sufficiently with Afghanistan.

Analysts from outside the region have been concerned with the overall lack of engagement of the region with Afghanistan in general and the lack of a unified regional approach specifically. Examining this from the viewpoint of CA states, however, tells a different story. A more likely cause for restraint is not the lack of capacity but overall uncertainty of the exogenous environment related to Afghanistan itself. For one, Central Asians question whether the international community has a clear vision of support to Afghanistan after 2014. If Afghanistan itself does not have assurances that assistance to stabilization and reconciliation will sustain beyond 2014, neighbouring CA states also have questions about the overall presence of Western forces, their intentions and how the other concerned powers of the region will react, namely China, Russia, Iran and Pakistan. It is therefore with interest that the CA countries watch the position of Russia and China in Afghanistan, seeking ways to strike a balance between supporting NATO for benefits for themselves and avoiding the alienation of their non-Western allies. Related to this is the marginalization they have felt in the overall international efforts towards Afghanistan. After all, CA states do not believe that they have any power to influence developments in Afghanistan, an impuissance that works to the detriment of developing a strategic regional policy of their own.

CA countries also realize that the situation in Afghanistan remains unstable, with the possibility of renewed civil war, and are unsure about the durability of the Karzai central government beyond 2014. They are also aware that the reconciliation and reintegration process led by the High Peace Council, which has produced little so far, has been further weakened by the assassination of Professor Burhanuddin Rabbani in September 2011. They worry that a peace process, if it means reconciliation with the Taliban, will inevitably imply further alienation of the Tajiks and Uzbeks from the political process. They watched with interest as former members of the Northern Alliance, Ahmad Zia Massoud, Abdul Rashid Dostum and the Hazara leader Muhmamad Muhaqiq formed the Jabha-e Milli-e Afghanistan (the National Front of Afghanistan) shortly after Rabbani's assassination as an opposition group.

Although they are vigilant about taking anti-Western positions, CA leaders have rejected the idea of talks with the Taliban, although less explicitly than India, Russia and Iran, not the least because of their fears of Pashtun domination of ethnic groups which they have historically supported. Yet, they are also aware that in the absence of a genuine national reconciliation in Afghanistan where all major parties agree on a framework for reconciliation, peace remains elusive. In this pragmatic calculation, Uzbekistan wouldn't want to make enemies out of Taliban, which it fears less than the IMU. Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan can be expected to acquiesce with the reintegration of the Taliban into the political system more than the others, the same way that they had dealings with them in the 1990s.<sup>113</sup> However, national reconciliation and power sharing is preferred to an *ad hoc*

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111 Barnett R. Rubin and Andrea Armstrong, "Regional Issues in the Reconstruction of Afghanistan", *World Policy Journal*, Spring 2003.

112 Ashley J. Tellis and Aroop Mukherji (Eds.), 2010.

113 M.K. Bhadrakumar, "US Steps up its Central Asian Tango", *Asia Times*, August 25, 2009

solution that brings in selected elements of the Taliban into the government. The alternative to peace through national reconciliation, as they see it, is complete state failure and the fragmentation of Afghanistan, which presents concrete dangers for them as neighbours. In case there is going to be internal ethnic conflict in Afghanistan, the CA countries would want to create a buffer zone in northern areas to stop the advancement of the Taliban to their frontiers. The failure of national reconciliation in Afghanistan would also increase the probability for regional tensions. In the short term, it would lead to the influx of refugees into Tajikistan. Finally, CA leaders are also aware that engagement with Afghanistan comes at a domestic cost. Repression in the name of terrorism may be leading to more radicalization, but retaliation would also come as a response to military cooperation with the USA. The NDN, in this instance, presents a formidable vulnerability to potential terrorist attacks.

Another major reason for the lack of direct involvement of CA states in Afghanistan is their preoccupation with their own regional security dynamic. The core of security concerns in the CA RSC has to do with balancing between great powers and regional rivalries as Part I and II have shown. Hence, lack of a common approach towards Afghanistan mirrors the lack of intra-regional cooperation and a common security strategy within CA itself. As argued before, internal rivalry within the CA RSC and external mirroring in great power competition has led to a *modus vivendi* of balancing and bandwagoning as a survival strategy, all this in a very dynamic environment which makes short-term alliances preferable to long-term strategic planning. Consequently, relations with Afghanistan are similarly fragmented, impacted by disputes among the CA states internally and by changing alliances externally. Caution, in such an environment, is preferable to sustained coordinated action.

In the economic sector, in which they see more tangible benefits, their lack of investment and involvement is more the result of not being able to play a role rather than lack of will or capacity. Donors and Western backed technical agencies in Afghanistan have under-utilized the potential and skills of the Afghan refugees and educated Central Asian professionals. Major reconstruction contracts have consistently gone to European, Turkish and US firms, keeping the Central Asians out. Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan hoped to become suppliers of goods and services including fuel and fresh foodstuffs for US and NATO troops in Afghanistan, but in the initial years of the intervention, virtually everything used by the NATO troops was shipped in from their home countries, and the US military did not want to change traditional procurement processes and vendors even for products available or produced in CA.<sup>114</sup> The NDN changed the scene slightly when the supply of food from Uzbekistan and fuel from Kazakhstan were negotiated as incentives for participation.

In the final analysis, the marginalization they have felt in international efforts there, overall scepticism of the chances of success, security priorities elsewhere, as well as hesitation in order not to alienate allies, have combined to hamper the will of CA states to coordinate efforts towards Afghanistan. Their primary reaction has been to keep themselves insulated. If they engage, however, they evaluate such an engagement strictly on the basis of the unilateral advantages that they may derive in the short-term rather than what may benefit the region in the long-term.

### **Divergent Strategies**

Yet, if a coordinated regional approach has been shunned, it does not mean that they have individually avoided making concrete proposals. In fact, each CA state has advocated its own political and economic initiative using its comparative advantage of geographical proximity,

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114 Olcott, 2010, p. 55

cultural similarities and capabilities. CA states are united in their position against a military solution to the Afghan conflict, for economic revival as the key element for stability and for the leading role of the UN in the peacebuilding process. Yet, as became evident during the Istanbul meeting of November 2011 and during the various consultation meetings of the International Contact Group on Afghanistan leading up to the Bonn II Conference, they have different concrete ideas for the future of Afghanistan and different approaches towards existing regional propositions.

## Turkmenistan

Even though it shares long and porous borders with Afghanistan, Turkmenistan has strived to keep drug trafficking under state control. It undoubtedly struggles with both drug smuggling and extremist groups, but information is scarce. In September 2008, for example, when one incident saw a massive firefight with Turkmen police in the capital Ashgabat, it was unclear whether the perpetrators were extremist groups or narco-traffickers, or both. The Turkmen government has always opted for good relations with the warlords in Western Afghanistan, notably Ismail Khan. In the late 1990s, then President Saparmurad Niyazov also officially recognized the Taliban rule in the belief that they would create the stability needed to export Turkmen gas across Afghanistan.

