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## IIPER SPECIAL REPORT:

# CHINA AND CENTRAL ASIA AFTER AFGHANISTAN'S 'KABULIZATION'

**By Gordon M. Hahn**

*Senior Associate, Russia and Eurasia Program,  
Center for Strategic and International Studies*

### **Introduction**

The conclusion of Afghanistan's 'Kabul process' or 'Afghanization' will be pivotal both for the national security and economic interests of the People's Republic of China. With the withdrawal of Western forces from Afghanistan and the West's likely declining political and economic involvement in the region will almost certainly mean declining stability in Afghanistan and perhaps even the Taliban's return to power if all else remains as it is. Either outcome, but especially the latter, will result in greater Islamist and/or jihadist activity and political instability in Central Asia. In turn, greater instability in Central Asia could drastically impinge on key Chinese national security and economic interests in its troubled, western Muslim-dominated province, the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Republic (XUAR). Therefore, China is likely to play a more active role in Afghanistan and Central (and South) Asia in support of its security and economic interests. This report addresses the implications of the Western withdrawal for Chinese security and economic interests as they relate to Central Asia.

## Afghan Stability and the Western Troop Withdrawal

Kabul is unlikely to be capable of sustaining stability after the Western troop withdrawals. As we are seeing in Iraq, withdrawal will lead to increased internecine violence involving ethnic, Islamic, Islamist, and jihadist groups, including AQ. Although the civil war in Syria explains part of the uptick in Iraqi violence, much of it is internally driven. Afghanistan is likely to play out in the same manner. The argument for sustainable stability is based largely on the number of troops, both Afghan army and police, under the Afghan government. Unfortunately, the reliability of those troops once they face the Taliban and AQ one-on-one is dubious, reflected in the already frequent ‘green-on-blue’ violence by Afghan trainees against their Western mentors. The Afghan Taliban’s recent willingness to negotiate with Kabul and foster an image of flexibility and accommodation are likely a way to reduce ISAF and Afghan government military efforts and vigilance as the Taliban begins preparing its post-withdrawal offensive.

Already the Kabul government possesses limited sovereignty over the country with large portions remaining under Talib control. Looking at the five preconditions for stability laid down by Zhao Huasheng in a 2012 Center for Strategic and International Studies paper, the present report finds that Kabul is ill-equipped to meet them.<sup>1</sup> Massive and endemic corruption and lack of economic and institutional infrastructure in most of the countryside make the first precondition, effective governance, unlikely in the short- to mid-term. The second precondition, national reconciliation, hinges largely on the will of the Taliban to come to terms and, in particular, its willingness to help Kabul expel AQ from the country – an unlikely prospect. Third is internal solidarity, which is likely to be confounded by ethnic differences, for example, between the ethnic Uzbeks and Tajiks in the north and the Pashtuns in the south which are also likely to further confound national reconciliation, with the former demanding decentralized government and even administrative autonomy from Pashtun-controlled Kabul. The fourth, international aid, is likely to decline as the West and Muslim world becomes distracted by other, seemingly greater crises in Syria and across the Levant and Persian Gulf region, where an ummah-wide Sunni-Shiite war looms. The fifth, economic improvement, which will depend greatly on meeting the four previous preconditions is extremely unlikely in any significant way that might reach a critical mass for reducing resource scarcity and its political consequences. Thus, the most likely scenario is protracted civil war and eventually even the Taliban’s seizure of power, and the country could break up, *de facto* or *de jure*, leaving Talib in power in one of a rump southern portion of Afghanistan.

## Central Asia after Withdrawal: A Political Destabilization Risk Assessment

Destabilization and *de facto* or *de jure* states in the predominantly Tajik and Uzbek northern provinces would have unsettling security implications for bordering states in Central Asia like Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and the less viable state of Tajikistan, including: an influx of refugees, cross-border fighting, and Tajik and Uzbek Afghan pleas for the intervention of their coethnics across the border. Already, each of the Central Asian regimes, with the possible exception of Turkmenistan, suffers from several challenges, which if mismanaged can lead to an existential threat to the regime and, in the cases of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, even the state’s territorial integrity – that is, to failed states.

We know of little secular political, ethnic, tribal, or religious instability in totalitarian Turkmenistan. The strong state and regime has changed little from Soviet times beyond ideology and national (as opposed to ‘all-Union’) control of natural gas exports and profits, which stabilize the regime. Therefore, Turkmenistan remains largely outside this report’s analytical purview.

Uzbekistan, which lacks a border with China, is Central Asia’s pivotal state; as goes Uzbekistan, so will go the rest of the region in all likelihood. Except for Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan is the region’s most viable state and stable economy. However, the regime’s harsh authoritarian nature, falling short of totalitarianism, remains vulnerable to destabilization, especially if and when the succession of 75-year old

<sup>1</sup> Zhao Huasheng, *China and Afghanistan: Interests, Stances, and Perspectives* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, March 2012), p. 5.

President Islam Karimov moves to center stage. The country also has communalist vulnerabilities, both ethnic and religious. Interethnic conflict between Uzbeks and Tajiks in Uzbekistan could seriously destabilize the country, would most certainly spread to Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan through the Ferghana Valley and the conduit of co-ethnics in southern Kyrgyzstan and northwestern Tajikistan, and could provide a political opening for Islamist and jihadist groups targeting Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. Uzbekistan is penetrated by the largely non-violent Islamist group Hizb ut-Tahrir Islami (HTI) which is presenting a growing challenge to the country's official Hanafi Sunnis and Sufis. Despite the calm in recent years, Uzbekistan remains under constant threat of the return from the Afghanistan-Pakistan theatre (AfPak) of the now Waziristan-based predominantly Uzbek jihadist group the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and its offshoot group the Islamic Jihadi Union (IJU) discussed below.

