

Central Asia and Post-2014 Afghanistan: A New Turn in Russia's Military Policy in Central Asia*

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As the NATO withdrawal proceeds in Afghanistan, both the Alliance and key members will encourage Central Asian states to assume more responsibility for providing their own security. But such a task is enormous for most Central Asian governments. Thus, they fear that they might be abandoned to Moscow, if not Beijing, or left on their own to face what they believe to be a mounting terrorist threat. This article examines the already visible military and strategic rivalry between Moscow and Washington for hegemony in Central Asia—mainly through support for weapon transfers, basing rights, and regional integration mechanisms in the security field.

Keywords: Central Asia, Russian Military Policy, Afghanistan, Silk Road, CSTO

Introduction

The 2012 NATO Summit in Chicago decided that more than 130,000 troops would leave Afghanistan by the end of December 2014. Coupled with the earlier announcement of the withdrawal by 2014, these most recent NATO and American decisions, signs of NATO and U.S. troop reductions, and the holding of negotiations with the Taliban, have introduced a new dynamic into the Central Asian equation. This dynamic has forced all the Central Asian states and their partners, including Russia, to reconsider their options, policies, and relationships with the United States and other players in the context of a severely diminished U.S. presence. At the same time, there has been increased discussion in various circles that the wars growing out of Syria and Afghanistan portend a new development or trend in contemporary conflict, to which Russia must adjust. All these developments highlight the potential for a significant modification in Russia's threat assessment and thinking about contemporary war as well as in its policies in Central Asia. President Putin and members of the Russian government have repeatedly expressed their alarm at future terrorist threats emanating from Afghanistan, their concern that the Afghan army cannot defend the country, thereby exposing Russia and Central Asia to terrorist incursions, and decried

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the allied failure to stop the Taliban, ISIL, and the drug trade. Putin called for a new, clear strategy in Central Asia and Afghanistan. He also urged the utilization of the full arsenal of preventive measures and the potential of enhanced protection of the Russian state borders, tightened migration policy, accelerated equipping of the CSTO's rapid reaction force with modern equipment, and advocated a stronger campaign to suppress drug trafficking. Then came intensified programs of economic, humanitarian, and military cooperation with neighbors to stabilize Central Asian states and presumably further their integration with Russia in trade, energy, economics, and culture. Cynics will argue that this program of action merely conceals a policy to integrate Central Asia and the Caucasus around Russia. But while these are among Russia's main objectives, nevertheless this threat assessment is real and well founded.

Central Asia and post-2014 Afghanistan: Russia's Dilemma

The U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan could generate multiple threats and problems for Central Asia. It entails not just bringing military forces back home, but also a sharp cut in associated military spending; for example, on the Northern Distribution Network (NDN) that supplies those forces and greatly benefits Central Asian businesses and governments, and all other forms of U.S. aid, military and non-military alike. While military assistance appears to have been increasing up until 2012, it has declined since then and other forms of aid are apparently declining. Indeed, funding for Afghanistan has already been cut.

Recently, clearly due to the fact that terrorist threats are growing, President Obama reversed the past U.S. policy and actually expanded the scope and size of the U.S. mission in Afghanistan.¹

Mr. Obama's order allows American forces to carry out missions against the Taliban and other militant groups threatening American troops or the Afghan government, a broader mission than the President described to the public earlier this year, according to several administration, military and congressional officials with knowledge of the decision. The new authorization also allows American jets, bombers and drones to support Afghan troops on combat missions.²

Whatever his reasons for doing so, he thereby explicitly corroborated the threat assessment held by Russia and most Central Asian states, except possibly Kazakhstan, that the prognosis for Afghanistan after the end of the Hamid Karzai regime is highly unstable and imminently dangerous.³ Indeed, even Afghanistan's President, Ashraf Ghani, believes the United States must "re-examine" the pullout of its forces.⁴

