

Security in the Caucasus and Central Asia

Unstable neighbourhood. Afghanistan in a Central Asian context

Summary



This is a summary of a seminar conducted by Eurasia Forum on 30 November 2012.

It was the last seminar in a series of three on the topic Security in the Caucasus and Central Asia.

Participants:

Börje Almqvist, Deputy Chairman, Swedish Committee for Afghanistan (SCA)

Michael Fredholm, Researcher, Stockholm International Program for Central Asian Studies (SIPCAS)

Henrik Hallgren, Chairman, Eurasia Forum (moderator)

Afghanistan as a part of Central Asia

The issue of Afghanistan's future is at the top of the international agenda. To Sweden, as an example, it is important not only because of the country's military presence, but because Parliament recently agreed on committing more than 900 million Euros of support over a period of ten years starting in 2015. This means there will be a long-term commitment.

Since President Barack Obama announced the withdrawal of US troops for 2014, the discussion about the future of Afghanistan in the region has gained momentum. Pakistan's importance, both as a strategic ally of the international forces, but also as a silent supporter of the Taliban movement, is well-known. The rest of the neighbourhood, however, has often been ignored. Iran, a country with traditionally strong influence in Afghanistan, is rarely included in discussions due to the international isolation of the current regime. The countries to the north, earlier a part of the Russian empire and later the bridgehead for the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, are seldom taken into consideration, even though they are now independent states with their own agendas and their own problems. Because of the recent transport difficulties through Pakistan, the countries have gained some importance for the international forces as part of the so-called Northern Distribution Network (NDN). The United States has also tried to promote a concept termed the New Silk Road with the purpose of tying the Central Asian countries together, making Afghanistan a regional trading hub.

Afghanistan possesses large mineral deposits, which due to the security situation have so far been exploited only hesitantly. If these are to contribute to a transformation of today's drug-dependent economy, not only the security situation has to improve. Since Afghanistan is landlocked, the neighbouring countries must present safe transport routes instead of risking becoming a destabilising factor. Beyond the immediate neighbourhood, it is also likely that the country once again will be the centre of conflicting great power interests.

All of the Central Asian countries to the north, with the exception of Kyrgyzstan, are ruled by increasingly despotic rulers, who have often tended to strengthen their own position at the expense of the neighbours. Relations between the countries today leave much to be desired, periodically even verging on open conflict. Already today, however, there is significant exchange between Afghanistan and its neighbours, unfortunately largely centred around narcotics and contraband goods. Narcotics production and trade are today assumed to constitute a significant share of the economy in Afghanistan, as well as in Tajikistan and south Kyrgyzstan.

There are also fears that the conflict in Afghanistan could spill over the borders. The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), as an example, was founded in Uzbekistan, but later found refuge in Pakistan and took part in the fight in Afghanistan alongside the Taliban and internationally listed terrorist groups. There are also recurring reports about incidents in Tajikistan, where armed separatists have been aided by Afghan fighters.

Still, there is a tendency in the international community, both when it comes to the military venture and the plans for a New Silk Road, not to treat these states as independent actors in the region. Plans for a gas pipeline from Turkmenistan through Afghanistan to Pakistan and India (TAPI) have so far remained on the drawing board, while Uzbekistan runs the only railway in Afghanistan, from the border to Mazar-e Sharif, largely as support for the international forces. In summary, there is great potential for exchange between Afghanistan and its neighbours, something which is also a precondition for a positive development in Afghanistan, but its realisation is dependent as much on maintained security as on improved relations between the countries.

One region, many peoples

The country today known as Afghanistan has been overrun by invading armies and been the route of peaceful migration over many centuries and has received influences from the northern steppes, from the Persian lands to the west and India to the south. Since today's Afghanistan became independent from the Persian empire in the early 18th c. and up until today, its rulers have almost without exception been ethnic Pashtuns. The Taliban as well as the government of Hamid Karzai are dominated by Pashtuns, but Afghanistan is composed of many ethnic groups, almost all of them also inhabiting neighbouring countries.

A map of the region's ethnic groups clearly shows how ethnically integrated Afghanistan is in its Central Asian context.