Taking the Central Asian states that border China, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are the region's weakest; each at risk of becoming failed states due to weak capacity, interethnic conflict, and separatism. Both lack the natural resource base of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan and must rely on remittances from émigré workers to Russia and other regional states in order to buttress the homeland's economy. In addition, both are at risk of destabilization by jihadi elements that might be able to parlay inter-ethnic tensions and poverty into greater recruitment. Like Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan are under threat from the HTI, IMU, and IJU. In 2011 predominantly Sunni Hanafi and Sufi Tajikistan witnessed an outbreak of significant jihadi violence connected to the IMU and perhaps the IJU.

In an August 2012 regionalist postscript to 2011's jihadist outbreak, Dushanbe's sovereignty was challenged in its southern region of Gorno-Badakhshan bordering both China and the far eastern Afghan salient that in turn also borders China. Gorno-Badakhshan's religiously Shiite Ismaili ethnic Pamirs demonstrated in the thousands in the central square of the region's capitol, Khorog, and succeeded in blocking the further deployment of Tajik special forces sent to the region to hunt down remnants of the IMU/IJU militants. The demonstrators demanded that Dushanbe not only honor the terms of an earlier truce agreed with armed criminal groups in the region a month earlier and withdraw government forces but also fulfill the truce's condition that Gorno-Badakhshan's governor be dismissed.

Gorno-Badakhshan lies on the narcotics smuggling route from Afghanistan to Central Asia, and the IMU has had a long history of drug smuggling and using smuggling routes to cover its movements. Therefore, IMU and IJU at a minimum can use Dushanbe's limited sovereignty for migration and supply and at a maximum can make common cause with Pamiri separatism in the region. One saving grace is that the IMU's (and IJU's) Sunnis are not so likely to make cause with the Shiite Pamiris' separatist-oriented elements, though China and other regional powers would best not discount out of hand significant cooperation between the two. The rise of concerted Pamiri separatism could also give rise to separatism among Tajikistan's more than one million Uzbeks, which in turn could effect Uzbek minorities in Kyrgyzstan.

Kyrgyzstan has achieved some tentative instability since the 2010 'second tulip' revolution, the adoption of a constitutional parliamentary system, and presidential and parliamentary elections. It is the only Central Asian state that claim to have a democratic regime, a weak one albeit. However, the weakness of Kyrgyzstan's democracy and other fundamentals places the country in the category of a weak if not failing state, like Tajikistan. Kyrgyzstan has structural problems related to a weak economy, high poverty rates, and Third World infrastructure. Citizens are often limited to several hours of electricity per day. Also like Tajikistan, the country is plagued by interethnic tensions, which remain high between the Kyrgyz-dominated north and Uzbek-dominated south bordering the Ferghana Valley, which has always served as an incubator of Islamic radicalism and independence. Kyrgyzstan has already experienced three bouts of Kyrgyz-Uzbek violence since the collapse of the USSR. The most recent in June 2010 left hundreds dead and 100,000 displaced. Such interethnic tensions and any minority out-group's alienation from the mainstream in Kyrgyzstan or, for that matter, anywhere else in Central Asia can lead to political and/or religious radicalization helping the Islamists' and jihadists' recruiting efforts.

Kazakhstan is the most stable with a relatively capacious state supported by robust exports and

substantial industrial base, regime legitimacy under the careful leadership of President Nursultan Nazarbayev, and limited inter-ethnic and religious extremism challenges. However, Kazakhstan has seen the persistent presence of HTI, and in 2011 the first major terrorist operations carried out by a jihadi group, Jund al-Khalifat (JaK), but the former has been well-contained and the latter represents an edisodic threat at present. Nevertheless, the rise of HTI and jihadi extremism in the Central Asian country with the longest border with China should raise concerns, especially in light of the upcoming political test of succession to the country's aging president. Nursultan Nazarbayev's capable if soft authoritarian leadership has been the foundation of Kazakh stability. Therefore, the emergence of these destabilizing factors, as the succession to the 73-year old leader appears over the horizon, slightly raises the political risk level higher than has been the case ever since the Soviet collapse.

Different mixes of ethnic conflict, Islamist and jihadist threats, and potential succession crises, give the Central Asian states, with the possible of exceptions of energy-rich Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, a metastability – that is a tentative stability easily shaken by any one of the noted vulnerabilities. Any instability, in turn, can play into the hands of Islamist and jihadist forces from the region seeking to establish themselves more firmly or return from exile in the AfPak theatre. In this way, Islamist and/or jihadist forces can pose an existential threat to one or more of the Central Asian regimes and states.

At the same time, Central Asia and China's neighboring Muslim-populated XUAR are of vital importance for China's continued economic development and growth, which depend heavily on continued, indeed greater energy supplies. China relies on both its XUAR and Central Asia for energy, in particular oil and gas, as well as transit from other energy suppliers like Russia and Turkmenistan. The XUAR holds a third of China's estimated oil and gas reserves and 40 percent of its coal reserves, and oil and gas typically account for a third of the XUAR's production. Although China's imports of oil are highly diversified, with less than 10 percent coming from Central Asia, in particular Kazakhstan, natural gas exports from Central Asia are reaching half of China's gas consumption and rely heavily on the Central Asia-China Gas Pipeline bringing Turkmenistan natural gas through Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan and two smaller Kazakhstani pipelines. All of these imports come to the XUAR. Moreover, the XUAR's economy is heavily dependent on trade with Central Asia, with 30 percent of its GDP comprised of trade with, and over half of its exports going to Kazakhstan alone. The ethnic Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Uighur and, to a lesser extent, Dungan and Han Chinese that straddle China's borders with Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan especially facilitate this trade. However, Central Asia is also a conduit for China's Islamist/jihadist threat.

### **The Islamist/Jihadist Threat in Central Asia**

Three groups – the IMU, IJU, and more recently Jund al-Khalifat (JK) – constitute the main jihadi threats to Central Asia with the support of Al Qa`ida, the Taliban, and other jihadi organizations. The threat is limited in that each of these Central Asian groups consists of not more than a few hundred fighters at most, some of whom are from regions outside Central Asia (Russia, Turkey, AfPak and Arab countries) and would be of limited use in organizing jihadism in Central Asia. However, as 9/11 and other attacks have shown, a handful of capable and well-supported jihadists can inflict catastrophic casualties and damage.