Inasmuch as the U.S. government now shares this threat assessment, its recent actions also represent, even if stated quietly, an admission of policy failure. But it also constitutes a *de facto*, albeit tacit, recognition that the negative assessment of Afghanistan's prospects that had been widely and long expressed by analysts in the United States, as well as by Russia and other Central Asian states, was on the mark.⁵ Russia sees the situation in Afghanistan not only as a threat but also as an opportunity to secure its interests because Russia is concerned about the Western military presence in the region, which it regards as interference in its neighborhood. The possibility of a worsening security situation in Afghanistan in the aftermath of the complete or

partial withdrawal of the International Security Assistance Forces (ISAF) post-2014 seems to have presented Russia with an opportunity to entrench its military dominance in Central Asia.⁶ Russia has been building up the CSTO, a security bloc made up of ex-Soviet states, as a means of bolstering security in Central Asia as a bulwark against Islamist extremists in Afghanistan who may set their sights on Central Asia.⁷ Russia first secured the extension of its military bases in Central Asia earlier in 2014 and now is offering large amounts of military hardware to Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, the two Central Asian countries that host Russian military bases and are members of the CSTO.⁸ He has also sought to improve ties with Uzbekistan. At the September 2014 SCO summit, Uzbekistan's President Islam Karimov met with Putin. Despite the ups and downs in Tashkent's relations with Moscow, Russia remains Uzbekistan's largest foreign trade partner. In 2013, bilateral trade turnover reached \$7.1 billion. This initiative may also have borne fruit. Surprisingly, during his 2014 SCO summit speech, Karimov appeared to break with previous Uzbek policy regarding a resolution to the Ukraine crisis by saying: "In any negotiations processes on the Ukrainian crisis, the age-old interests of Russia that have evolved historically throughout many centuries should also be taken into account. Ignoring these interests would be a serious oversight."⁹

Russia's weapons transfers to Central Asian countries signal a marked shift from the Kremlin's previous military thinking with regard to its partners in Central Asia. Previously, the Russian government preferred to keep Central Asian countries militarily weak by deliberately withholding weapons supplies in order to perpetuate their dependence on Russia for protection from outside aggression.

Russian decision-makers evidently now fear that a security vacuum emerging after the withdrawal could destabilize Central Asia and have a negative impact on Russia itself. Russian decision-makers highlight illegal drug abuse in Russia as one of the main problems stemming from Central Asia. Another threat highlighted by Moscow, though only a potential one, is the possible spillover of violence from Afghanistan to Central Asia.¹⁰ President Putin has recently expressed his belief that illegal immigration from Central Asia (and presumably legal migration as well) is a potential source of extremism and polls have been released allegedly showing that one-fifth of Tajik immigrants to Russia are susceptible to Islamic extremism.¹¹ Such talk and arguments only add to the preconceived notion that this area is bursting with terrorist potential even if the facts on the ground to date suggest otherwise. Moscow has hardly been shy about voicing its apprehensions about the future of Afghanistan and clearly sees potential future threats emanating from and in that country as one of the main drivers of its Central Asian policy and threats to Central Asian and Russian security. According to Russian views, the Taliban is already present and active in northern Tajikistan.¹² Specifically Chief of the General Staff, General Valery Gerasimov, reported to foreign defense attachés:

In light of the political decision adopted by the U.S. leadership to withdraw the contingent of American troops from Afghanistan by the end of 2014, we predict with a high degree of probability a significant deterioration in the situation in that country with the transfer of real control of particular regions to terrorist groupings. In the context of the severe deterioration in the situation in Iraq and Syria as well as the stepping up of the activities of the terrorist grouping ISIL, the possible removal of Afghanistan from the focus of attention by Western and other interested countries is capable of putting the security of the Central Asian region in jeopardy.¹³

Similarly, Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu stated that Russian and Tajik defense forces must be ready for any scenario, including the most negative one. Therefore, it is essential to bolster the combat potential of those forces and the 201-division base in Tajikistan.¹⁴ Russia's Presidential Representative in Afghanistan, Zamir Kabulov was even more explicit. He openly raised the possibility of so-called precautionary moves on the Russo-Kazakh border or the Caspian Sea or fighting the terrorists on the Amu Darya rather than on the Volga.¹⁵ This would mark a fundamental departure from Russia's policy to date, which as described below, really amounts to an attempt at deterrence and dissuasion of the terrorists but at the same time is more rhetorical than substantive.

