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The *Voices from Central Asia* series is a platform for experts from Central Asia, Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Mongolia, and the neighboring countries. The local point of view is often forgotten in Western-centered analysis; at best, only the official, state-level position is known. The series promotes the diversity of opinions expressed by Central Asians and is a venue for researchers, senior officials, opposition figures, and civil society activists.

The Growing U.S. Military Involvement in Central Asia and Its Impact on U.S.-Central Asia Relations

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Do you think the current U.S. growing military involvement in Central Asia is mostly about consolidating the Northern Distribution Network (resupply efforts and reverse transit), or helping the Central Asian states to reinforce their own security in preparation for 2014?

Sultan Akimbekov

Currently, the NDN is of great importance to the United States. It is clear that Washington is willing not only to pay for the transit of goods,

but also to build partnerships with the countries of the region. Security in Central Asia therefore remains an important factor for Washington in the medium term. While the exact scale of the withdrawal of coalition forces is still an open question, part of the U.S. military will stay even after 2014. This was confirmed by the strategic agreement signed by President Barack Obama in Kabul this spring, which envisaged an American presence in the country until 2024. But these are all tactical issues. For the United States, the Central Asian region as a whole is of great strategic importance in the context of a geopolitical rivalry with Russia and China.

Zakir Chotaev

Today the issue of the reinforcement or the maintenance of U.S. military involvement in Central Asia remains open. In my opinion the United States wants both to consolidate the NDN and to help the Central Asian states. It should be noted that security issues in the region and the fight with international terrorism became an important aspect of the U.S. foreign policy agenda after 9/11 and Washington's military intervention in Afghanistan. Prior to this, Central Asia's security did not represent an important element in American foreign policy. For the short-term, military operations in Afghanistan and their logistical support (uninterrupted supply) are the main priorities for the United States. On the medium term, security in Central Asia is part of the American strategy in stabilizing the whole region. In this context, it is in Washington's interests to ensure that the region does not destabilize into an 'Afghan scenario' and to fight the proliferation of extremism and terrorism.

Viktor Dubovitsky

So far, the reason for Central Asia countries to enhance their military cooperation with the United States has been an aspiration for financial resources from the Northern transit route. This enthusiasm might have been reduced though after the announcement of the U.S. agreement with Pakistan, as of July 3, 2012, on the resumption of the Southern transit line. This agreement will cut off up to 60 percent of the goods transported through the Northern Transit Network, and will result in the loss of the corresponding fees.

Of course, Central Asian countries have also been increasingly worried about regional security after the ISAF troops' withdrawal from Afghanistan, but they do not associate their own domestic security with the United States, which failed to succeed in the operation 'Enduring Freedom'. They view either Russia or China as their guarantor of security, or both of them within the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) framework. So far the SCO is only an emerging coalition which could develop further if the region's security comes under threat, for instance if a civil war resumes in Afghanistan. But to trans-

form the SCO into a real security coalition, China needs to depart from its self-isolation policy and its status as 'emerging country' in the Bandung spirit, and declare itself as a leading world power. The speed towards this declaration has escalated as a result of the financial crisis of 2008-11. However, the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and Russia will have to be the first to respond to regional security challenges, while SCO and China may join in only at the second stage, a few years from now.

Farkhad Tolipov

In my opinion, growing U.S. military involvement in Central Asia is mostly about consolidating the Northern Distribution Network (NDN) rather than helping the Central Asian states with their security in preparation for 2014. However, there is no real significant boost in military cooperation between the United States and Central Asia. According to many allegations in the region, the United States is actually constructing some geopolitical project aimed at establishing permanent access to Central Asia as it prepares to leave Afghanistan without having resolved the most important challenge – eliminating sources of terrorism. Further developments in the region will therefore lead to the 'reinforcement of geopolitics,' i.e. Afghanistan could be thrown back to the time when it was the unstable focus of geopolitical competition between great powers and regional powers. This time however, regional powers will be more involved than before.

Do you think the majority population of your country is supportive of a growing U.S. military involvement, or reluctant to it, and why?

Sultan Akimbekov

Most of Kazakhstan's population does not support the U.S. military presence in the region, for several reasons. First, there is a preserved inertia of the Soviet ideology, especially among the older generation, as well as the dominance of Russian media in Kazakhstan and their interpretation of the events. Second, Kazakhstan's national minorities (which includes not only

Russians, but other minorities of so-called 'European' origin: Ukrainians, Germans as well as those who originated from the territory of Russia – Tatars, and others) are largely inclined towards Russia, which is traditionally opposed to the American presence in Central Asia, and especially a military one.

As for Kazakh-speaking population, it currently does not express a distinct position and is somewhat apolitical, particularly on foreign policy issues. However, we cannot ignore the growing influence of Islam on the part of ethnic Kazakhs, but also on Muslim minorities, such as Uyghurs, Uzbeks, Chechens, or Azeri. Their assessment of American policy in the region is made through a lens of the Israeli-Palestine's issue, as well as the U.S. 'invasion' of Iraq and Afghanistan. Generally, Kazakh society is less religious than the Uzbek or the Tajik ones, but interest toward religion is growing, particularly in the southern and western regions. This nascent Islamic public opinion regards American involvement in the region and military cooperation by the United States with larger criticism than does the secular majority, which is more indifferent to geopolitical issues.