#### *The IMU*

The IMU emerged from the Ferghana Valley in the late Soviet period under the leadership of Tahir Yuldash(ov) and Juma Namangani. In the late Soviet period it established a religious, social, and political presence in the region openly challenging communist rule and then Uzbek CP First Secretary Islam Karimov. Its members received fighting experience during the Tajikistan civil war, trained in Taliban-ruled Afghanistan's AQ-run training camps, and returned beto a crackdown on the IMU, whose leaders and fighters then returned to Afghanistan where they renewed training and joined AQ and Taliban forces in fighting the U.S.-led invasion after 9/11. The Afghan Taliban's defeat by Western armies in 2001 forced the IMU to relocate to Pakistan's largely ungoverned FATA areas, in particular Waziristan, where the IMU split between those who wanted to focus on a return to Central Asia and those who sought to support AQ's global jihadi efforts including but not

limited to the jihad against the U.S.-installed democratic experiment in Kabul. The latter group became the genesis for the Islamic Jihad Union (IJU). The IMU retains ties to former local United Tajik Opposition (UTO) commanders in Tajikistan's 1992-97 civil war who remain in the region and are intertwined with the narcotics trafficking. IMU and perhaps IJU militants organized a jihadist jailbreak and a series of subsequent attacks on, and skirmishes with Tajik forces in 2011 until the leading amirs were killed in late 2011 and early 2012.

The IMU's de-territorialization, globalization (see below), and long exile in AfPak has diminished its connection Uzbeks and Uzbekistan. It is now reportedly dominated numerically by non-Uzbeks. Indeed, when the IMU's amir Abu Usman Adil was killed in a U.S. drone strike in North Waziristan in April 2012, its new amir became Adil's naib (deputy), Usman Ghazi, who is reported to be a 40-year old non-Uzbek. The IMU communicates using the IJU-affiliated website [www.sodiqar.com](http://www.sodiqar.com).

#### *The IJU*

The IJU has outpaced its parent organization, the IMU, in recent years. It is based out of the Mir Ali region and the U.S. has designated it a Specially Designated Global Terrorist Organization. In 2012 jihadi websites circulated a photograph showing a meeting between of IJU amir Abdullah Fatih and high-ranking AQ leader Abu Yahya al-Libi. The IJU also maintains close ties with leading AQ amir Abu Kasha al Iraqi and North Waziristan Pakistan Taliban commander Hafiz Gul Bahadar, who controls the Datta Khel region. Its fighters come from Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Turkey, Azerbaijan, Russia, Pakistan, and even Germany. The IMU, IJU, and the Kazakhstani IJU splinter group 'Jund al-Khalifat' are ready to return the Uzbekistan and Central Asia when possible but continue to undertake jihadi operations against Western forces in Afghanistan and against Pakistani forces in the FATA.

In August 2011, for example, three IJU fighters were killed in a U.S. drone strike in Pakistan. The IJU has claimed responsibility for numerous attacks in Pakistan and Afghanistan, including a March 2008 suicide attack against a U.S. military post purportedly carried out by a German-born Turk. The IJU also claimed responsibility for the July 2004 suicide bombings of the U.S. and Israeli embassies in Tashkent and a May 2009 attack in Uzbekistan.

Both the IMU and IJU have developed operations in Europe (Germany) and the U.S., recruiting both Germans and Americans. In 2012 an Uzbek named Ulugbek Kodirov, who claimed he was acting on behalf of the IMU, was convicted to a minimum 15 years in prison in Alabama for plotting to shoot President Barack Obama during the 2012 presidential election campaign. In May 2013 an Uzbekistan national, Fazliddin Kurbanov, was arrested in the U.S. city of Boise, Idaho for providing material support to the IMU and possession of an illegal explosive device.

The IJU has recruited 'German Taliban,' who have carried out attacks in both Afghanistan and Pakistan. In April 2009, Turkish security forces detained IJU-tied extremists, finding weapons in the process. A 2009 IJU video showed 'German Taliban villages' in Waziristan, training at camps and military operations. German IJU member Eric Breininger, who was wanted by German authorities for planning terrorist attacks in Germany, was killed along with three Uzbeks in an operation targeting a Pakistani military outpost in North Waziristan on 28 April 2010. Americans have also joined the IJU in recent years. Two, Abu Ibrahim al Amriki and Sayfullah al-Amriki were featured in propaganda video released a year ago. In January 2012, an ethnic Uzbek Jamshid Muhtorov was arrested in the U.S. for rendering material support to the IJU. In February 2012, the U.S. placed IJU member Mevlut Kar, of German and Turkish citizenship, to the list of Specially Designated Global Terrorists. Kar plotted to attack American military personnel and civilians at Germany's Ramstein Air Base and Frankfurt International Airport in 2007.

#### *Jund al-Khalifat*

Jund al-Khalifat (JK) is a Kazakhstani IJU splinter group or sub-group also based in Waziristan. Initially, it may have first emerged as the Ansar al-Din ('Ansaru-d-din') group or AD of self-declared Kazakhstani mujahedin. AD posted its first declaration of the website *Hunafa.com* of the CE's Ingushetiya network in November 2010. AD may still exist, based in Aqtobe, but it has not claimed responsibility for a single attack either in Kazakhstan or AfPak. Jihadi terrorism seemed to have been sparked most immediately in

March 2011 when the jihadi sheikh, Abul-Mundhir Al-Shinkiti, issued a fatwa posted on the same website asserting the legality attacking police and carrying forth jihad in Kazakhstan even though the Muslims there are weak and small in number. Shinkiti is Mauritanian by nationality and is a member of the Shariah Committee of the jihadi website ‘Minbar al-Tawhid w-al-Jihad’ run by the leading jihadi philosopher, Sheikh Abu Muhammad Asem al-Maqdisi, a main sponsor of the CE. Two months later Kazakhstan suffered its first wave of jihadi terrorism, including two small-casualty suicide bombings (on May 17<sup>th</sup> in Aktobe and on 24<sup>th</sup> in the capitol Astana), and a series of jihadi attacks and related violent incidents ensued through out the year and into 2012. The JK issued statements claiming of responsibility for the suicide bombings as well as some of the subsequent attacks, but has not been heard from since mid-2012.

