

Regional Dynamics and Strategic Concerns in South Asia

Central Asia's Role

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This background paper was prepared as part of a study of U.S. strategic concerns in South Asia and the regional dynamics and priorities that are likely to influence U.S. policy there between 2014 and 2026. It is one of 10 such papers covering the relevant internal dynamics, trends, relationships, and scenarios in China, Iran, the Gulf States, Central Asia, Russia, Turkey, Europe, India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. The final report, South Asia Regional Dynamics and Strategic Concerns: A Framework for U.S. Policy and Strategy in South Asia, 2014–2026, by Robert D. Lamb, Sadika Hameed, and Kathryn Mixon, is available at <http://c3.csis.org> and includes a framework on which the United States may base the development of policies and strategy in South Asia over the next 12 years.

Central Asian States' Relations with the United States

Relations between the United States and the five Central Asian countries are largely positive, notwithstanding tensions over the spotty political and human rights environment in some states. Much U.S.–Central Asian cooperation is connected to the war effort in Afghanistan, which the Central Asians are assisting with logistical support, infrastructure, and security cooperation. U.S. and Central Asian interests coincide in promoting stability in South Asia, from which the Central Asian states fear the spread of instability following the end of ISAF combat operations, and in preventing regional conflicts. U.S.–Central Asian interests also generally converge in maintaining a pluralistic geopolitical environment and preventing Russian or Chinese dominance of the region—though this is likely a higher priority for the Central Asians. Interests in the stability of South Asia and preventing the growth of extremism will continue to coincide over the coming decade. Other interests, particularly connected with the role of Russia and China, could diverge by 2026, especially if the Central Asian governments perceive the United States as either pushing too hard for democratization, or as abandoning the region after the withdrawal from Afghanistan.

Internal Trends and Dynamics

The major internal dynamics affecting Central Asia's influence and interests in South Asia are continued weak governance (including the potential for state failure at least in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan), entrenched criminality, and the spread of extremist ideologies, along with mistrust and low levels of interdependence among the five states. The impact of all these problems could be exacerbated by uncertainty surrounding the succession to long-time leaders. Both Kazakhstan's Nursultan Nazarbayev and Uzbekistan's Islam Karimov have been in power since before the Soviet collapse and neither has a clear successor. A transition in Uzbekistan, with its strong regional clans, widespread discontent, and rising extremism in the Ferghana Valley could be especially chaotic. Such chaos could provide an opening for groups like the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU)—currently based in South Asia—to reestablish a foothold in the country. Given the narrow, well-guarded border between Afghanistan and Uzbekistan,

militants would likely go through Kyrgyzstan or Tajikistan, as happened during major incursions in 1999 and 2000, spreading unrest more widely.

Moreover, much of Central Asia faces demographic shifts—growing youth populations lacking the Soviet-era education and values of their elders—coupled with shortages of water and other resources that could contribute to civil strife or cross-border conflict. A particular concern is the spread of Islamism among the youth population, much of it connected to transnational groups such as Hizb ut-Tahrir and South Asia-based Tablighi Jamaat, about whose activities Central Asian governments have limited information. To the extent these internal dynamics contribute to instability within Central Asia, governments in the region are likely to place a greater emphasis on preventing the spread of extremism, drugs, crime, and other problems from South Asia, rather than intensifying Central Asia–South Asia cooperation.

Key Influencers

All the Central Asian states save Kyrgyzstan have strongly centralized authoritarian governments that provide few opportunities for nonstate actors or public opinion to shape foreign policy, while Kyrgyzstan is a messy parliamentary democracy whose government is buffeted by competing factions and visions for the future. In the four authoritarian states, the president is the central figure in articulating the state's interests. As the Central Asian governments view South Asia largely through the lens of security—particularly the potential for extremism and instability in South Asia to undermine security in Central Asia—the military and internal security services also play an important role, though less in terms of setting high policy than as preferred implementers.