Zakir Chotaev

Kyrgyzstan's population sees U.S. military presence in Kyrgyzstan depending on, first, its limited level of awareness of foreign policy issues, and second, by its diversified ideological orientation, either to Russia or to the West. Kyrgyzstan is currently dominated by Russian media sources, and there is a dominant pro-Russian ideological orientation, which is fed by the propaganda of various political forces, which seek to obtain support from Moscow. According to this view, the U.S., the West, and their 'bribed NGOs' are responsible for destabilizing the country and delegitimizing its elite. Yet many of the educated and informed people understand that having only one partner such as Russia is problematic, because it causes dependence on the Kremlin. Many also understand that the U.S. has more pragmatic interests in Kyrgyzstan with regards to the situation in Afghanistan. Popular reaction to the Manas military base (officially a 'transit center') depends on the above-mentioned criteria. Some understand the importance of

multi-vector foreign policy and American technical and financial support; others prefer a Russian strategic partnership. In my opinion, Kyrgyzstan needs to build a stable multi-vector policy, where Russia is a priority partner, but along with other permanent and strong partners, such as the United States, China, Turkey, and Europe.

Viktor Dubovitsky

Most of the Tajik population views the U.S. military involvement with suspicion, seeing the failure of Operation 'Enduring Freedom' in Afghanistan it makes them doubt the ability of the United States to protect the region against religious extremism. Various sociological surveys conducted in Tajikistan during the past ten years on Tajiks' views of external actors in the region have shown that the majority trusts Russia more than any other country. For an average Tajik, the United States remains a faraway 'virtual' country where life is good but you cannot get there. On the contrary, Russia has a century-old shared past with Tajikistan and, even more importantly, one million Tajiks who work seasonally in Russia and send remittances that reach up to 40 percent of the Tajik GDP. The Tajik population generally thinks that even if the authorities get money for a Russian or American base, these funds will not reach ordinary people, while remittances are 'real' money for local households. The population is therefore more anxious about new Russian legislation on regulating migration and introducing Russian language exams, than about Moscow's unwillingness to pay for the deployment of its 201st division in Tajikistan.

Farkhad Tolipov

Uzbekistan's population remains indifferent to such processes. Uzbek public opinion supported both the U.S. troops' deployment in Uzbekistan in 2001, and their withdrawal in 2005, at the peak of operations in Afghanistan. The reason for that is a so-called 'Soviet syndrome', which means a reiteration of the Soviet ideological practices, when people support any decision made by the authorities and believes that their government is always right. In fact, public opinion mostly remains indifferent to foreign policy issues, in particular because the information space is

saturated with Soviet-style propaganda, leaving no room for critics or alternative discourse.

Do you think the United States has made a good assessment of the security challenges that your country is facing?

Sultan Akimbekov

Among the main security issues for the region is the threat of radical Islamists and supporters of 'pure Islam'. This is a major problem for both secular Kazakhstan and for American foreign policy, and both are in tune on assessing this issue. Another security concern, the lack of political reforms in Kazakhstan, is a more complex problem on which both countries do not share the same view. Adequate institutions remain underdeveloped in Kazakhstan; but reforms may lead to a weakening of the central authority with profound consequences, including increased Russian influence. Moreover, influenced by Russia's narrative Kazakhstan's public opinion views the U.S. policy as a policy of double standards: when Washington deems it necessary, it promotes *Realpolitik*, when not, it decries the lack of democracy. A large part of the Kazakhstani society has a conservative mindset and does not like sudden changes. It is afraid of democratization, because it can lead to instability, especially when it comes to inter-ethnic relations. Liberal-minded people, who stand for rapid democratization, are in minority, and live mainly in Almaty. Unlike Russian society, 'liberals' constitute a smaller part of the Kazakhstani society than 'conservatives'.

Zakir Chotaev

In general, the United States has perceived Kyrgyzstan's security issues accurately. However, this perception is based on Washington's own interests in Central Asia, and does not always take into account local specificities or sensitivities to certain issues such as human rights, democratization of public governance, or Kyrgyzstan's priority partnership with Russia. The difficulty the United States has with taking into account national sensitivities may lead to

negative responses to their foreign policies in the region. For example, Washington's pressure on the Uzbek government after the Andijan incident in 2005 caused the U.S. to lose access to bases in that country. As for Kyrgyzstan, after the Tulip revolution in March 2005 Washington took a more prudent attitude toward the Bakiyev regime and tried not to intervene in domestic affairs, but supported the government in security issues like counterterrorism, and fight against narco-trafficking. Since the April 2010 revolution, the United States has increased its support to Bishkek by intensifying cooperation in the fields of democratization and political reforms, but the Russian Federation has also pressured the Kyrgyz government to close the Manas base after 2014.