In the post-Taliban years, Turkmenistan has been intent on exploring the possibility to act as a broker and mediator by putting emphasis on its neutral status. Both during the Taliban years and post 2001, Turkmenistan on numerous occasions offered to facilitate reconciliation and intra-Afghan dialogue on its territory, without any preconditions, much as it had during the Tajik Civil War when it organized a series of inter-Tajik meetings in Ashgabat. During the Istanbul meeting, the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Rashid Meredov reiterated Turkmenistan's intention to play a role in peacebuilding efforts by proposing an international forum bringing all conflicting parties together. Turkmenistan also strongly emphasizes the leading role of the UN in the peace process in Afghanistan, with President Berdimuhamedov using the podium of the UN General Assembly each year to call for a dialogue process between Afghan factions under the auspices of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) and with direct involvement of the UN Regional Centre for Preventive Diplomacy for Central Asia (UNRCCA) which it hosts in Ashgabat.

In his speech at the 65<sup>th</sup> UN GA Session in New York in September 2010, President Berdimuhamedov also presented a mix of political and economic incentives in a five-point formula for peace in Afghanistan.<sup>115</sup> The formula included: 1) Offer of the political space of Turkmenistan for inter-Afghan dialogue under the auspices of the UN, through holding an international high level meeting on confidence building in Afghanistan; 2) Education and training of Afghan bureaucrats and civil servants personnel in various sectors in Turkmenistan under the UN patronage and programmes; 3) Assistance in the development of transport infrastructure, including a project for constructing a 150-km railway line to connect with the Andkhoi town in Afghanistan, with further extension on the Afghan territory aided by international donors; 4) substantially activating the construction of the TAPI pipeline as a regional project for common stability and prosperity, which in Turkmenistan's estimation, would create 12,000 jobs for Afghanistan; and 5) massive investment in transmission and infrastructure to increase the electric power supply to Afghanistan fivefold.

If the diplomatic overtures have not been successful so far given the isolation of country and its marginalization by the Coalition in Afghanistan, Turkmenistan nonetheless hopes that

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115 Speech of President Berdimuhamedov at the UN General Assembly Session, New York, September 2010 found at <http://www.newscentralasia.net/moreNews.php?nID=640>

reconstruction efforts would lead to a new market for its gas to Pakistan and India via Afghanistan. Plans for the \$2 billion TAPI gas pipeline project, first proposed in 1995 but abandoned due to security concerns and a lack of commercial sponsors, were revived in April 2008 when India agreed to join the consortium and share the gas equally with Pakistan. The TAPI project did not progress beyond the feasibility study stage, however, leaving Turkmenistan more dependent on Russia and increasingly on China. By 2011, the project saw renewed boost as part of the proposed New Silk Road initiative. Yet, Turkmenistan's reaction to the New Silk Road was, like that of the other CA countries, cautious, although it was generally supportive of stronger regional cooperation. Officially, the country did not make official comments on the initiative, considering that Turkmenistan, as a neutral country, could not pronounce itself on an initiative announced by the USA.

## Uzbekistan

Uzbekistan shares a small and tightly monitored border with Afghanistan but is concerned about the porous nature of the Afghan-Tajik border and the lack of ability of Tajikistan to ensure its control. It also looks at the crisis in Afghanistan as an opportunity to recover its role as an international player unilaterally, and not as part of a bloc that includes Russia. Thus, Uzbekistan's diplomatic proposal for stabilization in Afghanistan has been voiced since the April 2008 NATO Summit in Bucharest as the revival of the UN's Afghanistan '6+2' Assembly, metamorphosed into a '6+3' ensemble by including NATO (The 6 refer to Afghanistan's immediate neighbours – Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Iran, Pakistan, China – and the 3 to the major global stakeholders, i.e. NATO, USA and Russia). The 6+3 formula was proposed as a Contact Group intended to be an advisory body of the international community acting under the auspices of the UN. The previous version of this proposal, also formally proposed by Uzbekistan in August 1997 and adopted by Lakhdar Brahimi, then UN Special Envoy for Afghanistan under the name of '6+2 group of neighbours and friends of Afghanistan', had led to a Regional Action Plan for curbing the drug trade from Afghanistan. Uzbekistan had, in July 1999, gathered the 6+2 group under the UN auspices to adopt the Tashkent Declaration "On main principles of settling the conflict in Afghanistan." Uzbekistan's revived formula proposed more consultations with the neighbours under the aegis of UNAMA, but was striking for not including Afghanistan itself. The argument against the inclusion of Afghanistan, from the Uzbek point of view, is that the initiative is for the stability of this country by its concerned partners and neighbours, and including the Afghan government would mean favouring one of the factions or warring parties over the others. Yet, this omission in reality points to doubts about the survival of the Afghan government after the US withdrawal. The inclusion of NATO in the Contact group was also Uzbekistan's attempt to enhance the legitimacy of the NATO presence in Afghanistan, but it put it at odds with the position of some of the neighbours of Afghanistan, notably Iran. The initiative in the meantime fell on deaf ears – despite being raised on numerous occasions in the UN GA by President Karimov – partly because of its neglect of the role of the Afghan government, partly because it proposed the UN to institutionalize such a consultative mechanism, and partly because the Uzbeks have not been able to muster support from the other CA countries for their unilateral proposal.

The international community's ignoring of Uzbekistan's proposal may have played into the latter's unenthusiastic reaction to the New Silk Road vision, but other factors also explain the Uzbek hesitation for regional projects. Overall, Uzbekistan favours bilateral relations for Afghanistan, including directly with NATO and US forces for the NDN network, without having to negotiate a collective position with the other CA states with which it competes. The most important bilateral relationship, the US-Uzbek alliance on cooperation in Afghanistan, has after all allowed Uzbekistan to achieve four of its goals: 1) to lend its territory for NDN despite the closure of the US base in Khanabad, and as such to increase its access to economic aid without

having to abide by the political conditionality of western and IFI donors; 2) to enlist US military assistance to eliminate the IMU and Hizb-ut-Tahrir on its territory; 3) to achieve the more long-term goal of greater independence on security matters from Russia; and 4) to gain both legitimacy and capacity to pursue its hegemonic ambitions vis-à-vis other countries within the CA RSC.

For the USA, Uzbekistan represents an important strategic and transit point in CA. This motivation has led to a policy of rapprochement which in September 2011 saw the US Congress approve a bill, known as Foreign Military Financing (FMF), lifting restrictions on aid to Uzbekistan to buy equipment for its military and border protection, put in place in 2004 because of concerns about human rights observance. Although the move drew criticism from human rights advocates, from Washington's point of view, assistance to Tashkent is important to ensure Uzbek cooperation in keeping open the NDN vital supply routes to Afghanistan.<sup>116</sup> For this reason, the Senate Appropriations Committee passed an administration-backed bill that would allow the Secretary of State to waive the human rights restrictions on the grounds of national security interest. For Uzbekistan, this move represented a legitimization and recognition of its fight against terrorism. The increasing reliance of the West on Uzbekistan after 2014 and the provision of equipment and financial support to its military would, however, increase tensions and competitions in CA even though it may reduce CA dependency on Russia for security guarantees.