Because politics in the Central Asian countries is frequently about allocating rents to regionally based political “clans,” the economic interests of these groups also play a role in how interests and policy are defined.¹ Discussions of new infrastructure connecting Central and South Asia (such as power generation and transmission) are inevitably shaped by opportunities for politically influential figures and groups to profit from them. In much of Central Asia, corruption and criminality are deeply rooted, even in government institutions. Ties between criminal groups and border guard forces, for instance, facilitate smuggling (especially of narcotics from Afghanistan) and complicate efforts to pursue coherent policies.²

Militant groups, especially the IMU and its offshoots, have the capacity to indirectly affect the way the Central Asian states define and pursue their interests with regard to South Asia. Since the IMU and related groups have found refuge in South Asia (Pakistan's tribal areas and Afghanistan), their post-2014 evolution could shape the Central Asian governments' perceptions of cross-border security threats: a strengthened militant presence in Afghanistan and/or Pakistan would likely ensure the Central Asian states continue to view their relations with South Asia largely through the lens of

¹ See İdil Tunçer-Kilavuz, “Political and Social Networks in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan: ‘Clan,’ Region and Beyond,” *Central Asian Survey* 28, no 3 (2009): 323-334. Also Alisher Ilkhamov, “The Limits of Centralization: Regional Challenges in Uzbekistan,” in *The Transformation of Central Asia: States and Societies from Soviet Rule to Independence*, ed. Pauline Jones Luong (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004), pp. 159-81.

² UN Office of Drugs and Crime (UNODC), “Opiate Flows through Northern Afghanistan and Central Asia: A Threat Assessment,” May 2012, http://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/studies/Afghanistan_northern_route_2012_web.pdf.

national and regime security.³ A related factor is the relationship between some of the Central Asian governments and the ethnic Tajik, Uzbek, and Turkmen populations in Northern Afghanistan who, for a time, formed the backbone of the Northern Alliance. To the extent that the security situation in Afghanistan deteriorates after 2014, the Central Asia governments (particularly Uzbekistan's) will likely boost their engagement with these communities and their militias.

Regional Relations

Central Asian States' Relations with Afghanistan

The Central Asian states' most immediate concerns in Afghanistan include preventing a return to civil war after the withdrawal of ISAF forces and minimizing the potential for cross-border threats to their own stability. They have cooperated with one another, the United States, and Russia in managing the Northern Distribution Network, which has allowed ISAF to reduce dependence on supply lines through Pakistan and has provided an economic windfall to Central Asia. States in the region are eager to similarly benefit from "reverse transit," and some are also pressing to take ownership of equipment Washington does not want to pay to ship out.

Given the level of mistrust among the five Central Asian states, their ability to work together to encourage a successful Afghan transition is limited, despite the efforts of the international community. Moreover, general assessments in Central Asia of post-2014 Afghanistan are pessimistic. The region's states have consequently pursued uncoordinated approaches and maintain connections to various proxy groups in the North, despite efforts on the part of the international community to promote regional cooperation (e.g., the Istanbul Process, the Heart of Asia summits, etc.).

Despite their security concerns, the Central Asian states are also interested, in theory, in deepening their economic relations with South Asia by way of Afghanistan.⁴ International development assistance has helped build new infrastructure links between Central and South Asia, including power lines (about one-third of Afghanistan's electricity is imported from Uzbekistan) and railways (a line from the Uzbek border to Mazar-e Sharif that opened in 2011 connects Afghanistan to the outside world). The proposed TAPI (Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India) gas pipeline would, if built, bring Central Asian gas to the booming Indian market, but its success depends on overcoming significant doubts about funding and security. Efforts to expand electricity transmission, including via the internationally funded CASA-1000 project, have the potential to worsen relations. The Tajik government is seeking to build the massive Rogun dam to provide power for the project. Downstream Uzbekistan fears Rogun would damage its agricultural sector and has at times threatened force to prevent the dam's construction.⁵

³ Joshua Foust, *Post-Soviet Central Asian National Interests in Afghanistan* (New York: Century Foundation, 2010). Martha Brill Olcott, "Central Asian Republics," in *Is a Regional Strategy Viable in Afghanistan?*, ed. Ashley J. Tellis and Aroop Mukharji (Washington, DC: Carnegie, 2010), pp. 51-60.