Viktor Dubovitsky

The American assessment of risks in Tajikistan is clearly overestimated. They see the main danger coming from the resurgence of the Taliban (or other forms of Pashtun political power). They believe having a well-guarded border against Taliban activism is sufficient, as was demonstrated in the civil war years (1992-97). Religious extremism inside Tajikistan though is a greater danger for the country. The government has undertaken efforts to control the rise of domestic Islamism. In 2009 it outlawed Salafi movements, arrested Hizb ut-Tahrir members, put those who go abroad for religious studies under scrutiny, and fought against unregistered mosques. Fortunately, there are still some safeguards: the Tajik population still suffers from a 'civil war syndrome', that is, unwillingness to fight again due to past violence. Moreover, most economic problems are addressed by a massive labor migration to Russia of the most active part of the population. In addition, there is a constant 'blow off' of religious extremism by the legitimate Islamic Renaissance Party (IRPT), the only legal religious party, which is represented in the Parliament.

Farkhad Tolipov

I think the United States has a realistic understanding of the situation and security threats in Central Asia. The question though is, how does Washington see these threats in the context of its own interests?

The assessment of the situation and further development of the U.S. policy towards Central Asia will depend on the ratio of three factors: geopolitics, power projection and a normative approach. First, the United States, as a geopolitical actor, cannot help but to make its global strategy antagonistic vis-à-vis other great powers, especially those who are influential in Central Asia and Afghanistan, like Russia, China, and Iran. Second, its ability to lead the 'war on terror' and to be a relevant actor in conflict resolution activities is dependent on its overseas power projection capacity. Third, the United States' leading role in the world has always been associated with promoting democracy and protecting human rights, which is, by definition, a normative policy that Washington would like to pursue in the region.

Do you think the growing U.S. military involvement will help or hamper Washington's capability of influencing the political evolutions in your country?

Sultan Akimbekov

I do not think that Washington is able to assert pressure, but it can make a difference. Kazakhstan's authorities pursue an adequate multi-vector policy, which provides for equal relations with all the great powers that have interests in our region. Since the United States is clearly not willing to reduce its influence in Central Asia in general, such interaction will continue beyond 2014.

Zakir Chotaev

The current political situation in Kyrgyzstan – democratization of the political system since the April 2010 revolution – has had a positive impact on the development of relations between Bishkek and Washington. The increasing U.S. influence in Kyrgyzstan though has caused a reaction from the Kremlin, expressed in the form of economic sanctions against Bishkek, and Moscow's support of negative propaganda used by the Kyrgyz opposition forces against the authorities. An increased U.S. military presence without Russia's

support could eventually have a negative impact on the domestic situation in the country, but be positive through a rising financial and technical commitment for political reforms and economic development.

Viktor Dubovitsky

A potential U.S. military presence in Tajikistan can, of course, increase Washington's influence on political developments in the country. I doubt though that such evolution will benefit Tajikistan; rather, it can lead to some scenarios close to the 'Arab Spring' and the rise to power of Islamic circles like it has already happened in Tunisia, and Egypt. Economic influence on Tajikistan would require enormous efforts by the United States, for example, to build Rogun hydropower station and grant it to Dushanbe. Back in 2007 Evan Feigenbaum, then Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs, said that since the U.S. cannot invest public funds in Tajikistan, private companies should do so, but they did not want to because of the high risks involved. Since then, the risks have only increased, mainly due to the situation in neighboring Afghanistan.

Farkhad Tolipov

As noted above, there is no significant growth in the U.S. military presence in the region. The Manas transit center in Kyrgyzstan has been challenged, Tajikistan is not interested in having a U.S. base deployed on its territory, and the base in Uzbekistan will not be reopened. Although the United States will leave some military equipment in Uzbekistan during the withdrawal process from Afghanistan, it does not mean that its military presence in the region will increase. As for Washington's influence on the political processes in Uzbekistan, it will not go beyond the traditional critique of Central Asian regimes on issues of democracy and human rights, unless of course the region erupts into spontaneous political unrest.

Uzbekistan's recent withdrawal from the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) was an anticipated decision to many officials and analysts. The 'last straw' was that the CSTO members were persistently pressing Uzbekistan

on finalizing the establishment of Rapid Reaction Forces (RRF) and deploying them in the region, which Tashkent refused. Second, the Uzbek authorities deny any binding coordination with CSTO members based on the deployment of a third countries force. Thirdly, the CSTO, as any security organization, cannot claim to be the sole and exclusive provider of security in the region; it has to interact with other providers, but it is not ready yet to accept new forms of co-operation. In addressing critical security issues Uzbekistan is therefore increasingly inclined to a bilateral format, and while rejecting CSTO, it maintains good relations with Moscow at the bilateral level. Fourth, the Uzbek authorities may have a long-term geopolitical concept associated with the reconstruction of the regional order after 2014.

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