However, there are some 200-300 Kazakhstani militants in AfPak. Many receive financial support from JK supporters in Kazakhstan. Thus, in October 2012 a Kazkhstani court convicted Aidos Kusanov for transferring 380,000 tenge (approximately \$2,500) to JK in Pakistan through AD. Moreover, the JK may be trying to follow IMU and IJU practice by establishing international connections and capabilities. Thus, the Tunisian-born JK amir Moez Garsallaoui had connections to compatriot Mohammed Merah, who killed three Jews and four French paratroopers in France in March 2012.

Although the threat posed by these jihadi groups has not been very robust in Central Asia over the last decade, there are signs of growing jihadi activity in Central Asia emanating from the AfPak theatre even before the Western pullout (see Table 1 below). These operations have

**TABLE 1.** The Number of Terrorist/Insurgent Attacks Other Jihadi-Related Violent Incidents and Their Resulting Casualties Carried Out in Central Asia from 1 January 2004 to 1 January 2013 (Number of Attacks/Killed/Wounded).

Country/Year	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	Total
Uzbekistan	10/19/63	0	0	0	0	2/2/6	0	2/0/0	0	14/21/69
Tajikistan	1/0/1	1/0/4	3/2/0	2/1/0	3/0/1	5/0/8	15/67/37	8/25/2	2/17/0	40/112/53
Kyrgyzstan	0	2/0/0	1/5/2	1/1/0	0	2/1/0	3(?)/?/?	3/3/0	0	11/10/2
Kazakhstan	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	15/26/13	8/9/4	23/35/17
Turkmenistan*	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
<b>Total</b>	11/19/64	3/0/4	4/7/2	3/2/0	3/0/1	9/3/14	18/67/37	28/54/15	10/26/4	88/178/141

\*There is no reliable data on jihadi violence in Turkmenistan.

been tied to the IMU and IJU in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan and the JK in Kazakhstan. As also can be gleaned from Table 1, the area of operations by the IMU, IJU, and JK expanded to encompass all of Central Asia in 2011-12, with the exception of Turkmenistan, but including Kazakhstan for the first time. The February 28, 2012 attack at a market in Yecheng near China’s border with Tajikistan signifies the threat of cross-border infection. The Kazkah and Kyrgyz populations that straddle the Chinese-Kazakh and Chinese-Kyrgyz borders of the XUAR underscore the point.

A significant Afghan destabilization or the Taliban’s return to power would very likely allow AQ and allied Central Asian groups based in the AfPak region, in particular in North and South Waziristan, to expand operations north into Central Asia. In order to expand into Central Asia, AQ would use the IMU, IJU, JaK and other smaller groups which have been based in AfPak over the last decade.

*The Waziristan Incubator, the IMT, AQ and its Affiliates and Allies*

The ethnic Uighur-Chinese-dominated (East) Turkestan Islamic Party TIP currently consists of several hundred fighters at most and is led by amir Sheikh Abdul Aziz. During their many years of exile in AfPak, AQ, the Taliban, the IMU, IJU and now the JaK have developed closing working relations between themselves and the ethnically Uighur-dominated and increasingly jihadist Xinjiang Autonomus Republic-focused separatist group, the (East) Turkestan Islamic Party (TIP), also based in Waziristan. Thus, by virtue of its long exile in

AfPak and Waziristan, the TIP has become an ally of AQ which along with the Pakistan Taliban hosts training camps in the Mir Ali area. One or two of the TIP's leaders and served or perhaps still serve on AQ's ruling Shura Majlis. One was TIP amir Abdul Shakur (Shakoor), who was reportedly killed in a US drone strike in AfPak in 2012. He reportedly took over command of all of AQ's foreign forces in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas in April 2011 after Saif al-Adel departed from the region. The TIP receives military training from AQ and perhaps the IMU, IJU, and Pakistani Taliban for operations in AfPak and perhaps the XUAR. It also receives theo-ideological training from AQ. The late AQ religious scholar Khalid bin Abdul Rahman al-Husainan visited Xinjiang promoting jihad among the Uyghur Muslims. This year the TIP released a posthumous video of Husainan promoting jihad to Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang.

In addition to its close ties to AQ, the TIP has developed close ties with Central Asia's IMU and IJU while in Waziristan. Late amir Shakur was a close associate of the IMU's founder Tahir Yuldas(ov), who like Shakur was killed in a U.S. drone strike in 2010. Through the IJU and IMU, the TIP makes contacts with mujahedin from across Eurasia writ large. A 15 July 2013 video from the IJU's media wing, Badr at-Tawheed, featured a mujahed noting that one day he is with a Pastun, an Uzbek, and a Russian and on the next day with a Tatar and Russian. Moreover, in March 2013 a former officer and expert of Uzbek law enforcement told Uzbek media that IMU forces are returning to Central Asia from the AfPak region, citing instability in the Ferghana Valley and along the Kyrgyz and Uzbek borders and recent arrests of IMU fighters in Tajikistan as evidence. He emphasized that the IMU was strengthening its ties to Dagestani, Chechen and Uighur mujahedin.