⁴ Jeffrey Mankoff, *The United States and Central Asia after 2014* (Washington, DC: CSIS, January 2013), http://www.csis.org/files/publication/130122_Mankoff_U.S.CentralAsia_Web.pdf.

⁵ Tajikistan argues that the dam is necessary for the CASA-100 transmission scheme to operate. The World Bank (which is carrying out a feasibility study on Rogun) disputes this claim. On the World Bank's position, see World Bank, "Q&A with Saroj Jha, Regional Director for Central Asia, on the Rogun Assessment Studies," August 31, 2012, <http://www.worldbank.org/en/news/speech/2012/08/31/saroj-jha-q-and-a-rogun>. The Asian Development Bank (ADB) pulled out of the CASA-1000 project in June 2013, citing in part insufficient

Central Asian States' Relations with Pakistan

The Central Asian states are mainly concerned about the role Pakistan plays as an incubator for extremist groups. Relations were long strained because of Islamabad's pre-9/11 backing for the Taliban. Following the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, surviving elements of the IMU made their way to Pakistan, where many remain holed up in the tribal areas. During the Pakistani army's attempts to re-take control of the tribal belt in 2009, small numbers of IMU fighters attempted to make their way back into Uzbekistan; more recently, Tajikistan has expressed concern about the potential infiltration of fighters from Pakistan.⁶ Security cooperation between the Central Asian states and Pakistan has improved in recent years, but many Central Asians remain wary of Pakistan's double game with Islamist militants and support for non-violent Islamist groups such as Tablighi Jamaat that are banned in Central Asia. The Central Asian states' generally positive relations with India also limit prospects for cooperation with Pakistan as long as Indo-Pakistani ties remain poor.

The Central Asian states want to expand trade ties with Pakistan and develop new infrastructure. Turkmenistan would like to boost energy sales through the construction of the TAPI pipeline, while Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are growing markets for Pakistani goods. Pakistan in turn is interested in expanding its imports of Central Asian energy (hydroelectricity as well as gas). These economic ties ensure a common interest among the Central Asian states and Pakistan in having stability in and secure transit across Afghanistan. Nevertheless, Pakistan's hopes of becoming Central Asia's main artery to global commerce have been disappointed.⁷

Central Asian States' Relations with India

In the long run, the Central Asian states generally view India as an important economic partner that can help ameliorate their dependence on Russia and China. In the short-run, prospects for deeper economic cooperation are hampered by uncertainty regarding Afghanistan's post-2014 stability and by Indo-Pakistani tensions. More broadly, weak economic ties limit India's ability to counterbalance the influence of Russia and China in the region.

India would like to gain access to Central Asian oil and gas, but faces many obstacles. These include security risks for pipelines that would have to cross Afghanistan and Pakistan, as well as the greater availability of Chinese investment capital. The TAPI pipeline, which could meet up to 60 percent of India's gas demand, is a particular priority. While economic projections indicate that TAPI could turn a profit, international energy companies are wary of investing given the security challenges: Afghanistan's uncertain future, India-Pakistan tensions, and growing instability within Pakistan. Given these complexities, TAPI's timeframe remains uncertain; meanwhile, Chinese demand for Central Asian gas will grow, likely forcing TAPI to compete with additional Chinese-financed pipelines to East Asia.

On security issues, the priorities of Central Asia and India largely coincide, though many Central Asians regard India as punching below its weight in the region. Along with

generation capacity—in part bolstering Dushanbe's argument. See Payrav Chorshanbiyev, "ADB to pull out of CASA-1000 Project," *Asia Plus*, June 7, 2013, <http://news.tj/en/news/adb-pull-out-casa-1000-project>.