However, it is not only concern about Afghanistan and the potential return of civil war that might spread into Central Asia or actually lead to a Taliban takeover that then exports terrorism and insurgency to Central Asia that drives Russian defense policy in Central Asia. In general, Russia perceives Central Asia as a fragile region vulnerable to all kinds of threats and therefore an area that Russia must stabilize, if need be by itself, although preferably with the local governments.¹⁶ Furthermore, Russia believes that it is incumbent upon itself to undertake this stabilization—for if it fails not only will terrorists, or worse still, Americans, make their presence felt in Central Asia; Russia will then have demonstrated its inability to play the part of a great power in its much-vaunted multipolar world.¹⁷ There is also an ever-present perception in the minds of Russian and local governments that there is a substantial domestic underground of Islamic extremists in Central Asia or Jihadists who are waiting, regardless of trends in Afghanistan, to strike at local governments. However, there is good reason to believe that this threat assessment of the imminent threat of Central Asian Islamic radicalism is substantially over-hyped; the fact of this perception and of its staying power in official policy documents and mentalities helps drive Russia's perception that it must be ready to deploy rapidly into Central Asia or at least possess that capability if need be.¹⁸

Russia's Presidential Representative in Afghanistan, Zamir Kabulov, has recently gone even further. He claims that about 100 ISIS fighters have been deployed from Syria and Iraq to Afghanistan to prepare an attack on Central Asia. Specifically he warned:

A 'spillover' into Central Asia is inevitable, especially considering that all the foundations are there. They have created two beachheads in Afghanistan: one on the border of Tajikistan, and the other of Turkmenistan. There they have concentrated fairly large forces. Let's say on the Tajikistan beachhead there are 4-5,000 fighters concentrated. And on the beachhead opposite Turkmenistan [there are] 2,500 fighters. They have deployed camps for two-month preparation courses for fighters. We know of three such camps, and there may be more. They are training 50 fighters in every course, so if you take at least three camps that we know about, that's 150 fighters every two months. What's interesting is that they are mostly natives of Central Asia.¹⁹

Similarly, Kabulov believes Western countries are not likely to repeat military operations in Afghanistan and the director of Russia's Federal Drug Control Service (FSKN), Viktor Ivanov, has once again criticized NATO for its ongoing unpreparedness to combat the production of Afghan heroin.²⁰

At the same time Moscow has stepped up its investment profile in Afghanistan

in the recent past.²¹ This obviously aims to impart some stability to the Afghan regime, demonstrating Moscow's support for that regime; solidifying an enduring Russian presence in Afghanistan; preparing for a post-American geopolitical competition for influence there; and establishing ties with key sectors and elites who would be willing to work with Russia once Washington and NATO depart. Furthermore, Moscow has increasingly come to believe that the United States is actively inciting color revolutions across all of Asia and even was or still might be collaborating with terrorists against Russia's efforts to integrate and subordinate Central Asia economically and strategically. Therefore, it needs to create instruments of power and policy by which it can thwart not just the terrorists but also the Americans.²² Russia is thus drafting an agreement for future supplies of weapons to Afghanistan.²³ But its engagement seems to be broader than merely military.

Meanwhile, Moscow has been deepening its engagement with Afghanistan both directly and through other regional players. In Afghanistan the Russians have been rebuilding old Soviet factories and relaunching uncompleted Soviet-era public infrastructure projects. In addition, the Russians have been expanding their military presence in Central Asia and cultivating ties with key Asian ethnic and regional leaders, especially in northern Afghanistan. Russia has also been seeking to cooperate in Afghanistan with the other great powers active there, including the U.S, NATO, and European Union members, China, India, and Pakistan.²⁴

But while Russia "has a stake in Afghanistan," it wants others as much as possible to defend that stake and its policies are shot through with ambivalence, as it is not prepared to send troops to Afghanistan or even to the border with Tajikistan.²⁵

Weapons Transfers and Basing Rights

According to newly released Pentagon data, the United States has substantially cut its aid for Central Asian security forces.²⁶ The National Defense Authorization Act for fiscal year 2013 allowed the U.S. Department of Defense to train and equip foreign security forces involved in counternarcotics missions. In 2012, the Pentagon seemed to make Central Asia, in particular Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, a major focus. But according to the new data, that effort might have been abandoned. The new data covers the first half of Fiscal Year 2014, from October 2013 through March 2014:

Kazakhstan: \$187,000 – from \$8.7 million
Kyrgyzstan: \$1.2 million – from \$21.3 million
Tajikistan: \$1.1 million – from \$15.4 million
Uzbekistan: \$156,000 – from \$5.7 million

Given that every country in the region seems to be getting its funding slashed, this would seem to be the result of a decision that Central Asia should no longer be a priority. Given that the U.S military aid was so clearly a quid pro quo in exchange for access to Afghanistan, it is not surprising that as that mission winds down, the U.S. aid is being reduced.²⁷

The United States' most prominent military outpost in Central Asia, the Manas air base in Kyrgyzstan, formally closed its doors in June 2014. The commander of

the base handed over a symbolic golden key to Kyrgyzstan military officials, and the U.S. ambassador to Kyrgyzstan said the last of the American troops would leave. In its 12 years of operation, Manas handled 5.3 million military personnel from 26 countries as the main transit point for troops entering and leaving Afghanistan. Those 12 years saw plenty of rocky periods of negotiations between Bishkek and Washington over the base's presence, as the Kyrgyzstan government faced both pressure from Russia and widespread public suspicion over the base. In 2009, the Kyrgyzstan government announced that it would close down the base, only to reverse its decision after the United States upped the rent from \$17 million to \$60 million annually. But President Almazbek Atambayev campaigned in 2011 on a promise to shut down the base, and whatever the United States offered to keep it open apparently was not enough, and in 2013 announced that it would leave the base and the transit operations would move to Romania for the remainder of the Afghanistan mission.²⁸

France has formally ended its military presence in Tajikistan after 13 years of operations supporting French troops in Afghanistan. At a ceremony held on October 28, 2014, the French flag was lowered at the Dushanbe airport, where the French military had operated since 2001. The small base hosted around 200 French troops at a time, working on supply and logistics for their compatriots in Afghanistan. From 2005 to 2007 it also hosted French fighter jets used for operations in Afghanistan. Over its lifespan it facilitated the transit of about 89,000 soldiers and carried out 11,000 airlift missions.²⁹

As the U.S. government is seeking new partnerships in Central Asia after 2014, Tajikistan seemed to be the only plausible option to the United States. Kyrgyzstan has maintained its decision to close down the Manas Transit Center. A delegation of U.S. Congressmen visiting Tajikistan in July 2013 promised to raise the question of establishing a military base on Tajik soil after 2014.³⁰ With Turkmenistan staying permanently neutral, Kazakhstan is engaged in an active military cooperation with Russia and this precludes an American base there.

More recently, while Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan are all (to varying degrees) participating in Russia's economic and military integration schemes, Uzbekistan has resisted. Strategic concerns have overridden Western qualms about human rights in Uzbekistan. Even though after the Andijan uprising and massacre of 2005 relations between Uzbekistan and the West sharply deteriorated, their recent improvement can be seen as the West's response to the various integration processes of the post-Soviet Central Asian states and Russia in various spheres. Uzbekistan has been an important country for NATO and American military logistics for the war in Afghanistan. A railroad, between the Uzbekistan border town of Hairatan and Mazar-e-Sharif, Afghanistan, was built and opened in 2011 by Uzbekistan Railways with money from the Asian Development Bank after American military logisticians identified the Uzbekistan border as the most troublesome bottleneck in getting supplies into Afghanistan. The transit of cargo through Uzbekistan has been the most important part of cooperation with Washington.