Despite being prompted for warmer relations with the West, Uzbekistan, represented only by its Ambassador to Ankara, was the only country during the November 2011 Istanbul meeting refusing to sign the Islamabad Declaration. The reason may have been that its own proposition of 6+3 was not taken seriously. It could also have demonstrated Uzbekistan's preference for smaller bilateral projects, which it can control itself, instead of having to invest in large multi-country projects and regional mechanisms. Uzbekistan's economic integration projects with Afghanistan are bilateral, after all. For instance, it has delivered electricity to Kabul directly since 2009, bypassing the plans for an electricity grid through CASA 1000.<sup>117</sup> It has also opted to construct its own railway line, through a tender worth \$170 million from the ADB, to connect Khairaton with Mazar-i Sharif via a bridge over the Amu Darya River, with plans to extend it to Herat and on to Iran.

Uzbekistan also hopes to expand bilateral trade with Afghanistan. As a paper of the Centre for Economic Research based in Tashkent argued, Afghanistan may provide Uzbekistan the shortest way to the sea ports in Iran and Pakistan.<sup>118</sup> Uzbekistan could also win up to \$ 100 million profits through participating in transportation projects in Afghanistan as a subcontractor, as well as receive more benefits from increased transit in the longer run. Yet, the paper also warned that Uzbek companies would need the Government's support in mitigating security risks related to doing business in Afghanistan.

In the long term, Uzbekistan would want to have continued US presence in Afghanistan in order to gain economic dividends without having to succumb to political conditionality for reform. By aligning itself with the US, it can gain political legitimacy for its regime, bring in a counterweight to Russia, and become a privileged zone of influence and leadership in the region. In case the Coalition fails in Afghanistan, however, Uzbekistan can always nurture its relationship with General Abdul Rashid Dostum and his party to create a buffer zone against the advancement of

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116 Joshua Kucera, "Uzbekistan: Military Aid to Tashkent Would Help Protect NDN - State Department", *Eurasia Insight Roundup*, September 28, 2011.

117 Bruce Pannier, "New Power Line Lights Up Afghan Capital," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, May 29, 2009, [http://www.rferl.org/content/New\\_Power\\_Line\\_Lights\\_Up\\_Afghan\\_Capital\\_/1742690.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/New_Power_Line_Lights_Up_Afghan_Capital_/1742690.html)

118 Center for Economic Research, "Afghan Transit: How Uzbekistan can Win Peace and Spur Economic Growth", *Development Focus*, Issue No. 6, January 2011, Tashkent. [http://www.cer.uz/upload/iblock/11b/one%20pages\\_6.pdf](http://www.cer.uz/upload/iblock/11b/one%20pages_6.pdf)

the Taliban in the north of Afghanistan.

## Tajikistan

Tajikistan has the longest border with Afghanistan and shares ethnicity with the second largest group in that country. The long and, despite presence of Russian forces, weak border management makes Tajikistan vulnerable to incursions by extremists and traffickers of illicit goods.<sup>119</sup> The border has also been crossed both ways by an influx of refugees fleeing civil wars in both countries in the past, and Tajikistan continues to face difficulties in integrating past Afghan refugees, let alone any new ones should there be renewed war in Afghanistan. Relations in the past between Ahmad Shah Massoud and the Tajik opposition groups were tight, but as described above, Tajikistan does not necessarily support ethnic separatism that could destabilize Afghanistan. However, where there is open ethnic rivalry, as for example is the case within the present Afghan parliament, or could be the case should the largely Pashtun Taliban engage in conflicts with other ethnic groups, Tajikistan would support Afghanistan's Tajik minority.<sup>120</sup>

Tajikistan's contribution to the political settlement in Afghanistan is to offer its own experience with settling its Civil War in the 1990s: the model included brokering by the UN, the establishment of contact groups of neighbouring and concerned parties, rounds of inter-Tajik dialogue, both officially and track two, as well as concessions made to the opposition through a quota of 30% power-sharing in appointments in ministries, local administration, police and security bodies in return for the opposition to disarm its 7,000 fighters and reintegrate them into civilian life.<sup>121</sup> One of the major differences between the two peace processes however is that in the Tajik one, the UN, as an independent mediator, was able to engage regional countries especially Russia and Iran in the process, while in Afghanistan, the UN has consistently taken a back seat to the USA, the latter hesitating to genuinely involve the neighbours of Afghanistan – beyond Pakistan – in the search for a political solution.

Tajikistan, like Kyrgyzstan, looks at the possibility of stabilization and reconstruction as an opportunity to export electricity to Afghanistan and beyond, including to energy-deficient India and Pakistan through the CASA 1000 project. It has made numerous proposals for the future of electricity export should it successfully develop the Rogun hydropower dam: one to build transmission lines from Rogun to Iran through Mazar-i Sharif, and another to go through Kunduz, to Kabul and onto Jalalabad. The problem with such projects however is that Tajikistan itself struggles with internal electricity supply during winter times and the construction of the Rogun dam is challenged by neighbouring Uzbekistan, weakening prospects for sustainable cooperation, even if Tajikistan already sells its surplus summer electricity to Afghanistan.

Tajikistan also hopes to benefit from trade and transport routes to Afghanistan. Should plans for improving the railway system within Afghanistan materialize, Tajikistan would want to build a Dushanbe–Kurgan Teppe–Kunduz railroad. In 2007, a truck bridge was built on the Pyanj River by Indian engineers, financed by the USA and Norway, which has become a major transit route. The Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN) has also built three bridges linking the Gorno Badakhshan Oblast with Afghanistan since 2002. With hopes of reaping benefits from regional integration projects, Tajikistan was particularly active during the Istanbul Conference in supporting the New Silk Road initiative, in defiance of Russia, proposing for example that the 5<sup>th</sup>

119 There are also some rumours, although unsubstantiated, that the Taliban frequently cross back and forth the borders of Tajikistan, including to rest, as related to the author by the military attaché of a European embassy in Dushanbe, December 2010.

120 Olcott, 2010, p. 52.

121 See Shahrbanou Tadjbakhsh, "Peacemaking in Tajikistan and Afghanistan: Lessons Learned and Unlearned." *Etudes du CERi* No 143, Paris: CERi Sciences Po, 2008; George Gavrillis, "The Tajik Solution A Model for Fixing Afghanistan", *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 88, No. 6, November–December 2009

Regional Economic Cooperation Conference on Afghanistan (RECCA V) be held in Dushanbe in March 2012 within the context of the New Silk Road Initiative.