⁶ Dilafruz Nabiyeva, "Tajikistan moves to fend off IMU infiltration," *Central Asia Online*, February 4, 2013, http://www.centralasiaonline.com/en_GB/articles/caii/features/main/2013/02/04/feature-01.

⁷ Marlène Laruelle and Sebastien Peyrouse, *Globalizing Central Asia: Geopolitics and Challenges of Economic Development* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2013), pp. 102-3.

the Central Asian states, Delhi supported the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance, and has provided training for Central Asian security personnel. India is also purchases Russian military hardware produced in Central Asian factories.⁸ India's efforts to expand its influence in Afghanistan are not generally seen as threatening in Central Asia, although the resulting proxy conflict with Pakistan exacerbates instability inside Afghanistan.

India's opportunities in Central Asia are constrained by complex relations with the major external actors, Russia and China. Though Delhi spent \$70 million to modernize the Ayni airbase in Tajikistan, Russian opposition has prevented Indian aircraft from deploying at the base, which would give India a strategic toehold close to both Afghanistan and Kashmir.⁹ India's interest in acquiring a stake in Kazakhstan's oil sector was rebuffed even as Chinese investment was approved.¹⁰

Other Relationships

Central Asia–Russia

Russia remains the most important security actor in Central Asia, though its economic position is being rapidly overtaken by China. Russia is seeking to limit the Central Asian states' reorientation towards China (and, to a more limited extent, South Asia) by promoting regional re-integration through bodies like the Customs Union and CSTO. With the withdrawal of foreign forces from the region, Russia is looking to reinforce its own presence. It reached agreement with the governments of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to extend the deployment of Russian forces into the middle of the century, and has sought to improve the capabilities of the CSTO to address threats to regional security, including those coming from Afghanistan. Given Russia's large Muslim population (including millions of Central Asian migrants), Moscow regards extremism and instability in Central Asia as a direct threat to its security. Russian pressure played a role in blocking the deployment of Indian combat aircraft in Tajikistan. Like the Central Asian states, Russia has contacts among the non-Pashtun militia groups in Northern Afghanistan that it could revive should Afghanistan's transition appear to be failing.

Central Asia–China

China sees India in particular as a rival, and is wary of attempts to establish an Indian security presence in Central Asia. Otherwise, China works closely with the Central Asian governments to combat the "three evils" of terrorism, extremism, and separatism. Chinese investment in Central Asia has expanded rapidly, and Chinese capital is paying for the construction of new infrastructure such as roads, railways, and pipelines linking China to Central Asia and ultimately to markets in Europe and the Middle East. Apart from pressure on the Central Asian governments to crack down on Uyghur activism on their territory, Beijing has deliberately limited its political and security role in Central Asia, largely deferring to Moscow. That deference could, in theory, change if a more unstable Central Asia becomes a magnet for extremist groups/Uyghur nationalists targeting China. While Beijing needs stability on its Western border and sees economic

⁸ Ibid., pp. 97-101.

⁹ Balaji Chandramohan, "India relies on Ayni for its Central Asian presence," Universal New Wires, December 13, 2012, <http://www.universalnewswires.com/centralasia/tajikistan/viewstory.aspx?id=13319>. Some Indian engineers and technicians remain at the base, which Russia is also seeking to occupy.

¹⁰ "CNPC to take \$5bln stake in Kashagan oilfield," *Financial Times*, July 2, 2013.

opportunity in “marching West,” its economic and strategic focus lies to the East and South.¹¹