More recently, the TIP appears to have developed ties not only to groups operating in the AfPak theatre but also to global jihadi allies of AQ farther afield such as the Caucasus Emirate (CE) mujahedin based in Russia's North Caucasus. The CE has been involved in several failed foreign plots in Europe and Azerbaijan and inspired several more, including the April 15, 2013 Boston Marathon bombing in the U.S. In October 2012 the TIP's present amir, Sheikh Abdul Aziz, sent a twenty-minute video-greeting to CE amir Doku 'Abu Usman' Umarov. (The TIP's ally, the IJU, did the same in March 2011.) The TIP might also have developed ties to the Waziristan-based Bulgar Jamaat (BJ), consisting of ethnic Tatar mujahedin self-exiled from Tatarstan and perhaps elsewhere in Russia. The Tatars' historical ties and possible social networks in Central Asia and the CE's ties to the Kazakh JaK could provide other avenues for training and logistical support in Central Asia. The breadth of the TIP's global connections is reflected by the fact that its statements and videos are now released in five languages: Uighur, Turkic, Arabic, Russian, and English.

Waziristan-based groups from Central Asia and elsewhere have been involved in global jihadi operations far from the AfPak front in India and Europe. The IMU's and IJU's attempted and successful attacks in Germany, the 2008 Lashkar-e-Taiba attacks in Mumbai, India, and the failed Pakistan Taliban-tied attack in Times Square, New York on 1 May 2010. Therefore, there is no need to think that China will be off the radar screen of AQ, its affiliates and allies in the region. Indeed, increased AQ, Taliban, IJU and IMU activity in Afghanistan's north and northeast provinces indicates that the TIP has or will have a staging point from which to infiltrate China. AQ and Taliban forces carried out a major operation in Afghan Badakhshan Province just a week ago that killed 85 and wounded more than 100 Afghan troops and police and led to the capture of 26. The IJU and IMU are typically most active in Pakistan's FATA and Afghanistan's northern provinces. The narrator in video from the IJU's media wing 'Badr at-Tawheed' noted that its fighters were routinely dispatched to the northern provinces of Badakhshan, Kunduz, and Balkh (Mazar-e-Sharif) along with some central and southern provinces and emphasized that Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and northern Afghanistan are "strategically a very important region for the Muslims of Central Asia."

It should be noted that Uighur fighters are likely to travel with Uzbek, Caucasus, Tatar or other fellow-jihadis to Syria and further both their training and global jihadi networking, as one Chinese security official claimed in July has already happened after the arrest in the XUAR of Memeti Aili, an Uighur who allegedly fought in Syria. This would also put TIP Uighurs in greater contact with the CE and other global jihadist groups, because most mujahedin in Syria from abroad fight under the 'Army and Emigrants and Helpers' (Jeish Muhajirin va Ansar) or JMA which is led by amir Umar al-Shishani, an ethnic Chechen from Chechnya. The

CE has appointed a permanent liaison to the JMA. Such Uighurs returning from Syria either to AfPak or China would do so with greater fighting capacity and even material resources. The abovementioned December 2011 Badr at-Tawheed video included a mujahed saying that some IJU fighters in Pakistan were interested in acquiring chemical weapons.

The return of the IMU, IJU, JaK or other Waziristan-tied jihadi groups to Central Asia in force would provide the TIP with a network and logistical infrastructure for penetration into Xinjiang in order to carry out attacks on Chinese soil. This would be important for the TIP, since its goal is the creation of an independent and Islamist East Turkistan that would be part of a Central Asian emirate or caliphate that in turn would be part of the global caliphate the jihadists hope to create.

*The TIP Threat to China and the XUAR*

To the extent the XUAR continues to experience significant ethno-political unrest, the region and perhaps China at large will be increasingly vulnerable to TIP attacks after the Afghan withdrawal. The riots in Urumqi in July 2009 and July 2011 suggest continuing ethno-political and religious contention. Even before completion of the Afghan withdrawal, the TIP appears to have been able to capitalize on this contention, penetrate China and the XUAR, and carry out attacks. Since its emergence in 2007, the TIP has claimed responsibility for a series of bombings that preceded the 2008 Summer Olympic Games in Beijing. In August 2009, the TIP's amir Abdul Haq al-Turkistani threatened to attack Chinese embassies as well as targets inside China. The TIP claimed responsibility for the July 18 and July 30-31, 2011 series of bomb and knife attacks in the XUAR's western cities of Hotan and Kashgar (just 200 miles from Central Asia's traditional hotbed, the Ferghana Valley) that killed four and killed more than 10 civilians and 8 attackers and wounded more than 40 others, respectively. The likelihood that the TIP was involved in the July 30-31, 2011 attacks comes from the September 2011 video in which the TIP amir claims responsibility shows one of the 10 attackers, likely the group's amir. The TIP also took responsibility for the April 2013 attack - also in Kashgar - that killed 15 community workers and police officers. All this may be the tip of a significantly larger iceberg. Keeping in mind that security officials often tend to exaggerate their own effectiveness, it is worth mentioning that in May 2013 Chinese security officials claimed that they have been able to prevent 96 percent of planned terrorist attacks. The TIP has not claimed responsibility for the killing of 35 at the hands of 16 knife-wielding attackers in June of this year in XUAR's township of Lukqun.

More recently, with the runup to the Afghan withdrawal, the TIP has shown increased operational and propaganda activity in the AfPak area likely in preparation for stepping up operations in AfPak and/or XUAR supported by AQ affiliates and allies once withdrawal is complete. In spring and summer of this year the TIP released videos showing the military training of woman and children. It was unclear from the videotapes whether the women and/or children were being trained for suicide operations; AQ began using female suicide bombers in AfPak around 2010, following the lead of the CE and its predecessor organization, the Chechen Republic of Ichkeriya. Moreover, the TIP has been consistently increasing its propaganda video output in the last three years, with 2013's output doubling that of 2012, which in turn doubled output in 2011. In May of this year the TIP released two videotapes that seemed to claim responsibility for two separate two suicide bombings in Afghanistan. One of them was reported to have occurred in 2011, suggesting that the other may have been carried out more recently, perhaps this year given the timing of the videos' release.