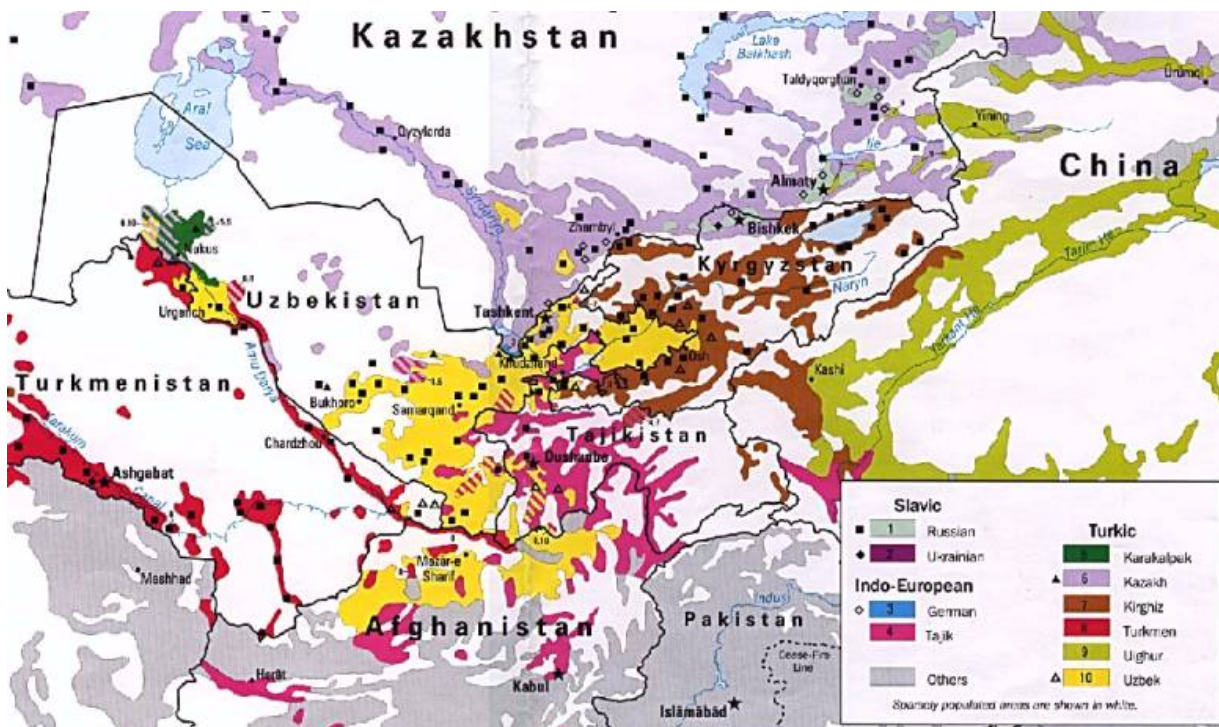


Illustration 1: Ethnic groups of Central Asia. Source: www.lib.utexas.edu

A brief history since the Soviet invasion

Börje Almqvist begins his overview of the modern Afghan history by underlining that initially the fight against the communist regime and the Soviet occupation had broad popular support. But as the war dragged on, it became obvious to Afghans that certain *mujahideen* groups grew increasingly powerful with international support. Hitherto unknown leaders in exile received support in particular by the USA, Saudi Arabia and Iran.

When the Soviet forces withdrew in 1989, so did support for these fighting groups, which instead began funding their activities among other things by forced taxation of the population and drug trade. As the large financial support from Russia stopped - according to Almqvist at times constituting around 300 million per month and substantially larger than the US and Saudi contributions combined - the days of the Russian-supported Najibullah regime were counted. The war against the communist regime was over, but Kabul was reduced to ruins and the earlier *mujahideen* often transformed into

bandits.

