

**SECURITY CHALLENGES IN CENTRAL ASIA  
RUSSIAN AND PERSIAN LANGUAGE PUBLICATIONS CONTENTS  
DIGEST**

August 2017

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We hereby present the second issue of the Russian and Persian language publication digest on regional security challenges in Central Asia. This digest is focussed upon two key political statements: the one made by Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoygu as regards the increasing security threats in Central Asia, and the other by U.S. President Donald Trump, as relates to his administration's newly announced strategy for Afghanistan. How these two elements will impact Central Asian politics and processes in the context of regional and global security will undoubtedly be the subject of further coverage in our digest's future issues. The views and opinions of the authors do not necessarily reflect the position of Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung.

**AUGUST/2017**

**Trump declared war to a successful end**

*Andrei Sherikhanov,  
Journalist of the digital newspaper "Utro" (Russia)*

U.S. President Donald Trump's decision to send an additional 4.000 troops to Afghanistan has been widely debated by Russian experts. Trump appears to have radically changed his view of the Afghan conflict: during his election campaign he was calling for the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan, and not for an increase in their numbers. Trump's political shift has birthed the new U.S. strategy for Afghanistan, namely one which proposes switching focus to eliminating militants and non-interference in Afghan domestic affairs. This indicates that U.S. presence in Afghanistan is both serious and long-term. Regardless of these shifts, however, Andrei Sherikhanov doubts that the U.S. will be able to cardinaly alter the Afghan situation, unless the Pentagon decides to kick off large-scale military operations against the Taliban and the Haqqani network.

According to Svyatoslav Kaverin, the Russian independent expert on Afghanistan, Afghan society is split. Many Afghans are in favour of long-term American presence in Afghanistan, as they have become accustomed to Western television, goods and mass culture, and as Americans provide jobs and pay dollars. Others, conversely, remember that under the Taliban (1996-2001) things were orderly, if a little austere: there was less crime, banditry and drug addiction. Kaverin believes that an American withdrawal from Afghanistan would have calmed the Taliban for a while, and led to the negotiation process, but this is, of course, only in theory.

<https://utro.ru/articles/2017/08/22/1337519.shtml>

## What is behind Kabulov's calls to the U.S. to withdraw its troops from Afghanistan?

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*Stanislav Tarasov  
Editor-in-Chief of the Eastern Editorial Office  
of the news agency Regnum (Russia)*

The article parses the reasons that have prompted the Russian special presidential envoy to Afghanistan, Zamir Kabulov, to call the U.S. to leave Afghanistan. Moscow believes that U.S. policy towards Afghanistan has failed, and that as a result Afghanistan faces a real threat of being turned into an incubator of international terrorism. Moscow's anxiety isn't groundless: ISIL has repeatedly threatened to penetrate into Russia and Central Asia through Afghanistan. It is, therefore, no coincidence that Russia has entered into a dialogue with the Taliban and is making efforts to simultaneously prevent the penetration of terrorist groups into its territory, and to weaken U.S. clout in Afghanistan.

Meanwhile, Washington D.C. can't allow itself to leave Afghanistan for reputational reasons. The U.S. also fears that Afghanistan may fall into the power orbit of Iran, China and Russia. Moreover, D.C. does not exclude the possibility that the Taliban may seize control over the whole of Afghanistan. It is for these reasons that the U.S. is modernising its military presence in Afghanistan and concurrently considering the option of substituting regular U.S. servicemen with mercenaries.

However, the use of U.S. mercenaries may radically change the nature of the conflict, with the risk of making it lengthier and multilateral. In the opinion of the author, America is getting prepared for a long war in Afghanistan, where it is likely to deploy tactics tested in Latin America. In particular, troops and mercenaries will keep big cities under their control whereas the countryside will devolve to the Taliban.

Against this backdrop of avoiding terrorist penetration and hostility to U.S. policy Moscow faces an additional challenge: namely that of insufficient political and diplomatic resources to terminate American "grey expansion" in immediate proximity to the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) boundaries. Yet according to the author, this grey expansion has several positive aspects for Russia. The growing threats from American expansion can produce a wave of pro-Russian sentiments in Central Asia, which may allow Moscow to implement more decisive policies in this region. Russia also wants to benefit from the contact group "Shanghai Cooperation Organisation - Afghanistan", which Moscow and Beijing are currently working on giving a new breath.

<https://regnum.ru/news/2310291.html>

## Is Russia about to fight in Central Asia?

*Irina Jorbenadze, Journalist of the Russian informational and analytical agency "Rosbalt"*

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This article considers the statement of Russian Minister of Defence, Sergei Shoygu, regarding increased security threats in Central Asia. Shoygu noted that Moscow is strengthening its military bases in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan due to high terrorist activity of militants based in territories adjacent to Afghanistan. According to available information, ISIL is now conducting negotiations with other armed terrorist groups in Afghanistan with a view to uniting their forces, an objective which poses a direct threat to Central Asia and Russia's southern regions.