Central Asia–Turkey

Turkey’s efforts in the early 1990s to promote itself as a model and “big brother” to the Turkic states of Central Asia (i.e. all save Tajikistan) were de-railed by its limited resources, the resurgence of Russian power, and local opposition. More recently, Turkey has sought economic and cultural cooperation with Central Asia, along with limited efforts at promoting political reform and improving the functioning of security forces. It is also interested in accessing energy from Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan, though Russo-Iranian opposition has so far kept most of this oil and gas flowing elsewhere. Turkey’s concerns center on establishing itself as a regional broker and acting as a bridge to the West. At the same time, Turkey is hedging because of uncertainty about the West’s commitment to the wider region after 2014; Turkey recently became a “dialogue partner” of the SCO. Similarly, Turkish engagement in Afghanistan is heavily shaped by Ankara’s desire to promote its role in NATO and as an ally of the United States. With the United States and NATO pulling out, Turkey too is likely to downgrade its emphasis on Afghanistan post-2014, especially with the worsening conflict in Syria and a growing political crisis at home. Ankara does, however, have ties with the Turkic minorities in northern Afghanistan and, along with the Central Asian states, could seek to leverage these ties to contain the spread of instability after 2014. If Central Asia itself should become more unstable, Turkey is also likely to be a destination for many refugees.

Central Asia–Iran

Iran’s main interests Central Asia center on stemming the flow of narcotics from Afghanistan and expanding economic and political cooperation to limit the impact of Western sanctions. Iran is already an important transit route for Central Asian exports, and is likely to become more so in the future (especially if sanctions are relaxed). In Afghanistan, Iran’s major concerns are border security and counternarcotics efforts. The Shi’a clerical regime in Tehran was violently opposed to the Sunni extremist Taliban government, and remains wary of a post-2014 Taliban resurgence. Iran also has some concern for the fate of the Shi’a Hazaras in northern Afghanistan. As Iran would suffer from renewed instability in Afghanistan, it favors strengthening the current non-extremist government and promoting economic development. Given Iran’s worldwide strategic confrontation with the United States, Tehran also seeks to opportunistically expand its economic and political influence in both Afghanistan and Central Asia.

Conflict Scenarios

Scenario: Afghanistan Stability

Should the civil war in Afghanistan remain relatively stable or improve, concerns about cross-border threats to Central Asian stability are likely to diminish. Though obstacles to regional cooperation would remain serious, the Central Asian governments would have an opportunity to move away from the “securitization” of their mutual relations and relations with Afghanistan, potentially opening the way for greater regional economic integration. Given the depth of mistrust between the five Central Asian states, however, this opportunity is one most of them are likely to miss. By removing Afghanistan as a focal point for cooperation, an improvement of the security situation in Afghanistan

¹¹ Wang Jisi, “‘Marching Westwards’: The Rebalancing of China’s Geostrategy,” *International and Strategic Studies Report No. 73*, Peking University, October 7, 2012.

could actually worsen tensions within Central Asia over water, borders, energy, and other longstanding disputes.

At the same time, the Central Asian governments maintain an incentive to highlight cross-border threats in order to keep outside powers (mainly Russia and the United States) engaged. While U.S. focus on the region is set to diminish after 2014 in any case, Afghanistan's emergence from civil war would likely accelerate Washington's "pivot" or "rebalancing" away from the whole Greater Middle East, leading Central Asia to look more and more to Russia as the region's main security provider.

Scenario: Afghanistan Instability

A worsening of the Afghan civil war is likely to lead the Central Asian states to boost their efforts to insulate themselves from cross-border threats. Existing initiatives to secure Afghanistan–Central Asia borders would likely be strengthened, undermining internationally backed attempts to promote regional economic integration. The Central Asian governments, along with Russia, would also seek to renew and develop relationships with the non-Pashtun groups in northern Afghanistan, seeking to create a buffer against the spread of violence and extremism.

A chaotic Afghanistan would provide a more welcoming base of operations for the IMU and other Central Asian Islamist groups. Worsening violence in Afghanistan would thus reinforce the "securitization" of politics in Central Asia, undermining prospects for political reform within the region and limiting prospects for inter-state cooperation outside of narrowly defined counter-terrorism issues. It would further reinforce Central Asian wariness of Pakistan, especially if Islamabad is perceived as continuing its support for the Taliban and other Afghan Islamists.