### Kyrgyzstan

Kyrgyzstan, although it does not share borders with Afghanistan, has been an important player in Coalition efforts by leasing out its military base at Manas airport, as discussed before. It also, briefly, made an attempt to propose a political solution for Afghanistan before it became engulfed in its internal political turmoil. In 2009, former President Bakiev launched a so-called 'Bishkek initiative' that envisaged a high level event on Afghanistan where different sides of the conflict and other relevant actors could address the situation at the highest political level. The proposal also included the establishment of a permanent platform for discussions and negotiations on Afghanistan between various political factions.<sup>122</sup> Unlike the similar proposal coming from wealthier Turkmenistan, however, the Kyrgyz wanted the international community to foot the bill of their proposed initiative. The idea was then dropped when Bakiev was replaced in the 2010 coup and the Kyrgyz government has since been focusing primarily on internal developments.

The Bishkek initiative proposal had come around the same time as Russia offered substantial investment (including 2 billion dollar in loans and 300 million dollars in grant) for the completion of the Kambarata hydroelectric station, attempting to induce Kyrgyzstan not to renew the lease agreement with the USA in February 2009. By June 2009, however, Kyrgyzstan offered the Manas base again to the USA for a substantial increase in rent. A year later, Bakiev fled to Belarus. The interim president, Roza Otunbayeva, decided to honour the previous regime's deal over US access to Manas but the new President Almazbek Atambayev indicated that he would seek closure of the base in 2014. Kyrgyzstan, which receives nearly \$200 million per year from the USA, stands to lose a substantial portion of its GDP when the USA and NATO forces leave Afghanistan. As far as the New Silk Road initiative is concerned, Kyrgyzstan, like Tajikistan, has been relatively favourable given the concessions provisioned for the country's export of electricity.

### Kazakhstan

Although Kazakhstan too is wary of trans-border threats emanating from an unstable Afghanistan, it is the least impacted, being two countries removed from its borders, with less possibility of potential refugees spilling over to its territory directly. Instead, it views opportunities in the Afghan terrain as a possibility to gain diplomatic and economic leverage, both over its rival Uzbekistan and through diversifying its political allegiance with great powers. Kazakhstan puts strong emphasis on using instruments of multi-lateral diplomacy to promote a solution and ensure humanitarian aid and economic assistance. It used its position as chair of the OSCE during 2010 to put Afghanistan on the agenda of the OSCE Summit in December 2010 and proposed more engagements of the organization in cross border initiatives, even though Russia has been strictly opposed to having an OSCE involvement in Afghanistan. Furthermore, as the chair of the Foreign Ministers of the OIC during 2011, Kazakhstan continued to use multilateral channels to find an entry point for a political solution in Afghanistan.

In the meantime, it is mostly through its own concrete financial pledges that Kazakhstan has been able to gain advantage over the other republics in Afghanistan. It provided humanitarian aid (food aid and grain), implemented a number of large-scale social projects (including helping the parliament), introduced scholarships and allocated \$50 million dollars for education and training of Afghan nationals. It also debated the possibility to dispatch a peacekeeping contingent from its

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<sup>122</sup> The author would like to thank Armands Pupols and Jomart Ormonbekov from the UN Regional Centre for Preventive Diplomacy in Central Asia (UNRCCA) for this information.

peacekeeping brigade (KAZBRIG) to support ISAF in Afghanistan, a proposition that was finally vetoed in its parliament. Kazakhstan also stands to gain political and economic stake in the success of the NDN. If the vision of the future involves regional economic integration, then it is Kazakhstan that is prompted in the lead role as a potential donor and investor of regional infrastructure projects, including in Afghanistan.

Unlike Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan came out with strong support for the New Silk Road initiative during the Istanbul Conference, seeing it as a way to give access to Afghan goods through the Western Europe–Western China transport corridor, in which it has invested approximately three billion US dollars.<sup>123</sup> Yet, Foreign Minister Yerzhan Kazykhanov also recalled during his speech in Istanbul that the New Silk Road Initiative should take into consideration already existing platforms and agreements, such as CICA or the Trade and Investment Framework Agreement (TIFA). He also called for a more proactive role for the UN in Afghanistan.

## CA RSC–Global Powers–Afghanistan Triangle

### Watching Russia

As argued in part II, the CA countries seek to balance their security dependence on Russia, and it is to a large extent through this prism that they weight their commitments to international Coalition efforts in Afghanistan. Aligning with the USA in Afghanistan provides an opportunity, especially when the Americans are willing to pay substantially more money than the Russians to help their economies. This motivation clearly explains the initial overture made by Uzbekistan to the Americans for its Khanabad base and Kyrgyzstan for its Manas one. While Uzbekistan can afford to use the opportunity to pull away from Russia, Kyrgyzstan has tried to appease them both by hosting both countries' bases on its small territory. Yet, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan both also need to find a balance between the financial assistance they can get from the USA and continuing relations with Russia, which provides direct assistance (Russia has provided money for the reconstruction of Southern Kyrgyzstan for example) as well as hosts their migrant workers, whose remittances contribute substantially to their GDPs. The best option from the CA countries' point of view would be US–Russian and NATO–Russian collaboration over security and stabilization in Afghanistan. Failing that agenda, they seek engagement both with Russia and China through regional institutions such as SCO and CSTO, as well as with the USA and its allies and NATO.

In the meantime, Russia has kept a relatively low profile in Afghanistan, wary of a repetition of the mistakes committed during the Soviet invasion – its “Afghan syndrome”.<sup>124</sup> Russia also takes a high moral ground with its own experience, having seen the limitations of imposed modernization, the intricacies of tribal society, the quickly reversible alliances and relationships, and the resentment of foreigners as well as their exploitation. As Dmitri Trenin and Alexei Malashenko put it, Russians gained a fundamental understanding in Afghanistan of the need to “discount the power of military force relative to the power of the purse, and the power of the purse relative to the power of religious beliefs and tribal customs.”<sup>125</sup>

In the final analysis, Russia does not want to pay for any long-term engagement in Afghanistan and is happy to see the USA engulfed financially if not militarily. At the same time, it realistically recognizes that US and NATO failure in Afghanistan may lead to a rise of militancy that could

123 Statement by H.E. Yerzhan Kazykhanov, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Kazakhstan, at the Istanbul Conference on Afghanistan Istanbul, 2 November 2011

124 Dmitri Trenin and Alexei Malashenko, *Afghanistan: A View from Moscow*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2010, p. 13. See also the warnings of the then Russian Ambassador to Afghanistan Zamir Kabylov about NATO repeating the mistakes of the Soviets. <http://en.afghanistan.ru/doc/91.html> See for example, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/7402887.stm>

125 Trenin and Malashenko, 2010, p. 13.

move north and threaten the stability of CA, its zone of influence. Russian President Dmitry Medvedev may have endorsed President Barack Obama's new Strategy for Afghanistan in December 2009, but Russia has repeatedly stressed the UN mandate of the international operation in Afghanistan and has occasionally put conditions for the renewal of the ISAF mandate at the Security Council, for example, in making them include the eradication of narcotics.<sup>126</sup> Moscow may not commit troops to Afghanistan after the Soviet defeat there, but it seeks ways to rebuild its influence with infrastructure projects, sales of helicopters, and increasing cooperation with Western forces in combating the narcotics smuggling. It negotiated with NATO to allow for NDN, which ironically makes NATO dependent on Russia's good will, especially after relations broke down after the Russia–Georgia conflict in August 2008. Russia also wants to see more engagement for the regional military organization that it sponsors, namely the CSTO, although a broader NATO–CSTO dialogue, which it seeks, is highly unlikely.