The TIP's base in Waziristan has allowed it to develop a potent propaganda machine using videotapes like those mentioned above on various global jihadi websites and to reach out to other AQ allies and AQ affiliates. A good example of the IMT's more expansive jihadi outreach is IMT amir Abdul Aziz's October 2012 video message to Dokku 'Abu Usman' Umarov, the amir of the global jihadist organization based in Russia's North Caucasus, the Caucasus Emirate. If the IMT is pursuing a relationship with the North Caucasus-based Caucasus Emirate mujahedin, it is certainly partnering with Central Asian jihadi groups like the IMU, IJU, and JaK or others that are likely to occasionally emerge in the region for some time to come. Aziz's video suggests that the TIP is recovering from the loss of its long-time operative and recent amir Emeti Yakuf (aka 'Aibu Adubu Rehman' and 'Saifulah'), killed in a U.S. drone strike in August of last year along with Badruddin



Haqqani son of the Pakistan Taliban's amir Mehsud Haqqani. Given the global jihadi revolutionary alliance's greater geographical reach since the weakening of AQ central and the growth of AQ and AQ-like franchises creates a more favorable environment for the TIP to partner with other groups in order to extend its own capacity and reach, including the Central Asian-oriented groups, and eventually step up its infiltration and presence in China's XUAR.

A saving grace for China and the XUAR is that the TIP is not at the top of the agenda for AQ and other global jihad-oriented groups for two reasons. First, the TIP's Islamist-takfirist credentials are more suspect than all other groups in the global jihadi revolutionary alliance. Second, China is not seen as a leading perpetrator of anti-jihadism as the 'infidel' West and others like the Shiites and Russia are. Third, AQ and other jihadists are likely to be increasingly drawn westward rather than northeastward given the Sunni-Shiite civil war in Syria, the possibilities for jihadists in post-Morsi Egypt, and the general deteriorating situation across the Arab Muslim world. Nevertheless, China and the XUAR will likely remain a more attractive, if risky target for Uighur and Central Asian Islamists and jihadists. Finally, it remains unclear whether efforts by the TIP, IMU, IJU, JK, and CE to pool resources and exchange personnel to one extent or another is a sign of weakness and whether the chosen remedy could increase the TIP's capacity.

#### *The Islamist Threat to Central Asia and China*

The Islamist threat in Central Asia could actually pose a greater threat to both Central Asia's regimes and China's control over the XUAR in the long-term than does the jihadi threat. Its non-violent moderation, often effective underground recruiting and organizational, and occasional political flexibility in terms of forming opposition or revolutionary alliances lends Islamism greater appeal than extremist violent jihadism. HTI, which adheres to non-violent Islamic revolution, is the only real Islamist threat to China and Central Asia. Chinese authorities acknowledged HTI's presence in Xinjiang in 2008 and blamed the 2011 Hotan attacks on HTI.

However, HTI has focused most of its energy in Eurasia if not globally on Central Asia, with hundreds of arrests of alleged HTI members occurring annually across the region. In any revolutionary or pre-revolutionary situation in Central Asia, HTI likely would play a role. Indeed, HTI may pose a greater threat to the XUAR than do jihadist organizations, given the Uighurs' limited Islamization and limited radicalism, HTI's ability to maintain a low profile and organize for the long-term, and HTI's greater flexibility in terms of forming political alliances with non-Muslim groups. This gives HTI the opportunity to seize power as part of a revolutionary coalition and then parlay its position into a complete power, along the lines of the Muslim Brotherhood's rise to power in Egypt. The general consensus among experts is that for now the main threat from HTI emanates from the role it plays as an incubating precursor to jihadi terrorism, since a significant portion of members radicalize and join the jihadists over time.

China's neighbor of Kyrgyzstan has become a focus of HTI activities in Central Asia; something that should be of concern to PRC authorities. HTI is said by some analysts from the region to be 'occupying Kyrgyzstan' and to have as many as 20,000 and perhaps as many as 100,000 supporters. Its success lies in its entrance into the country in 1997 just as the population, both ethnic Uzbeks but especially Kyrgyz, underwent rapid Islamization and re-Islamization in the wake of the Soviet demise. Kyrgyz Islamic self-identification among the Kyrgyz nearly doubled reaching 97.5 percent. HTI's political Islam, along with official 'traditional' Islam and conservative reformist Islam (championed by the Kamalov family), is now one of three nearly equally influential Islamic forces competing for the minds and hearts of Kyrgyzstan's Muslims. HTI's goal is to penetrate into the government and official Islamic structures, recruit government officials and Islamic clergy, and parlay these gains into winning HTI mainstream status through removal of the party from the list of the illegal organizations. HTI in Kyrgyzstan and elsewhere also uses missionary or proselytization (*da'vat*) tactics in society and the provision of social services to the poor and others, for whom the resource-poor state is increasingly unable to provide. HTI is most powerful in the Ferghana Valley's eastern parts in Osh, Jalalbad, Kara Suu (a mere 130 kilometers from Kyrgyzstan's border with China and 300 from XUAR's capitol of Kashgar), and the village of Ak Terek near the Lake Issyk-Kol area in far northeastern Kyrgyzstan near the

Chinese border.

HTI also has a strong presence in Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Russia, despite the ban on the organization in all three countries as in Kyrgyzstan. In Russia, it has been able to operate openly and make cause with local Tatar nationalists in Tatarstan. This development reached a certain peak in 2012 and coincided with the first major terrorist attacks in which the republic's chief mufti and his top deputy were wounded and killed respectively, in two separate attacks in July 2012.

The presence of Tabligh Jamaat (TJ) in Central Asia and Russia, especially among the latter's Tatars has some implications, especially as the TJ is based in China's and the XUAR's neighboring Pakistan. Though not political or Islamist, the TJ is an incubator of fundamentalists. Given Islam's tendency to be all-encompassing and include things political, TJ members are in an antechamber of Islamism. Thus, to some extent the TJ's expansion in Central Asia or China would increase the potential for Islamism and jihadism in China.