Though the United States is reducing its footprint in and around Afghanistan, a worsening of the civil war is likely to lead the Central Asian states to push Washington and its ISAF partners for a more robust residual presence, while also seeking to acquire more weaponry and equipment for their own use. To the extent Washington resists such imprecations, the Central Asian states are likely to turn more and more to Russia as the only power capable of securing the region—unless the resumption of violence reaches a level that forces Washington to make the unlikely decision to maintain a significant, open-ended presence. With a reduced U.S. role, prospects for Central Asia–South Asia economic connections such as the TAPI pipeline and CASA-1000 electricity transmission project will likely fade.

Scenario: India-Pakistan Instability

Significant cross-border violence between India and Pakistan would represent an unwelcome complication for Central Asian states. Though economic and political links between Central and South Asia are limited, geographic proximity means that Central Asia is unlikely to be immune to escalating violence between India and Pakistan.

Even a major terrorist attack along the lines of the 2008 Mumbai raid is unlikely to have a significant impact on Central Asia, which would continue to regard Pakistan skeptically and perhaps seek to bolster counterterrorism cooperation with India. A conventional conflict between India and Pakistan (never mind one that escalates to a nuclear exchange) would, however, overshadow developments in Central Asia, which would in turn seek to insulate itself as much as possible from the consequences. Its ability to do so would depend on a number of variables, including the extent to which external actors like Russia and China stayed on the sidelines.

An Indo-Pakistani conflict would undermine—likely for good—U.S.-backed plans for Central-South Asian economic integration, making it impossible to build infrastructure across Pakistan to markets in India. Central Asia would then look even more to alternative outlets, including Russia, China, and perhaps Iran. India-Pakistan conflict would also presumably further de-stabilize Afghanistan, with both Delhi and Islamabad backing proxies in an effort to outflank one another to the north, leading to many of the outcomes discussed in the scenarios above.

Given that South Asia is more strategically significant than Central Asia for most major states, conflict there is likely to diminish the international community's (apart from Russia) bandwidth for dealing with Central Asia. The worse the conflict in South Asia is in terms of lethality, refugee flows, and the potential employment of nuclear weapons, the more Central Asia becomes an afterthought, regardless of how bad conditions in the region become.

Conclusions

Prospects for stability in Central Asia are more likely to be affected by developments in South Asia than vice versa. South Asia, especially Afghanistan, is the source of drugs and potential extremism that could undermine Central Asian stability over the period from 2014 to 2026. The biggest threats to Central Asian stability, however, are indigenous to the region: poor governance, state failure, demographic change, criminality, and rising extremist tides.

Central Asia can have a significant impact on South Asia only to the extent that the international community prioritizes, and funds, infrastructure projects designed to promote economic interdependence, such as the TAPI pipeline and the CASA-1000 electricity project. However, the high costs and political uncertainty surrounding these projects means that their odds are long. Instead, South Asia is likely to remain a niche partner for Central Asia, especially for states looking to reduce their dependence on Russia and China for access to global markets. Cross-border violence in South Asia would make even this limited degree of integration problematic.

About the Author

Jeffrey Mankoff is deputy director and fellow with the CSIS Russia and Eurasia Program and an adjunct professor of security studies at Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service. He is the author of Russian Foreign Policy: The Return of Great Power Politics and a frequent commentator on international security, Russian foreign policy, regional security in the Caucasus and Central Asia, ethnic conflict, and energy security. His work has appeared in the New York Times, Foreign Affairs, Foreign Policy, Boston Globe, National Interest, International Affairs, Current History, and other national and international publications. Before joining CSIS, he served as an adviser on U.S.-Russia relations at the U.S. Department of State as a Council on Foreign Relations International Affairs Fellow. From 2008–2010 he was associate director of International Security Studies at Yale University and an adjunct fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations. Dr. Mankoff has held academic fellowships at Harvard, Yale, and Moscow State Universities. He holds dual B.A.s (summa cum laude) in international studies and Russian from the University of Oklahoma and an M.A., M.Phil., and Ph.D. in diplomatic history from Yale.