NATO formally opened its liaison office in Uzbekistan in May 2014, a year after it started working and amid heightened Russian rhetoric about the Western alliance encroaching on its backyard.³¹ General Lloyd Austin (USA), Commander-in-Chief of CENTCOM (United States Central Command), visited Uzbekistan and met with

President Islam Karimov among other officials. It was reported that Austin was in Uzbekistan to negotiate a new U.S. military base there, and that the United States was offering Tashkent one billion dollars per year for the privilege, and that Germany was opposing it behind the scenes.³² Lately, U.S. officials, including Austin, have been admitting in public that the relationship was skewed by the requirements of Afghanistan. In his March 2014 testimony, Austin suggested that U.S. aid to Central Asian countries would now be less “transactional” and more based on regional threats: “Going forward, initiatives will be tailored to transform our current limited transactional-based relationships into more constructive cooperative exchanges based on common interests and focused on training and equipping them to conduct more effective [counterterrorism, counterproliferation, and counternarcotics] operations.”³³ The White House’s top official dealing with Central Asia, Celeste Wallander, talked about her recent trip through the region, and also acknowledged that now the United States was looking at rebalancing so as not to focus so heavily on security.³⁴

In January 2015, U.S. officials announced that they were donating over 300 Mine-Resistant Ambush Protected (MRAP) vehicles to Uzbekistan; it will be the biggest ever transfer of American military equipment to a Central Asian country. It was surprising in many ways: American military interest in Central Asia had appeared to be on the wane, and U.S. military aid to Uzbekistan was at a largely token level. There were lengthy discussions between Uzbekistan and the United States over the possible purchase of Black Hawk helicopters, but in 2013 the State Department finally blocked the deal.³⁵ Newly appointed U.S. ambassador to Tashkent, Pamela Spratlen, in her confirmation hearing in September 2014 confirmed that Security assistance to Uzbekistan has markedly risen over the past several years, both from the Pentagon and from the State Department, after the White House eased human-rights related restrictions on military aid in 2012. Interestingly, in her testimony Spratlen tied that policy to the advent of the “New Cold War” and Uzbekistan’s “deliberate, reliable resistance to Russian pressure,” which Washington wants to encourage.³⁶

The transfer of American equipment to Uzbekistan raised concern among officials in Moscow. Russian President Vladimir Putin jetted into Tashkent on December 10, 2014 for a meeting with Uzbekistan’s President, Islam Karimov. Putin appeared both to be wooing Karimov for backing in his confrontation with Ukraine, and offering a show of support for the incumbent ahead of upcoming parliamentary and presidential elections in Uzbekistan. Putin agreed to write off all but a fraction of Uzbekistan’s \$890-million debt to Russia.³⁷ Moscow will forgive \$865 million of the sum, leaving Tashkent paying just \$25 million and paving the way for new loans from Moscow, including loans to buy arms.³⁸ Because of the existing security threats in Uzbekistan, the country may be interested in purchasing helicopters, armored vehicles, air-defense weapons and small arms made in Russia. Uzbekistan and Russia discussed in December 2014 the supply of Russian equipment to upgrade helicopters, Russian engines for both aircraft and ground forces, and Russian personnel to train their Uzbekistani counterparts on the use of the new equipment.³⁹ Another area in which military cooperation will expand is the education of Uzbekistani officers in Russian military schools. Next year about 3,000 officers from Uzbekistan will study in Russia, up from about 500 now.⁴⁰ This approach of combining forgiveness for debts incurred in buying what are already subsidized Russian weapons has long been a Russian tactic for tying Central Asian militaries and their governments to Moscow’s “apron strings”

and a fundamental foreign policy tool beyond the CIS.⁴¹

Meanwhile, Russia is substantially increasing its military aid to the region, particularly to Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Moscow's military responses fall into the same categories as did its previous military policies in Central Asia, namely: expanding its own capabilities, enhancing cooperation among CSTO members by means of subsidizing them with Russian weapons, providing officer training, education, and security cooperation for police and border forces as well as military forces, bilateral deals to ensure a robust Russian military presence in Central Asia, using the SCO's Anti-Terror organization for police purposes against terrorists, joint anti-drug operations with Central Asians, and expanding cooperation with other interested governments who are engaged with Afghanistan or have a vital interest in its future course.⁴²