As a reaction to this turmoil, a new movement from the southern parts of the country rapidly gained ground in the mid-1990s. They became known as Taliban and were from an early date supported by Pakistan in its ambitions to maintain control over Afghanistan. The Taliban were often welcomed in the southern and eastern parts of the country, but when they expanded their control outside the Pashtun core areas, they came up against heavy resistance. The earlier rivals Ahmad Shah Massoud, ethnic Tajik, and Abdul Rashid Dostum, Uzbek, united with Hazara militias and also some Pashtuns in the so-called Northern Alliance.

The various groupings receive support from abroad, also after the fall of the Taliban. The Hazara (and therefore Shia) dominated Hezb-e Wahdat, nowadays split into several groupings, is supported by Iran. Dostum has repeatedly received support from Turkey, but he also has less transparent links to Uzbekistan, a country with interests in northern Afghanistan - not always in line with the government in Kabul. The Afghan Turkmens on the other hand have not seen corresponding support from Turkmenistan, whose governments favoured good relations with Kabul, both under the Taliban and Karzai.

Development scenarios after 2014

The uncertainty about developments after the planned international military withdrawal in 2014 also makes Afghanistan's relations within the region unpredictable. Almqvist sketches five possible scenarios:

1. *A durable victory for the government in Kabul and their allies.* A prerequisite for this is that Pakistan ceases its active support for the Taliban and that the government succeeds in creating sufficient legitimacy in the entire country. There is still a risk that uneven resource distribution between ethnic groups creates a breeding ground for military resistance.
2. *Continued stalemate.* Fights erupt periodically with the southern and eastern parts of the country mainly under Taliban control. This assumes that the security forces of the government, possibly with the aid of autonomous militias in the north, can fend off a Taliban invasion.
3. *Peace agreement between Kabul and the Taliban.* For this to happen, unity must be maintained between the various local Taliban groupings. An agreement of this kind could raise new resistance grounded in the Taliban's radical interpretation of Islamic law.
4. *Full-scale civil war.* If the government in Kabul increasingly loses control of developments and of its own security forces, the result in the north could once again turn into confrontation between Taliban forces and ethnically-based militias, while different warlords fight over resources, drug trade in particular, in the rest of the country.
5. *Taliban takeover of most of the country, including Kabul.* A military victory for the Taliban probably requires external support (from Pakistan). However, the result could still be ethnically-based fighting in the cities and continued resistance in the north.

Under the more peaceful scenarios #1, 3 and 5, Almqvist assumes that trade within the region will increase, especially transit from East Asia via Pakistan and Iran. China would expand raw materials-based investment in the country. Scenario #1 could possibly enable increased north-bound trade. Under Taliban rule, however, relations with the northern neighbours will hardly see any improvement, except for with Turkmenistan. Under stable Taliban control, the long-awaited TAPI pipeline from Turkmenistan to Pakistan and India may become a reality.

Relations between Afghanistan and its northern neighbours

Generally speaking, political relations and legal trade are poorly developed between the countries of Central Asia. *Michael Fredholm* gives an overview of the exchange and the strategies of the northern Central Asian states towards Afghanistan, with particular focus on Afghanistan's neighbours Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan.

Turkmenistan, a country with sparse population and a long land border with Afghanistan, has very limited official trade with its south-eastern neighbour. It is however one of the transit routes for narcotics to Russia and Western Europe. Official policy, founded under eccentric first president Saparmurat Niyazov Turkmenbashi, has neutrality as one of its cornerstones, which has meant a reluctance to engage in any kind of lasting alliances, be it with the neighbours, Russia or the US/NATO. A second fundamental policy goal is to secure the extraction and export of natural gas, which is completely essential to the country's economy. There were already in the 1990s plans for a pipeline to Pakistan and possibly India in order to lessen dependence on Russia as for gas transit. According to Fredholm, this meant a support for Pakistan and contacts with Kabul even under Taliban rule, which makes Turkmenistan different from the other countries in the region. Official interest in Afghanistan has, however, decreased since a gas pipeline to China opened in 2009. Support for the ethnic Turkmens on the Afghan side of the border has often remained mere sympathetic declarations.