In sum, Chinese analyst Yang Shu may be right in asserting that the "sky is not falling" with regard to China's Islamist/jihadi threat, but the sky certainly is darkening.<sup>2</sup>

### Potential Chinese Policy Responses

Historically, China has been least involved in Afghanistan's domestic politics among the country's six neighbors and Russia. This will have to change following the West's withdrawal. In lieu of military involvement, which China eschews, Beijing will be confined to political and economic means of directly influencing developments in South and Central Asia. Given the leadership gap created by the U.S. withdrawal, both Beijing and its strategic partner in the region, Russia, will need to provide new regional leadership in order to secure the region and protect their interests. However, limited Russian capacity and some lingering reluctance to get involved too deeply in Afghanistan will compel China to go beyond its present low profile and limited engagement on the Afghan issue.

#### *A More Robust Shanghai Cooperation Organization*

The XUAR's eight bordering countries are all members or observer members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the default international organization in the region for institutionalizing Sino-Russian leadership in regional security and economic development cooperation in Afghanistan and Central Asia. However, Mongolia, Pakistan, Afghanistan and India are observers only. With the Western withdrawal, China is likely to support full membership status for Afghanistan, which became a SCO observer in 2012 after its 2011 application.

Given Pakistan's central role in Afghanistan, China's already close relationship with Pakistan and Russia's increasingly close relations with Islamabad, the inclusion of Afghanistan will probably require Pakistan's full membership. In turn, the maintenance of some balance in SCO's and China's relations with Pakistan and India will require New Delhi's accession to full membership as well. This will include in SCO all seven neighbors of China and the XUAR who have Muslim challenges that could impinge on stability in Afghanistan, Central Asian, and thus the XUAR and China. In this way, China would spread the burden and reduce its costs in securing Central (and South) Asia.

China also is likely to seek a strengthening of SCO's military capacity so that it can interdict key access points to the XUAR from Central Asian (and other SCO member) countries that might be used by the TIP and/or other Islamist militants. China might propose the formation of a SCO rapid reaction force to perform this function. Such a force could be formidable and of limited cost to Beijing given the 'value added' by forces that could be provided by new member-countries and perhaps the CSTO (see below). This force could be deployed to protect the oil and gas pipelines and trade routes to China running from Central and South Asia, such as Wahan corridor connects Xinjiang and Afghanistan and the Karakoram Highway connecting to Pakistan.

Additionally, the SCO likely will increase its investments in Central Asian and Afghan capacity-

<sup>2</sup> Yang Shu, "Sky Not Falling in Xinjiang after Hotan Attack," *Global Times*, 19 July 2011, 21:09, [www.globaltimes.cn/DesktopModules/DnnForge%20-%20NewsArticles/Print.aspx?tabid=99&tabmoduleid=94&articleId=666919&moduleId=405&PortalID=0](http://www.globaltimes.cn/DesktopModules/DnnForge%20-%20NewsArticles/Print.aspx?tabid=99&tabmoduleid=94&articleId=666919&moduleId=405&PortalID=0).

building by reviving the more robust training exercises of several years ago and perhaps open up permanent military, police, intelligence, and border patrol training centers for the Central Asian states and Afghanistan. Greater counter-terrorism intelligence-sharing might be institutionalized, perhaps through SCO's Regional Antiterrorist Structure (RATS) based in Tashkent. The SCO's original economic mission could be reinvigorated and focus on Central Asia's and Afghanistan's economic development.

#### *Containing the 'Great Game'*

In going beyond its present "low profile" and limited engagement on both the Afghan issue and Central Asia, Beijing's activity could spark suspicions in Moscow, which is always wary about the role of 'outside' powers in its self-declared sphere of influence across the entire post-Soviet space. To be sure, Beijing has an interest in limiting the influence of Russia and the U.S. in the region to some degree. However, it also has an interest in preventing failed states along its border, avoiding conflict with both Russia and the U.S., and ensuring their continued carrying of some of the Afghan/Central Asian burden. Beijing is likely, therefore, to avoid SCO-CSTO competition and instead secure SCO-CSTO cooperation towards stabilizing Central Asia. The CSTO's rapid reaction force could be a model and even a partner for the SCO rapid reaction force or a joint SCO-CSTO rapid reaction force.

It might be argued that Sino-Russian tensions or conflict in Central Asia are unlikely given their joint membership, indeed leadership of SCO. One only needs to see the growing tensions within NATO between Turkey and the U.S. and other European members over the Syrian and especially Egyptian crises to understand that such arrangements are not barriers to conflict.

In order to avert competition or conflict with the U.S. and the West, China might be open to a revival of the '6 + 2' format. The '6 + 2' could be used to step up coordination between the major powers and be the forum to discuss other forms of international cooperation in the region. In the longer term, this could open up a path to a SCO-CSTO-NATO partnership to further broaden then security burden and eliminate the potential for tensions and conflict with the U.S. over its military presence in Central Asia. Whether Washington and other Western capitols are now ready to partner with the CSTO and SCO remains is another question, but the more viable SCO-CSTO partnership can be another way to spread the burden while making the security infrastructure even more robust. A counter-option less inimical to Western interests would be Chinese efforts to convince the Central Asian states to terminate any basing agreements they have with the US and refrain from such arrangements in future.

#### *China, Central Asia, and South Asia*

Pakistani interests in Afghanistan, including support for the Taliban, could create tensions in the Sino-Pakistani relationship. Moreover, Islamabad's inability or unwillingness to bring order to its tribal areas has posed a security threat to China since the mid-1990s. The TIP's predecessor, the East Turkistan Islamic Movement or Party (ETIM), emerged in Pakistan and carried out attacks in China from there. The TIP is now doing the same. It has been US drone strikes that have killed TIP amirs in Pakistan's FATA, including Abdul Haq al-Turkistani in 2010 and Abdul Sharuk last year.