There is no doubt that in the past several years up to the present and probably beyond 2015 that Russia has steadily built up an extensive superstructure of military presence in Central Asia.⁴³ Its improvements in military capability over the past decade open up possibilities for deployment to Central Asia. Moscow can now legally recruit foreigners, including Muslims and Central Asian residents who speak Russian, into the Russian Army to create a kind of "French Foreign Legion a la Russe" force that can and will fight in local theaters.⁴⁴ There is some discussion of the possibility of employing Ramzan Kadyrov's Chechen or other Muslim forces not only in the North Caucasus but in Central Asia as well. Kadyrov has announced his willingness to send Chechens to perform special military missions for Putin that other organizations of the Russian forces cannot perform, e.g. in Ukraine or as Putin's palace guard, or perhaps in Central Asia.⁴⁵

Furthermore Russia has now decided that it is safe to draft North Caucasian soldiers in numbers that would supply the army with about 10,000 servicemen annually. The 201st Russian Military Base in Tajikistan has long employed local soldiers.⁴⁶ Some Chechen forces have been sent to Ukraine and participated in operations during 2014. And several analysts argue that Russia should send North Caucasian troops who have gained experience fighting in Chechnya or throughout the region into Central Asia which might be expected—in case of future potential contingencies there due to terrorism and/or a collapse in Afghanistan—to feature of counterinsurgency or some would say hybrid wars resembling those in which Moscow has engaged since 1999.⁴⁷

In August 2014, Russia pledged \$500m in financial assistance to Kyrgyzstan to speed up Kyrgyzstan's integration into the Moscow-led Eurasian Economic Union. Using its basing rights in Kyrgyzstan the Russian Air Force has deployed upgraded SU-25SM attack fighter planes to Kyrgyzstan.⁴⁸ In September 2013, Russia and Kyrgyzstan signed a contract that allows Russian military sites to remain in the Central Asian republic for 15 years. Russia agreed to write off almost \$500m of Kyrgyz debt in exchange for a 15-year extension of the lease for a Russian military air base. Apart from the Kant base, which operates as part of the CSTO forces, Russia has a communications post and a torpedo testing range in northern Kyrgyzstan, a seismic station in southern Kyrgyzstan, and a naval test site at Lake Issyk Kul in the Tien Shan mountains. Russia is currently paying approximately \$4.5 million annually to lease bases in Kyrgyzstan.⁴⁹ The Russian air base in Kant hosted eight SU-25 attack aircraft and two Mi-8 helicopters in 2013. About 400 personnel are permanently deployed at the facility. Four additional Su-25 Frogfoot ground attack aircraft were deployed at the Kant airbase in 2014.⁵⁰

CSTO

Russia has also undertaken a series of more purely military moves to augment its capabilities for direct military responses to potential threats in Central Asia. One of these is a much stronger effort to make the CSTO into a truly effective military organization that can deter all manner of upheavals in Central Asia but, if necessary, can also conduct the requisite military operations under such circumstances. That process logically entails a much stronger security and defense coordination with Central Asian governments, a process that dovetails quite well with Moscow's determination to remain the security manager and *primus inter pares* in Central Asia.

For those kinds of contingencies it has therefore not only played the bilateral card of enhancing its military and other ties with local governments, but it has also invested heavily in giving the CSTO, its primary military organization in Central Asia, added capabilities and a more formidable appearance.

This is not to say it has completely ignored the SCO's Regional Anti-Terror Structure (RATS) for it clearly is happy to have members strengthen that organization.⁵¹ But the SCO is clearly not a major provider of hard security, whereas the CSTO is Moscow's favored organ for those purposes.⁵² And despite the efforts to invigorate the CSTO many Russian analysts have been quite skeptical of its capabilities.⁵³ Moreover, if Russia will not commit forces to Afghanistan and the situation there deteriorates to the point of a genuine manifestation of externally incited violence in Central Asia then the insurgents will have, in effect a privileged sanctuary, making the task of defeating them infinitely more difficult.

Furthermore it would appear that the main strategic-political motive for the CSTO, which has hitherto done nothing, is to be present in order to protect the ruling elites and remind the Central Asians that only Russia and not the West can protect them.⁵⁴ In other words, the CSTO is there as much to awe the local governments into accepting Russia as a regional *Ordnungsmacht*, or power that creates order, as it is to actually defend them against real threats.⁵⁵ Neither is it clear that they really want to see Russian intervention in their homelands. This is especially the case after Ukraine when it has become blindingly clear that Russia represents the primary external strategic threat to the integrity and sovereignty of all of these states and is not afraid to brandish the sword to maintain its interests in Central Asia.