At present nearly 7.500 Russian troops are stationed at bases in Dushanbe and Kurgan-Tube, Tajikistan. Russia also has military infrastructure in Kyrgyzstan, including an airbase in Kant. Given increased terrorist threats, Moscow has already deployed a division of the multiple rocket launcher systems "Uragan", and an operational-tactical missile system "Iskander-M" in the 201<sup>st</sup> Russian military base in Tajikistan. These systems were involved in the recent anti-terrorist exercises in the immediate vicinity of the Tajik-Afghan border, in which 4.500 soldiers took part and 300 units of military equipment were used.

While strengthening its military capacity in Tajikistan, Russia concurrently expresses concern about the defence capacity of Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, which also share borders with Afghanistan - of 744 km and 137 km, respectively. Ashkhabad has a rather weak army and avoids participating both in the Russia-dominated Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) as well as in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). This calls into question Turkmenistan's ability to deter 2-3.000 militants which have congregated in the areas of Northern Afghanistan contiguous to Turkmenistan. In this regard, Irina Jorbenadze doesn't exclude the possibility of - should a real threat arise - Turkmenistan's being compelled to quickly apply for the help of Russia, the CSTO and the SCO. Uzbekistan's defence capacity, meanwhile, is higher than that of Turkmenistan. Tashkent spends considerable sums for its national security. The Uzbek President, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, during his visit to Moscow, assured his Russian counterpart that Uzbekistan would be supporting Russian efforts relative to Afghanistan. It should, moreover, be noted that the Russian Parliament - just prior to Mirziyoyev's visit - ratified a military cooperation treaty with Uzbekistan. According to this document, Russia will sell its weapons and military equipment to Uzbekistan at the price at which they are sold to the Russian army. This act is not one of philanthropy. By selling weapons to Uzbekistan, Moscow creates new jobs, strengthening the national economy, while simultaneously improving the defence capacity of Uzbekistan, which in turn will have a positive impact on Russia's security.

<http://www.rosbalt.ru/world/2017/06/15/1623312.html>

**Not one way: the interests of China and Russia in Central Asia**[www.kas.de/zentralasien](http://www.kas.de/zentralasien)

*Alexander Vorobyov,  
Research Fellow of the Institute of Oriental Studies  
of the Russian Academy of Sciences*

The article is focussed on the prospects of current Russian and Chinese policies in Central Asia. Russia, although it retains close humanitarian relations with the countries of Central Asia and has a serious military presence in the region, is - in the long run - a departing power. China, meanwhile, is on the uptrend- an ascent all the more significant since it takes place amid the slump of U.S. influence.

U.S. President Trump is currently employing a selective approach to the countries of Central Asia, notably as regards financial aid: this has been terminated for Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, reduced by half for Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, and slightly increased for Uzbekistan.

China and Russia are making efforts to structure Central Asia around their own political-economic heartlands. Moscow relies on the Eurasian Economic Union, whereas China pushes ahead its One Belt, One Road initiative. According to the author, there are two predominant opinions concerning the interactions between the Russian and Chinese projects. The first believes that both projects can coexist and efficiently complement each other. The second views the projects as fundamentally in competition and as a zero-sum game.

Beijing has several advantages over Moscow. In particular, its approach is more flexible due to its considerable financial resources. In addition, the countries of Central Asia are interested in access to the Chinese market, which is a large consumer of mineral resources. Nevertheless, there are a few factors that can impede the increase of Chinese influence in this region.

Despite the benefits which might arise from cooperation with China, the Central Asian states do not wish to fall into complete political and economic dependence on Beijing. As such, they are most likely to seek to balance growing Chinese influence by expanding political, economic and military cooperation with other centres of power. Additionally, many wish to develop their own manufacturing industries. Also worth noting is the emergence of some degree of anti-Chinese sentiment in Central Asia, which Beijing is trying to mitigate by means of soft power and educational programmes. The number of Central Asian students in Chinese universities is rising steadily every year; for instance, 13.000 Kazakh students studied at Chinese universities in 2016. In order to further stimulate this process Chinese authorities are considering plans to turn the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region into an educational region focussed on Central Asia. This will raise the importance of Xinjiang for Central Asia, as well as burgeoning economic and trade ties between them.

<http://expert.ru/2017/07/3/kitaj-i-tsentrlnaya-aziya/>

**Do we need NATO?**

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*Vyacheslav Polovinko,  
Journalist of "Novyaya gazeta - Kazakhstan"*

The Russian media are expressing some anxiety about the possible drift of Kazakhstan towards NATO. This concern has been primarily raised due to the second stage of military exercises "Steppe Eagle 2017" which occurred with the participation of Kazakh, U.S. and U.K. servicemen, as well as due to the recently signed U.S.-Kazakhstan Defence Cooperation Plan for 2018-2022.