Although it was wary of the New Silk Road Initiative, Russia lent support to the TAPI project and announced during the SCO Summit in Saint Petersburg in November 2011 that it would contribute \$500 million to the CASA 1000 electricity project, both key projects of the initiative. Yet, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs also issued a critical statement in November 2011 regarding the US initiative, underlining the importance of solving issues through regional efforts without external interference. Instead, Russia has promoted the idea of a single economic space within the Customs Union created in 2010 between Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan eventually turning into a Eurasian Union with other countries of the post-Soviet space joining in.

In the meantime, both directly (in the case of Kyrgyzstan) and through the SCO (for Uzbekistan), Russia has sought to put pressure on the CA states to diminish the presence of US troops on their territory. Moscow also appears concerned about the prospects of long term presence of NATO in the region – setting a tone of caution echoed by Iran, Pakistan, and China, but less vocally by the CA countries. In the final analysis, Afghanistan is also an important element in the Russia–USA–NATO relationship where there are disagreements about expansion, the architecture of the European missile defence shield, and control over the Caucasus. In this dialogue, Russia may use its influence over CA states as a bargaining chip in its wider relations with the USA, the same way that the CA countries are balancing Russia's security guarantees with the US' cash incentives for cooperation in Afghanistan.

### Chinese Checkbook Diplomacy

While Russia hesitates to invest economically in Afghanistan, preferring to do so in CA which is richer in natural resources and more familiar for the Russians, it is China that has, through an active checkbook diplomacy, created genuine competition for economic influence in Afghanistan. China shares with Russia and the CA countries the same interest of seeing a stable Afghanistan that is not home to extremism, terrorism and narcotics trafficking. It also shares with Russia a fear of encirclement through a long-term US military presence in the wider region. For the moment, however, China has solely voiced its economic interest in Afghanistan and CA in pursuit of access to natural resources necessary to fuel its economic growth.

China shares only 76 kilometres of borders through the Wakhan Corridor with Afghanistan, but has established regular air transportation, including weekly Ariana Flights from Urumchi to Kabul. It has offered \$2.5 billion in aid since 2002 and some demining training to the Afghan National Army. It has also built hospitals, schools and irrigation systems in Afghanistan.<sup>127</sup> But

126 See Shahrbanou Tadjbakhsh, "Afghanistan", in Blanca Antonini & al, *Security Council Resolutions Under Chapter VII*, Madrid: FRIDE, 2009 <http://www.fride.org/publication/655/security-council-resolutions-under-chapter-vii>

127 *China Daily* 12/06/2011 p. 11, [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/cndy/2011-12/06/content\\_14217254.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/cndy/2011-12/06/content_14217254.htm)

the trump card has been China's investment of \$3.5 billion in Afghanistan's Aynak copper mine where the China Metallurgical Corporation (CMC) was awarded a 30 year lease, representing the largest foreign direct investment in Afghanistan. The China National Petroleum Corp (CNPC) also won a tender in October 2011 for a 20 year lease on several oil fields in northern Afghanistan, winning over Western companies, including the UK-based Tethys Petroleum, a client of the private investment firm Gryphon Capital Partners founded by Zalmay Khalilzad, the former US Ambassador to Afghanistan. This move prompted Alexander Benard, Khalilzad's son, to protest that "we pay, China plays" in the *National Review Online*.<sup>128</sup>

China's strategy is to gain economic influence in Afghanistan and CA without getting bogged down politically or militarily in the region. As such, it does not want to be at the forefront of the fight against terrorism for fear of retaliation against its economic interest. It is also for this reason that it prefers to engage politically with Afghanistan through multi-lateral mechanisms such as the SCO rather than bilaterally. At the same time, however, China has expressed its preference for bilateral economic relations through its reaction to the New Silk Road. Like Russia, it is distrustful of the US' proposal to tie CA and South Asia together through trade and energy corridors, which it fears would bypass its interests.

### Eurasian Multilateralism for Afghanistan: The SCO/CSTO Axis

If the CA countries are aware of their limitations when working bilaterally with Afghanistan, they have all been proponents of multilateralism in one way or another, including Uzbekistan with its insistence that the 6+3 mechanism be created under the auspices of the UN. During his speech to the 66<sup>th</sup> session of the UN GA in September 2011, the Kazakh President for example noted that "Global peace will only be enhanced if the United Nations works closer with regional security arrangements. With respect to the Eurasian region, these are CICA, Shanghai Cooperation Organizations (SCO) and Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO)." CA countries find themselves saddling between support to regional or global organizations sponsored by the West, i.e. NATO and the OSCE, and those supported by Russia (CSTO) and Russia/China (SCO). Their engagement with NATO having been discussed above, we turn to the role of SCO and CSTO in Afghanistan.

The SCO represents for the CA countries a viable platform for cooperation with the two giants of the region, Russia and China and through them with Afghanistan. Once Uzbekistan joined the Shanghai Five in 2001, the SCO emerged as a non-negligible structure of cooperation on security from the three evils (terrorism, separatism and extremism) and operating with the principles of non-alignment, non-confrontation and non-interference in the affairs of other countries. In the recent past however, the SCO has consolidated its identity as an economic organization more than a military block, perhaps as part of a division of responsibility with the Russia-backed CSTO. The organization's activities have expanded to increasingly include security cooperation, intelligence sharing, and counter-terrorism through joint operations, including joint Russia-China war games. Member states, led by China, however, have little interest in transforming the SCO into a military alliance such as NATO, leaving the task of strengthening national militaries and rapid reaction capabilities to the CSTO.

As the only major international organization that has neither the USA nor any US allies among its members, the SCO has sought to expand its membership to include the countries of the immediate region. Pakistan applied for full membership in 2006 and Iran and India followed suit in 2007 and 2010 respectively. While Russia and China have been cautious about new admissions

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128 Alexander Benard, "War-Forfeiteering" *The Corner, National Review Online*, October 5, 2011  
<http://www.nationalreview.com/corner/279249/war-forfeiteering-alexander-benard>

in the past, the SCO responded to the US plans for a new OSCE-like confidence building mechanism in the Heart of Asia by accelerating mechanisms for accession of India and Pakistan as full members, Afghanistan as observer and Turkey as dialogue partner. SCO member states, including the CA countries realize however that expanding membership of the organization and allowing entry to India, Pakistan and Afghanistan would not only change regional power politics but also the political dynamics within the organization itself.