Moreover, it will continue to try to push the West to resume operations in Afghanistan if not augment its presence there along with its other Asian partners including India and Central Asian states. This reflects an inescapable ambivalence because Moscow's ability to provide security, the true calling card of a regional hegemon, is steadily diminishing even if there had been no Western sanctions due to Ukraine. Those sanctions will make it still more difficult for Moscow to sustain its strategy of attempting to deter and dissuade terrorists from moving into Central Asia or internal forces there from starting trouble. But given the weaknesses of its position and of the CSTO which has never been tested, and where Uzbekistan is not a member precisely due to its suspicions of Moscow, it remains an open question whether or not Russia can sustain the great power aspirations and anti-Americanism that drive its policy here.⁵⁶ Indeed, since Russia, even more than Afghan-based terrorists, represents the single greatest threat to Central Asian states' integrity and sovereignty their attitude toward calling in the CSTO must necessarily be ambivalent from the outset.

Moreover, it is also abundantly clear that given the weaknesses of Central Asian states and a generation of disinclination to cooperate in any meaningful way on regional security, that they will not of their own accord either be able or even try to adopt a unified regional position on assisting Afghanistan. In other words, if there is to be regional cooperation of a serious substantive nature rather than rhetoric as has been the case until now, a great power or external actor will have to organize it.⁵⁷ Undoubtedly Moscow, Beijing, and Washington all know this. Nevertheless the only answer Moscow has come up with, whether voiced by Gerasimov or by Putin, is to enhance international cooperation with all the interested parties and in particular with Moscow's "allies" in the CSTO.⁵⁸ Nevertheless this may be changing. Putin, at the December 2014 summit of the CSTO openly warned the Russian and other armies there that they must prepare to take "preventive actions" in the light of a forthcoming threat to Central Asia from Afghanistan:

The CSTO should continue focusing its attention on enhancing its close cooperation with Afghanistan, especially in view of the greater risk to regional security posed by the withdrawal of International Forces. We are all interested in a flourishing, happy and neutral Afghanistan. We proceed from the notion that the Afghan leadership will work to stabilize the situation in the country. At the same time, the current situation causes concern. Militant groups of the Islamic State are attempting to include certain Afghan provinces in the so-called Islamic Caliphate. Terrorist and extremist groups are already spreading their activity to Central Asia. In these circumstances, the CSTO states should be ready to take adequate preventive measures. In particular, we need to continue focusing on the Tajik-Afghan border and on providing Tajikistan with financial and material aid to modernize its armed forces.⁵⁹

The most striking and consequential example of this is the new approach to China growing out of the close Sino-Russian relationship. Most recently Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu, said in Beijing that Russia and China confront not only U.S. threats in the Asia-Pacific but also U.S.-orchestrated "color revolutions" and Islamic terrorism. Therefore, "The issue of stepping up this cooperation [between Russia and China] has never been as relevant as it is today."⁶⁰ Specifically this means his advocacy of enhanced Sino-Russian security cooperation (through unspecified means) both bilaterally and within the SCO.⁶¹ Shoigu included not only Central Asia but also East Asia, as did his Deputy Minister Anatoly Antonov. Both men decried U.S. policies that allegedly were bringing about color revolutions and support for Islamic terrorism in Southeast and Central Asia. Shoigu further stated that, "In the context of an unstable international situation the strengthening of good-neighborly relations between our countries acquires particular significance. This is not only a significant factor in the states' security but also a contribution to ensuring peace throughout the Eurasian continent and beyond."⁶²

This overture to China apparently marks a fundamental reversal of past Russian policy to keep the Chinese military out of Central Asia and retain the option of military intervention there as an exclusively Russian one and could signify Russia's growing dependence on China in Central Asia and elsewhere under mounting Western and economic pressure. But the details remain to be seen. Such an alliance would also mark a reversal of Chinese policy that has heretofore shunned military involvement in Central Asia; but there are some straws in the wind suggesting that Beijing is rethinking this position. On the one hand China's Ministry of Defense spokesman, at

an international press conference on November 27, 2014, went out of his way to deny that an alliance with Russia existed, saying:

I need to emphasize here, though, that China and Russia adhere to the principle of no alliance, no confrontation, and not targeting a third party in military cooperation, and therefore it will not constitute threats to any country. It is inappropriate to place normal military cooperation between China and Russia in the same category as the U.S.-Japan military alliance.⁶³

On the other hand, however, on December 16, 2014, right after Shoigu's visit, Prime Minister Li Keqiang, speaking in Astana, proposed that the SCO become the "guardian of Eurasia." Obviously this is linked to concern over Beijing's showcase policy project of a "new Silk Road" through Afghanistan and Central Asia to Europe that would come under severe pressure if Afghanistan collapsed. And in August 2014, Russia and China held their largest SCO exercises to date where China contributed J-10 and J-11 fighters JH-7 early warning assets and control aircraft, and WZ-10 and WZ-19 attack helicopters.⁶⁴ In this vein there are also signs that China might actively contribute to the struggle against ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) with support for coalition air strikes even if independently and apart from the U.S. coalition.⁶⁵ This too would mark a revision of past Chinese policies if these were genuine indicators of an impending major policy change and could betoken movement toward a genuine Sino-Russian military-political alliance in Central Asia against terrorism and Islamism in all its forms. Obviously that trend, if it materializes would have profound implications for world affairs, going far beyond Central Asia.

Moreover, Russia's new defense doctrine proposes to "coordinate efforts to deal with military risks in the common space "of the SCO."⁶⁶ It also provides for the creation of joint missile defense systems. While Moscow has pursued this with the West in the past, this could also be a warning or offer to go along with China in the creation of such systems. Thus, Shoigu stated, "During talks with Comrade Chang Wanquan, we discussed the state and prospects of Russian-Chinese relations in the military field, exchanged opinions on the military-political situation in general and the APR in particular. We also expressed concern over U.S. attempts to strengthen its military and political clout in the APR. We believe that the main goal of pooling our efforts is to shape a collective regional security system." If this is not an offer for an alliance then we need to redefine the term.

Conclusion

Whether it is warranted or not, there is a widespread and growing anxiety for the future throughout Central Asia and Afghanistan, notwithstanding Kazakhstan's professed optimism about Afghanistan. Yet there are no discernible moves to enhance genuine regional cooperation or to develop effective regional command and control structures in the event of a major crisis. This anxiety connects fears for the future of Afghanistan after 2014 with uncertainty concerning the situation in Central Asian states, none of which enjoys true stability. Even Kazakhstan's stability depends on Nazarbayev's health and has been challenged by increased terrorist activities since 2011. The other states are in worse shape, facing myriad domestic challenges. Mean-

while, the North Caucasus is out of control and the South Caucasus can hardly be described as a region at peace.

For Russia too, caught midway in an uncompleted defense reform that may be eclipsed because the threats facing Russia are utterly different to those enjoying policy priority, the consequences of these developments are immense. Should these conflicts grow or even continue, they may force a reevaluation of official thinking about the nature of the threats facing Russia, the nature of contemporary warfare, the question of who are Russia's enemies, and the priorities of defense policy. This could force the government to come to terms with the need for fundamentally different governance throughout Russia, itself a change that would reverberate across Central Asia. All this is happening at a time when Moscow discerns a U.S. threat to its retaining of military influence in the area through a network of bases and an Uzbek partner and sees an increasingly powerful China usurping Moscow's political and economic standing among Central Asian states, becoming a rival in energy policy, and developing an ever more powerful and modernized military. Indeed, some Russian analysts even believe the PLA already outclasses the Russian army.

Even as the competition in Central Asia continues to intensify among all involved actors, it is clear that although we might disagree with Russia's policies in the southern strategic direction and in the Middle East—and even with its threat assessment—the perceptions that form that assessment are hardly imaginary or unfounded. From Russia's viewpoint, these threats are real and may be actualized sooner rather than later, and even catch Russia and allied governments by surprise. The current turn in Russian military policy represents Russia's effort to meet that challenge, but nobody should be complacent about the outcome should such challenges actually appear.

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