Tolganai Umbetalieva, Director General of the Central Asian Foundation for Developing Democracy, believes that Russia's concern stems from the fact that, for Moscow, partnership with Kazakhstan means complete Russian dominance in Central Asia. The loss of Astana, therefore, is tantamount to the loss of control over the entire region. Umbetalieva notes that Kazakhstan is still a second-tier actor in international politics; in order to increase its clout Astana should build closer relations with the other countries of Central Asia, jointly designing a common foreign policy agenda, which would enable Astana to become more independent of the big actors.

Dosym Satpayev, Director of the Risk Assessment Group, calls the Russian reaction to Kazakhstan's military cooperation with the U.K. and U.S. paranoid. He stresses that after what occurred in the Ukraine, Russia has repeatedly accused Kazakhstan of violating allied obligations within the CSTO. Meanwhile, Astana has been cooperating with NATO, within the framework of the Partnership for Peace programme, since the 1990s and Kazakhstan's military doctrine directly specifies that collaboration with NATO is a part of Kazakh national security. Russia, however, continually carps at Kazakhstan and, according to Satpayev, this indicates the degradation of Russian expert community. In Satpayev's opinion, the U.S. and NATO consider Kazakhstan predominantly as an economic partner, unlike Uzbekistan, which is regarded as a vital stabiliser of Central Asia. The Kazakh expert further notes that Astana's objective in cooperating with NATO is primarily for its servicemen to learn advanced technologies.

<http://novgaz.com/index.php/2-news/1900-%D0%BE%D0%BD%D0%BE-%D0%BD%D0%B0%D0%BC-%D0%BD%D0%B0%D1%82%D0%BE>

**Saudis' growing leverage in Tajikistan;  
the terroristic menace for Central Asia**

*Tasnim News Agency (Iran)*

The ongoing rapprochement between Tajikistan and Saudi Arabia, taking place against the backdrop of cooling Tajik-Iranian relations, is here reviewed by the Iranian news agency, "Tasnim". The article notes that Tajikistan faces numerous threats emanating from Afghanistan, such as international terrorism and drug trafficking.

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In this regard, the rapprochement between Dushanbe and Riyadh may be very dangerous for both Tajik and regional stability since Riyadh used to maintain close relations with some jihadist groups, which fought in Afghanistan. It should be noted that Central Asia is currently particularly vulnerable to terrorist threats given the fact that plenty of the region's inhabitants went to Syria in order to join ISIL and Jabhat al-Nusra.

However, despite the danger of a strong Saudi presence in the region, Dushanbe has taken measures to establish close ties to Riyadh. Both sides have actively discussed the expansion of bilateral cooperation in the economic, trade, educational, cultural, tourism, technical, and scientific areas. Increasing Saudi investment in Tajikistan, especially in Tajik energy projects, is also in the limelight of bilateral meetings.

The article underlines that the main imperative compelling Tajikistan to establish closer ties with Saudi Arabia is financial. Iran, meanwhile, considering its historical, linguistic and cultural affinities with Tajikistan, could have helped Dushanbe, however the relationship between the two has somewhat cooled in recent times. This was most likely due to Tajikistan's discontent with the fact that Iran invited the Islamic Renaissance Party chairman to the conference of Islamic countries' leaders. The Tajik government believes that this Islamic movement is a threat to their national security.

<https://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1396/03/12/1425525> /نوفن

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(Translated from Farsi)

### The assessment of ISIL's popularity in Pakistan

*Rasa News Agency (Iran)*

Pakistan, although it plays a key role in the Afghan conflict, is also itself subjected to the threat of international terrorism. The Iranian Rasa News Agency, located in the Shiite spiritual and theological centre Qum, made an attempt to assess ISIL's popularity in Pakistan. According to its findings, ISIL is less popular in Pakistan than it is in Afghanistan. Yet, the observable redeployment of militants from the Middle East to Afghanistan and Pakistan is a wake-up call for regional states, including Russia. Numerous terrorist groups operating in the region, such as ISIL, Al-Qaida, the Pakistani Taliban, and the Haqqani network are gradually turning it into a time-bomb.

Navid Shahzad, an expert on terrorism, points out that most Pakistani citizens have a negative view of ISIL. After a series of terrorist acts occurred in Pakistan, even the Pakistani radical Sunnis considered members of ISIL to be Kharijites, which is to say those who have seceded from Islam. Only the old anti-Shiite terrorist groups, such as Lashka - e Jhangvi, share ISIL's strategy. According to Shahzad's information, a group of religious women related to Lal Masjid (Red Mosque) have allegedly announced their allegiance to ISIL in a video message, but so far they haven't dared to publicise it.