Uzbekistan is, after Afghanistan, the most populous country in Central Asia, with ambitions to play a role as regional leader. The border with Afghanistan is short and relatively easy to control compared to the more complex border with Tajikistan, a country with which Uzbekistan has recurring controversies. In comparison with its neighbours, Uzbekistan has substantial military power. The economy is based on an insufficiently reformed model rooted in command economy, which means that trade with the neighbours is tightly controlled and under-performing compared to its potential. Official trade with Afghanistan is also small, but there is export of energy and the Uzbek state railways are responsible for running Afghanistan's only proper railway line from the border to Mazar-e Sharif. Despite cultural and dialectal differences, economic exchange is primarily conducted directly with the areas in the north controlled by ethnic Uzbeks, something that requires a balancing act with the government in Kabul.

Tajikistan, the poorest country in the former Soviet space, has little industry and negligible official trade with Afghanistan, but it is an important transit country for narcotics and contraband goods. The numerous Tajiks in Afghanistan have substantial cross-border contacts and Tajikistan officially strives for good relations with Afghanistan, which is especially important in light of its poor relations with its other neighbours. Like Afghanistan, the country also has a recent history of conflict. In the 1990s a bloody civil war was fought between religiously and regionally based groupings and the post-Soviet government in Dushanbe. The conflict is not definitively resolved and infiltration by Afghan fighters has occurred in Tajikistan. Even though a party rooted in Islam is permitted in Tajikistan, the government, like its neighbours in north Central Asia, has little acceptance for any deviation from the officially sanctioned religious practice.

Narcotics and conflict overspill or stability and trade exchange?

Probably the most widely discussed question when it comes to Afghanistan's future in the region is if the protracted conflict will spread to the neighbouring countries. It is a fact that the power vacuum in Afghanistan and western Pakistan attracted some of the more radical element from the northern states. Particularly important is the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), which has as its goal a Muslim Caliphate in the whole of Central Asia. It found refuge with the Taliban from the repressive regime in Uzbekistan and cooperates with al-Qaeda. The IMU has limited popular support in north

Central Asia, but alien interpretations of Islam are gaining ground and in areas affected by poverty and high unemployment in particular, there is a potential recruitment base also for more radical movements. This is of particular concern in Tajikistan, as Michael Fredholm points out. According to Almqvist, the Taliban would probably not attempt to export their ideology even if they were to return to power, but they might again give refuge to militant Islamists. The question risks resurfacing if the authoritarian government in any of the countries should falter, while at the same time the foreign presence is diminishing in Afghanistan.

Conversely, one has to ask whether the neighbouring countries risk becoming a destabilising factor for the development in Afghanistan. While Pakistan will continue to support the Taliban to maintain its influence, there is currently no interest for continuing open conflict in Afghanistan. However, Uzbekistan in particular probably prefers *status quo* to a strong and stable Afghanistan, which according to the current zero sum logic would be a competitor for water and investments. The risks for Afghanistan, should one of the authoritarian regimes be replaced by an internal power struggle or (less likely) by a government rooted in Islam, are harder to predict.

A problem with several consequences in the region is that various groupings in Afghanistan, but also in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, have become dependent on the narcotics industry to maintain their power base. The US and the EU as well as Russia share an interest in strangling supply, but as long as demand for opiates does not decrease drastically (through campaigns or competition from other substances) and alternative, profitable income sources in the region are lacking, this factor has to be continuously reckoned with.

But as we have seen, there is also a large, untapped potential for increased economic and cultural exchange throughout Central Asia, where Afghanistan can hopefully become a natural part. However, in addition to the requirement that the government in Kabul manages to obtain legitimacy across the country - and is accepted by Pakistan - the realisation of this potential also depends on improved relations between the governments in north Central Asia. Great power interests in the region can either play a constructive role in this context by engaging in transnational projects, or serve to sustain particularist interests by fuelling competition for foreign investment.

Contact

Please contact Eurasia Forum for more information, cooperation in Central Asia and the Caucasus or about further project ideas putting Afghanistan in its Central Asian context.

E-mail: info@forumeurasien.org

<http://www.forumeurasien.org/index.htm>

Phone: +46 (0)70 417 6789

<https://www.facebook.com/forumeurasien>