As one commentator observed, without China, "Pakistan would be lonely in a hostile world." This gives China great leverage for persuading Islamabad to act; leverage the U.S. has lacked. Thus, Beijing could play the 'India card' in order to pressure Pakistan to undertake real efforts to clean out FATA of jihadi groups. Full SCO membership for India or the threat of such might be one card Beijing might play to impress upon Pakistan Beijing's seriousness with regard to the TIP threat and, if compensated for by Indian cooperation, make Islamabad less vital in China's South Asia calculus. At a minimum, a policy of more equidistance between New Delhi and Islamabad would provide Beijing with more flexibility vis-à-vis Pakistan.

Another option for China would be to step up involvement with Pakistan to counter both the TIP threat and Pakistan's India problem. One Pakistan defense-related source claims "Pakistan would allow China to have

military bases or intelligence facilities in its tribal areas, though not necessarily publicly announced.”<sup>3</sup> A higher level of military involvement in South and Central Asia, perhaps through SCO, would not only give China greater ability to prevent anti-Chinese militants in the tribal areas from entering China, it would also facilitate greater Chinese and Pakistani capability to counter-balance against their regional rival, India. China’s “strike-hard” campaign to combat “imported” and homegrown terrorism in Xinjiang has already led to the deployment of some Chinese forces in remote areas of Pakistan-controlled Kashmir. This should be laying the necessary ground work for expanded security ties between China/SCO and Pakistan not only in combatting terrorism, but also in both filling the power vacuum in Afghanistan after the U.S./NATO withdrawal and counterbalancing India.

In sum, the Western withdrawal from Afghanistan will require China to establish a more robust diplomatic, economic, political, and military presence in both South and Central Asia unilaterally, with its partners in SCO, and potential partners in the CSTO and perhaps NATO.

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<sup>3</sup> “Xinjiang Insurgents and China-Pakistan Relations,” *Pakistan Defence*, 11 August 2012, [www.defence.pk/forums/world-affairs/201588-xinjiang-insurgents-china-pakistan-relations.html](http://www.defence.pk/forums/world-affairs/201588-xinjiang-insurgents-china-pakistan-relations.html).

## **IIPER ANNOUNCEMENTS**

**Dr. Gordon M. Hahn has concluded a contract with McFarland Publishers to publish his book *The ‘Caucasus Emirate’ Mujahedin: Global Jihadism in Russia’s North Caucasus and Beyond* in 2014.**

**Dr. Gordon M. Hahn has been appointed an Analyst and Advisory Board Member at the Geostrategic Forecasting Corporation, Chicago, Illinois.**

## **RELATED PUBLICATIONS, INTERVIEWS, AND LECTURES**

Gordon M. Hahn, *The Caucasus Emirate Comes to America: The Boston Marathon Bombing*, Geostrategic Forecasting Corporation White Paper, forthcoming in October 2013.

Gordon M. Hahn, *The Caucasus Emirate Threat to the Sochi Winter Olympic Games*, Geostrategic Forecasting Corporation White Paper, forthcoming in October 2013.

Gordon M. Hahn, “The Caucasus and Russia’s Syria Policy,” *The National Interest*, 26 September 2013, <http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/the-caucasus-russias-syria-policy-9132>.

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Gordon M. Hahn, “Putin’s Decay,” *The Moscow Times*, 11 July 2013, [www.themoscowtimes.com/opinion/article/putins-decay/483044.html](http://www.themoscowtimes.com/opinion/article/putins-decay/483044.html).

Gordon M. Hahn, “From the Caucasus to Boston: The Caucasus Emirate Mujahedin and the Boston Marathon Attack,” World Affairs Council of Monterey Bay, California, 24 June 2013.

Gordon M. Hahn, Panel Chair and Paper: “Russian Domestic Politics After Year One of Putin’s Third Term: Elite, Opposition, and Popular Support Base,” International Conference, Manfred Worner Foundation held at Cornivus University, Budapest, Hungary, 26-27 April 2013.

Gordon M. Hahn, “From the Caucasus to Boston and Beyond,” National Consortium on Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism, University of Maryland, 29 April 2013, <http://start.umd.edu/start/announcements/announcement.asp?id=527>.

## ABOUT IIPER

Islam, Islamism and Politics in Eurasia Report (IIPER) is a project of the Russia and Eurasia Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. It focuses on all politically-relevant issues involving or bearing on Islam, Islamism, and Jihadism in Russia and Eurasia writ large. All issues of IIPER are archived at <http://csis.org/program/russia-and-eurasia-program>.

IIPER is compiled, edited and, unless indicated otherwise, written by Dr. Gordon M. Hahn. Dr. Hahn is a Senior Associate (Non-Resident) in the Russia and Eurasia Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington, D.C., Analyst and Advisory Board Member at the Geostrategic Forecasting Corporation, Chicago, Illinois, and a Senior Researcher and Adjunct Professor at the Monterey Terrorism Research and Education Program (MonTREP), Monterey, California. He is also a Senior Researcher at the Center for Terrorism and Intelligence Studies (CETIS), Akribis Group and an Analyst and Consultant for Russia Other Points of View – Russia Media Watch, [www.russiaotherpointsofview.com](http://www.russiaotherpointsofview.com). He teaches courses on both politics and terrorism in Russia and Eurasia at MonTREP. Dr. Hahn is the author of two well-received books, *Russia's Islamic Threat* (Yale University Press, 2007), *Russia's Revolution From Above* (Transaction, 2002), and *The 'Caucasus Emirate' Mujahedin: Global Jihadism in Russia's North Caucasus and Beyond* (McFarland Publishers, forthcoming in 2014) as well as numerous articles on Russian, Eurasian and international politics.

IIPER welcomes submissions on any aspect of Islamic, Islamist, or Jihadist politics in Eurasia as well as financial contributions to support the project. For related inquiries or to request to be included on IIPER's mailing list, please contact:

Dr. Gordon M. Hahn

Tel: (831) 647-3535 Fax: (831) 647-6522

Email: [ghahn@miis.edu](mailto:ghahn@miis.edu) or [gordon-hahn@sbcglobal.net](mailto:gordon-hahn@sbcglobal.net)