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Lal Masjid gained notoriety due to bloody clashes between religious students and government troops in 2007.

Pakistani security and intelligence agencies deny any presence of ISIL in their country though they have identified dozens of Islamic State contributors and supporters. In Shahzad's opinion, this is explained by the fact that if the Pakistani security agencies confirm the presence of ISIL in their country, it would be tantamount to recognising their own weaknesses. He further notes that external actors do in fact interfere in Pakistani internal affairs, including through the support of separatists and terrorists. Such actors include India and Saudi Arabia. Shahzad also emphasizes the negative impact of the Afghan crisis. Afghanistan, due to its instability, attracts terrorists of different nationalities, which then seek refuge in the tribal areas of Pakistan.

<http://www.rasanews.ir/detail/news/511241/2049>

(Translated from Farsi)

### **The penitentiary system of Kazakhstan should become independent of the Ministry of Internal Affairs**

*Torgyn Nurseitova*

*Journalist of the news portal "Zakon. kz" (Kazakhstan)*

The radicalisation of prisoners in the Kazakh penitentiary system represents an evident danger. According to Azamat Shambilov, Regional Director of Penal Reform International (PRI) for Central Asia, if Kazakhstan wants to effectively manage penitentiaries and prevent the radicalisation of prisoners, its penitentiary system shouldn't be dependent on the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MIA). He believes that a significant mistake was made as regards the management of the Kazakh penitentiary system, resulting in a rising number of radicalised prisoners. To improve the situation, it is necessary to create a separate ministry or agency for the penitentiary and probation services. Shambilov further points out that there are currently 400 prisoners convicted of extremism and terrorism in Kazakhstan, of which 11 are women, and one in five has a higher education. The number of religious convicts in Kazakhstan totals 3.500, of which 763 are Salafits, and more than 90 are radicals. This creates fertile ground in prisons for recruitment and radicalisation. As international experience shows, one radicalised person can recruit an average of 11 people per month. In light of this, Shambilov questions why the Criminal and Executive System Committee of the MIA is unwilling to bear responsibility for the prevention of religious radicalisation in prisons, shifting instead all onus to the shoulders of the Ministry for Religious and Civil Society Affairs. He believes that it is the penitentiary system's duty since the process of religious deradicalisation in prisons differs widely from preventive work in society. However, the reorientation of the penitentiary system to undertake the work of deradicalising convicts will require increasing funding, improving prison management and staff skills, as well as creating a prison intelligence service.

<http://www.zakon.kz/4873763-tjuremnnye-uchrezhdenija-kazakhstana>



## The “President of Uzbekistan’s hope” launches reforms

*Sergei Balmasov,  
Historian and Journalist (Russia)*

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The article analyses the sweeping reforms launched by Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, which have already begun to alter Uzbekistan’s internal and foreign policy. In matters economic, Tashkent is increasingly tilting towards Beijing; in the military domain, however, it is demonstrating a rapprochement with Russia, both embarking upon preparations for large-scale military drills. Meanwhile, despite these partnerships, Mirziyoyev – akin to his predecessor - doesn’t want to turn Tashkent into a mere satellite of greater powers.

Mirziyoyev has simultaneously made efforts to improve relations with Uzbekistan's neighbours, having achieved significant progress to this end. Transport and trade cooperation with Turkmenistan has been expanded. Simultaneously he has started a political dialogue with Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan on water and border issues.

There have also been many alterations in domestic policy. In recent months Mirziyoyev has fired over forty top level officials - including ministers, deputy ministers, prosecutor officers and heads of state-owned companies – as well as hundreds of mid-level functionaries in a move of sizable administrative reshuffling.

Also worthy of notice are the president’s achievements in establishing direct ties to the Uzbek society through so-called “virtual reception rooms”, whereby ordinary citizens are able to directly inform the president about their problems. For the last 11 months more than 1.1 million people have already applied for assistance in this manner. Mirziyoyev further aims to give new impetus to economic development. He initiated tax, banking and pension reforms, and began an overhaul of the law enforcement system with a view to increasing its transparency. To overcome the challenges related to the slump in state revenue, the president has chosen to give priority to non-energy sectors, such as non-ferrous metallurgy, engineering, and tourism due to their high potential for supplementing the national budget.

The article emphasises that a considerable part of the economic and financial measures Tashkent is currently designing and implementing are in fact based on the IMF’s recommendations. The IMF mission arrived in Uzbekistan in July 2017 for the first time in many years: this may be taken as an indication that the Uzbek president desires to establish a relationship of trust with the West.

<https://m.ritmeurasia.org/news--2017-08-02--prezident-nadezhdy-uzbekistana-zapuskaet-reformy-31632>