China in particular, but also Russia, wants to see a bigger role for the SCO in Afghanistan, something that the Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi reiterated during the Bonn II Meeting in December 2011. Afghanistan is set to gain observer status in the organization in whose meetings it has so far participated as Special Guest. It has been part of the SCO-Afghanistan Contact Group established in 2005 during the same Moscow Summit in which SCO members raised objections to the presence of American military bases in CA. The SCO further developed its position towards Afghanistan through the adoption of a 2009 Moscow Declaration and an Action Plan of SCO Member States and Afghanistan on Combating Terrorism, Drug Trafficking and Organized Crime, as well as the creation of a SCO-Afghanistan Bilateral Commission. In 2011, the SCO adopted a 5 year counter-narcotics Strategy to tackle drug production and trafficking in the region, which sees the organization drawing Afghanistan actively into its fold. In its tenth Anniversary Summit in Kazakhstan in June 2011, the SCO also considered how CA could be affected by the possible spread of the Arab Spring and the failure to stabilize Afghanistan, pointing to the desire to boost the role of SCO as a region-based forum for discussing post-Western troops withdrawal scenarios in Afghanistan.

If the CA countries are somewhat intimidated within the SCO, much of it because of their increasing economic dependence on China, they are more familiar with the CSTO, an organization that comes more directly out of their own collective security experience as part of the Soviet Union. The CSTO has also voiced concerns for the potential spill-over of insecurities such as narcotics and extremism from Afghanistan. Member states differ however on what should be the adequate response, not the least because CSTO, unlike SCO, bills itself as a security organization. The test for the CSTO came in 2010 when it failed to act after the interim leader Roza Otunbaeva requested assistance to quell the violence in southern Kyrgyzstan. Yet, the CSTO Charter prohibited such intervention, with its Article 5 pledging “non-interference in matters falling within the national jurisdiction of the member states”.<sup>129</sup> Subsequently, the organization tried to amend its Charter and reconsider the circumstances in which it might be authorized to use force. At the Moscow Summit of December 2010, the CSTO moved to allow intervention in a domestic conflict on the territory of one its members in response to a request by the host government. It also stipulated that in a crisis, a simple majority rather than consensus among all members would be enough to initiate action.<sup>130</sup> Uzbekistan refused to join the amended treaties, however, claiming that the core mission of CSTO was collective defence and not to act as a regional police.<sup>131</sup> There are also other differences among member states in terms of how best to contribute to strengthening the borders with Afghanistan. Russia had proposed the redeployment of Russian border guards in Tajikistan, but the latter resisted, not least because its border management capabilities have been boosted by the USA and the EU. In the meantime, the CSTO has been keen on developing a dialogue and a cooperative agreement with NATO on Afghanistan, so far unsuccessful. In March 2010, CSTO signed a cooperation pact with the UN which it hoped would pave way for the organization’s greater involvement in Afghanistan as part of peacekeeping operations.

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129 Reuel R. Hank (Ed.), *Global Security Watch--Central Asia*, Praeger, 2010, p. 187.

130 Roger McDermott, “CSTO Moves into the Information Age”, *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Commentary*, September 04, 2011 [www.rferl.org/content/commentary\\_csto...into.../24317363.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/commentary_csto...into.../24317363.html)

131 Ibid.

For the moment, Russia and China seem to have created a division of responsibility that charts the evolution of the CSTO and SCO respectively in different fields. One possible scenario in the future could be an increase foray of SCO into military affairs, and behind it, a Chinese–Russian competition for influence for dominance in Eurasia. Until now, however, China and some of the CA countries have resisted transforming the SCO into a collective military alliance. Afghanistan represents an area of cooperation between the two organizations, as there is consensus on the need to counter the threat of narcotics trafficking and terrorism stemming from there. Afghanistan also represents an opportunity for collaboration between a variety of regional organizations in general, as it is clear that no single organization, including NATO, can afford to act alone. For cooperation on Afghanistan to happen, however, NATO, CSTO, and SCO must overcome their differences, including those related to the geopolitics of Western and Eurasian governments.

### Western-led Multilateralism for Afghanistan: Economic Cooperation as Panacea for Peace?

The New Silk Road was introduced pragmatically as the USA searched ways to sustain finances to Afghanistan beyond its withdrawal in 2014. It was proposed as the long-term, regional economic development vision for shared responsibilities and mutual benefits. The strategy is primarily focused on turning Afghanistan into an “Asian roundabout”<sup>132</sup> instead of a permanent American protectorate, a crossroads for network of economic and transit connections, executed regionally, locally owned and driven by the private sector.<sup>133</sup> An increase in regional trade, those behind the New Silk Road initiative believed, would, in principle, create incentives for peaceful relations between Afghanistan and its neighbours. This was also the idea behind the extension of the NDN, which was not only meant to provide an alternative to shipping supplies to the war in Afghanistan but also for the USA to “open the lines of communication” and contribute to CA regional cooperation and development.<sup>134</sup> Together, these were attempts by the USA to (re)assert influence in the area, foster free trade regimes and encourage political liberalization in the wider region, all as part of a sustainable exit strategy from Afghanistan.

The New Silk Road initiative seemed to answer to two of the concerns of CA countries: that priority should be given to peace through economic reconstruction, and that the CA countries be invited to contribute to and benefit from economic projects. It offered concrete answers to the critical economic problems of CA. After all, landlocked geography, and in Uzbekistan’s case a double dose of it, is one of the key impediments for increasing economic growth since higher transportation costs lower competitiveness of goods and profits for exporters. The New Silk Road bag of goodies included among other initiatives the revival of the TAPI pipeline, a national railway system for Afghanistan supported by CENTCOM, and the CASA 1000 project to transfer electricity from Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan via Afghanistan to Pakistan.

Nonetheless, the initiative has a number of limitations that can affect how this vision turns into reality. A first practical hurdle for the realization of the project is the question of financing. The Americans positioned themselves as the political but not financial brokers for mobilizing risk guarantees, new investments and public-private partnerships by the IFC, NATO, ADB, G-20 and private investors. So far, however, there is no guarantee of investments with the dire security situation in Afghanistan and the failure to assure cooperation from neighbours. If the USA is not

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132 Robert D. Hormats, “The United States’ ‘New Silk Road’ Strategy: What is it? Where is it Headed?” Remarks by the Under-Secretary for Economic, Energy and Agricultural Affairs Address to the SAIS Central Asia-Caucasus Institute and CSIS Forum, Washington, DC September 29, 2011

133 Parag Khanna, “From War on terror to New Silk Road”, *CNN Global Public Square*, October 7, 2011 <http://globalpublicsquare.blogs.cnn.com/2011/10/07/from-war-on-terror-to-new-silk-road/>

134 Kutchins et al, 2009

to finance this, there is scepticism of the benefits of a regional fund among other countries, including China, Russia and some CA countries.

The idea of free trade in the New Silk Road vision has also been challenged by everyday practices in CA. Uzbekistan, the major transit hub, used a policy of higher tariffs for trucks crossing its borders throughout 2010 and 2011, instigating a railway blockade and expanding its *de facto* trade embargo against Tajikistan. That led to a chain reaction when Tajikistan upped the charges for freight heading to Afghanistan. Kazakhstan has been busy negotiating terms as part of a new Russia-led Customs Union/Eurasian Economic Community gaining strength in the north. Trade barriers in the region are not likely to come down soon.

Then there is the problem of scale. Countries like Uzbekistan favour smaller bilateral exchanges, including exchanges and cross-border production of electricity over larger projects that require mega funding. If the World Bank and ADB had plans to create a single regional electricity market in Central and South Asia (CASEREM), they too are increasingly favouring smaller projects to transfer electricity from Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan across the borders. The electricity import schemes in the meantime are strife with political problems given CA countries' own water and electricity crisis.

A more important challenge is that such a grand economic strategy fails to consider political impediments, both in Afghanistan and around it. In CA, transport and transit issues have long been the subject of politics, not just economics, due to geopolitical considerations. No technocratic project can escape that reality, less so when it is introduced by one external power as an economic solution to failed political and military intervention in Afghanistan. The political question of long-term stability in Afghanistan is also a factor that cannot be neglected. The TAPI pipeline project has been under planning since the 1990s but insecurity in Afghanistan has scared away donors that have the capital to complete the project. Even though projects make economic sense, the New Silk Road would not likely reach its destination unless the structural political issues are solved.

It came therefore as no surprise that the New Silk Road Initiative saw objections during the Istanbul Meeting and did not feature as such in the Final Communiqué. China, Russia and Iran preferred to see regionally initiated bilateral projects not coordinated from outside. Pakistan came out strongly opposed to regional programs. The Uzbeks refused to sign the final declaration. For sceptics, the New Silk Road may have been perceived as a way to challenge the dominant position of China and Russia in CA and to gain direct access to the vast mineral resources of the region through communication links that bypass Russia and Iran. In any case, geopolitics trumped economic considerations, and CA countries, even if they stood to gain from the concrete projects, could not but stand by and let the dominant powers (Russia, China, Iran and Pakistan) voice the critique.

### **The Artificial Heart of Asia**

If the New Silk Road vision failed to get full buy-in from regional countries, so did the parallel political Afghan-Turkish initiative, backed by major Western donors, of the 'Heart of Asia confidence-building measures' proposal that was supposed to improve region-wide security prospects. The 'Heart of Asia' was not supposed to be just an appellation for a large conglomeration of the 14 states (Afghanistan, the five CA republics, Iran, Pakistan, India, Russia, China, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates). It was also supposed to be a new security paradigm for the region. The Afghan government wanted to obtain a binding non-interference agreement that would include a mechanism to verify commitments. The USA and the EU wanted to use the OSCE model to suggest a new confidence-building mechanism.

During the 2011 Istanbul Meeting, however, Pakistani, Iranian, Russian and some CA delegates expressed reservations concerning the establishment of any security apparatus or new regional organizations, which from their point of view would duplicate the work of at least ten other existing organizations. Instead, they wanted broad principles for cooperation. CA states pointed to the fact that there were several mechanisms and trilateral or bilateral forums already available that could be utilized or strengthened for the same purpose. During the Kabul Meeting of the International Contact Group for Afghanistan in the lead up to Istanbul, they had also supported the alternative draft statement of principles for regional cooperation that Russia had tabled. What these countries would have wanted instead was a document that outlined principles to promote Afghanistan's stability in line with the UN Charter. In essence, they were interested in reviving the 2002 Kabul Declaration on Good-Neighbourly Relations, which set out the principles including non-interference in each other's internal affairs and respect for Afghanistan's territorial integrity. The problem with the Kabul Declaration, however, was that there were no built-in verification mechanisms.

The Final Communiqué of the Istanbul Meeting, entitled the 'Istanbul Process on Regional Security Cooperation for a Secure and Stable Afghanistan' turned out to be a watered down Declaration that did not propose any new confidence building mechanisms, and in that sense was similar to the original 2002 Kabul Declaration. It did not have any reference to the New Silk Road initiative, and referred to "follow-up steps" (instead of mechanisms) to institutionalize meetings of senior officials from the Heart of Asia countries. Although agreements were reached to continue regular follow-up meetings and come up with a concept paper, in reality the Declaration came up with neither binding agreements nor a verification regime.

In essence, Western (and Turkish) efforts at forging consensus by regional countries for the future of Afghanistan came short of realization. Regional countries proved unwilling to collaborate with the terms dictated, preferring to give prominence to the UN after 2014. In the final analysis, that failure was perhaps due to three major structural impediments:

The first problem was related to the order of the peace process: From regional partners' points of views, the USA had already begun negotiations with the Taliban without consulting with the region and, failing to get results, had tried to get concessions for non-interference from regional countries. Even former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger criticized the order when he told a panel discussion at the Woodrow Wilson International Centre for Scholars in November 2011 that the USA should talk to Afghanistan's neighbours before the Taliban and any negotiations with the Taliban should be in the framework of multilateral regional negotiations.<sup>135</sup> It wasn't only the late opening up to the region that was problematic, but also the fact that it came at the heels of failed negotiations within Afghanistan. This explains the comments of Maleeha Lodhi, Special Advisor to Pakistan's Jang Group/Geo (media) and a former Envoy to the USA and UK, who wrote in *The News* that the Istanbul Conference made a "curious reversal of the order of business necessary to establish peace and security. Progress in the process of reconciliation with the insurgency ought to have preceded declarations of support and cooperation by regional states."<sup>136</sup> The CA countries in this respect also shared Iran's view that stability needs to come through reconciliation between different factions within Afghanistan, and not just talk with the Taliban. Instead, Western partners tried to get regional buy-in with an economic incentive when it was already too late (as the region had to be consulted from the beginning) and at the same time too early (as they had

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135 Mackenzie Weinger, "Henry Kissinger: Talk To Afghan Neighbors", *Politico*, 11/1/11  
<http://www.Politico.Com/News/Stories/1111/67384.Html>

136 Maleeha Lodhi, "Istanbul : Search For Consensus," *The News*, Tuesday November 1, 2011  
<http://www.thenews.com.pk/todaysprintdetail.aspx?ID=75428&Cat=9>

failed so far to reach a peace deal with insurgents within).

Second, even though, in principle, economic incentives embodied in the New Silk Road were to the benefit of all countries, Western partners tried to add on to it the configuration of a new security paradigm in the region. It was a politically risky proposal to begin with, and as the dissenting delegates pointed out in Istanbul, regional security is best handled by the countries of the region, while extra-regional powers could only act as facilitators; not initiators. The CA countries, for example, despite their enthusiasm for the New Silk Road, cautiously responded to the plans for the various political mechanisms and consultation groups that had been proposed in the lead up to the Istanbul meeting. Prompted by Russia, they remained wary of the US attempts to cast Western powers, NATO and the EU as the lead actors of a new regional security architecture in South and Central Asia. Instead, they preferred to work through the UN or through existing mechanisms, including tripartite ones (such as the Iran–Afghanistan–Tajikistan) or quadripartite ones (Afghanistan–Pakistan–Russia–Tajikistan). They also shared Russia’s view that states of the region don’t need new agreements to improve cooperation, as they are already cooperating through existing regional institutions. Russia, China and some CA countries thus hoped that the SCO would take a more prominent role in Afghanistan.

Third was the conceptual problem of trying to forge a Heart of Asia region in the first place out of South and Central Asia, bringing together countries from distinct regions that each have their own core security dynamics and rivalries. The conceptualization of Afghanistan as a Heart may have been indeed what Thomas Ruttig called “full of romantic but unrealistic Orientalism.”<sup>137</sup> It may have made sense from an economic point of view and from the perspective of the interests of USA and NATO in Afghanistan. But it failed to recognize the existence of three distinctly different regions around Afghanistan, each with its own dynamic not necessarily related to what happens in Afghanistan. A case in point is that much of what Pakistan objected to was related to its discomfort about sharing benefits with India. CA countries were also curbing their enthusiasm for full support to the USA in consideration of their deference to Russia and China who provide for their security and economic guarantees. The failure of Uzbekistan to sign the final declaration may also have been as much a signal of the core of the security dynamic within the CA RSC: its rivalry with Kazakhstan over benefits from regional projects.

Although Afghanistan is currently centre stage in world politics, the security concerns of the CA countries are broader than what happens in Afghanistan – as is the case with most of the others in the immediate neighbourhood. Trans-border threats do represent an area of concern, and are likely to intensify after 2014, but the security dynamics within CA and with the global powers interested in it trump concerns for Afghanistan. Their strategy is therefore to continue to politically and militarily insulate themselves from Afghanistan, while at the same time try to reap economic benefits from the international Coalition operations there by allowing their territories to be used for transit.

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137 Ruttig, 2011.

# Conclusion

For Central Asian countries, emerging discord among neighbours about the future of Afghanistan points to their own need for negotiating balance between closer integration with South Asia, as the US administration may want it, or being part of Eurasia, as the Russians and Chinese would have it. What this means is that the CA RSC, at this stage, is poised to develop its identity as part of a periphery zone of the arc of instability or as an integral part of an emerging geopolitical and geo-economic Eurasian super-complex. The best choice that the CA RSC has is to insulate itself and try to solve its own security dynamics within. Unless prospects for cooperation within are improved, the risk of absorption into one or another remains high.

Politically, all CA countries agree that common cross-border threats require regional cooperation and coordination. Regional cooperation also makes economic sense, by cutting costs, pooling resources and providing complementarities. However, competition and insulation characterize the region more than cooperation and integration. There are two reasons for this:

Internally within the CA RSC, there is a deep lack of trust between states, based on various factors, not the least of which are the inequality of power and the grossly skewed distribution of strength and capabilities: Three of the states are strong in terms of regime stability and control, economic growth, military might and international standing. Their relation is marked by rivalry. The remaining two are states weak in terms of economic problems, vulnerability to internal instability, economic problems, border violations, etc. The CA RSC may be asymmetrical in terms of distribution of power, but all the countries depend on each other for their security, given the existence of common threats to their individual regime stabilities. This mutual dependency has not forged a common regional security community or a space for economic integration, however, as countries fear being absorbed by regional hegemons both within and external to the CA RSC.

A second reason, related to factors outside the RSC, is the existence of more geo-political incentives pulling the countries to interact bilaterally with external actors. As a result, the potential of the region for economic cooperation is seriously hampered by geo-political and geo-economic interest-based competition among global and regional powers.

With these two tendencies, the CA RSC, even if solid and durable, consists of states whose relationships can be characterized by centrifugal rather than centripetal tendencies. With the existing centrifugal forces at work, coupled with the overall fear of domination and loss of sovereignty, the CA RSC has distinct security dynamics but is unlikely to become organized under a single, multifunctional umbrella security organization. CA countries already belong to a number of overlapping institutions that support regional development, economic cooperation, and security dialogue, but the efficiency of these institutions is undermined by the general fear of domination of its hesitant and non-committal CA member states. The institutions in the making are also weakened by competition among major powers, each backing the structure of regional cooperation in which they enjoy dominance and influence. This leaves an ambiguous room for manoeuvre – both narrow and broad – for the CA countries: Narrow as they do not have much of a say in the major institutional structures and the dynamics between them individually, but broad at the same time, given that the competition increases options for balancing between them. In the longer term, while increased confidence and trust between the countries themselves may facilitate the creation of a functional CA-based organization, the fear of being dominated by external

powers, and internal hegemons, inhibits the formation of such a structure within the CA RSC.<sup>138</sup> In the absence of a larger strategic and institutional approach, regional cooperation in some specific areas – such as counter-terrorism and counter-narcotics – is more likely than in others.

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<sup>138</sup> Niklas L.P. Swanström, "The Prospects for Multilateral Conflict Prevention and Regional Cooperation in Central Asia", *Central Asian Survey*, Vol. 23, No. 1, March, 2004, pp. 41–53.



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# Central Asia and Afghanistan: Insulation on the Silk Road, Between Eurasia and the Heart of Asia

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In the lead-up to the Bonn II Conference in 2011, the USA and Coalition partners had broadened their ‘regional approach’ to peace in Afghanistan from an initial narrow focus on the AfPak region, to a wider ‘Heart of Asia’ concept which cast Afghanistan as the political and economic hub of a conglomeration of regional countries. The new approach was based on two assumptions: First, that potential insecurity instigated by the destructive behaviour of non-state actors necessitated new collective security arrangements for all neighbouring countries; and second, that the

stabilization of Afghanistan would herald positive externalities and economic dividends, which the US administration envisioned as a New Silk Road. Yet, the ‘Heart of Asia’ concept had two conceptual limitations in addition to a number of political impediments. First, it fundamentally underestimated the potential for non-cooperation among states, even if they shared common concerns for dangers emanating from non-state actors. Second, by assuming that interests merged for cooperative security in the region, the vision failed to recognize genuine security dynamics within

sub-regions and how Afghanistan is surrounded by three Regional Security Complexes (RSCs), each with its own security dynamic.

This third paper in a series of four is devoted to Central Asia as one of these RSCs. The author argues that the Central Asian states’ (lack of) involvement with Afghanistan is reflected specifically by this RSC’s internal rivalry and common need to balance external actors. While CA countries are concerned about insecurities stemming from Afghanistan, their main security problems lie elsewhere.

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