

SECURITY CHALLENGES IN CENTRAL ASIA RUSSIAN-LANGUAGE PUBLICATIONS CONTENTS DIGEST

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We hereby present the fourth issue of the Russian and Persian language publication digest on regional security challenges in Central Asia. This issue is focussed upon recent events and freshly emerging trends in and regarding Uzbekistan, Afghanistan, Iran and Kazakhstan.

Uzbekistan continues to be a trendsetter in the region, offering new formats of interaction with its neighbours. Afghanistan, in turn, has sharply intensified cooperation with Iran, India, and the Central Asian and South Caucasian countries in the sectors of transport, transit and trade. Kazakhstan, meanwhile, is paving the way to change its own linguistic and educational situation by switching to the Latin alphabet. All these elements may lay the foundations for further changes in the structure, traditions and socio-political equilibrium of Central Asia.

In the next issues of our digest we will continue reviewing the above-mentioned issues, as well as other regional challenges covered by targeted foreign media. The views and opinions of the authors do not necessarily reflect the position of the Konrad-Adenauer Foundation.

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Central Asia: Integration versus Disintegration

*Rustam Makhmudov,
Political analyst (Uzbekistan)*

The expert analyses Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev's proposal to hold regular informal consultations between the Heads of State of all Central Asian countries. The dialogue format would have to be that of a "synchronisation of watches" over the most pressing issues of regional development. Mirziyoyev voiced this idea at the international conference "Central Asia: one past and a common future, cooperation for sustainable development and mutual prosperity" held in Samarkand (Uzbekistan) on November 10-11.

Makhmudov, the Uzbek expert whose views are here detailed, believes that such meetings may dramatically increase the pace of regional cooperation. He cautions, however, that their success will be hugely dependent on the ability and willingness of local elites to effectively strengthen interstate relations and mutual trust. He further points out that in recent years Central Asia has been facing a weakening of economic, geopolitical, social and linguistic ties between regional states. It is to be hoped that Uzbekistan's new proactive position may reverse these negative trends. Tashkent has given particular priority to the fundamental improvement of its relations with Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. An increase of Uzbek cooperation with Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan is simultaneously aspired for. These policies have already

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led to an increase of Uzbekistan's trade turnover with regional states by, on average, 20 percent, and in some cases by as much as 70 percent.

In addition to the above-mentioned straightening of ties, Mirziyoyev has also proposed to create a Regional Economic Forum, an Association of Provincial Governors and Business Communities of Central Asia, and a region-wide blueprint for transport communications development. Makhmudov notes that should these proposals be successful, they may spur even further regional economic cooperation. If all of Mirziyoyev's proposals materialise, it will lead to a surge of the share of intraregional trade and investment flows in the total trade and investment activities of Central Asian countries. Concrete results and tangible benefits will spark the interest of local elites and business communities, which will lead to a virtuous cycle of intensified intraregional ties and the cementing of mutual trust. According to UN calculations, a properly effective cooperation between Central Asian states could double the region's GDP for a period of 10 years.

<http://uz24.uz/opinions/centralnaya-aziya:-integraciya-vs-dezintegraciya>

Vladimir Norov: Central Asia is a mature and self-sufficient region

*Dmitry Kluchevski,
Correspondent,
Sputnik news agency (Russia)*

Vladimir Norov, Director of the Institute for Strategic and Interregional Studies under the President of Uzbekistan, in his interview to Sputnik news agency, stated that Central Asia is at the forefront of current international attention, and that this fact is bringing about a certain geopolitical competition between external actors. For the last twenty-five years Central Asian countries, especially Uzbekistan, have developed a specific type of foreign policy that rests on the principle of "equidistance", i.e. that cooperation with one foreign actor shouldn't harm cooperation with others. On the basis of this tenet, the countries of Central Asia have been fruitfully - and simultaneously - cooperating with Russia, China, the European Union, Japan, South Korea, India and Pakistan within different and complementary formats. Norov emphasises that Central Asian cooperation doesn't exclude dealings with non-regional actors, is fully transparent, and doesn't take a stand against any actor in particular. He further notes that leading actors, such as Russia, China, the US, the EU, India and others understand the nature of Central Asian politics and recognise Central Asia as a mature and self-sufficient region.

<http://ru.sputniknews-uz.com/analytics/20171114/6823020/Norov-Centralnaya-Azia-SNG-SHOS-sotrudnichestvo.html>

Chabahar changes the regional geography of trade and transit

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*Khodayar Nayebyzadeh,
Journalist,
Fars News Agency (Iran)*

The first batch of 15.000 tons of Indian wheat arrived in Afghanistan through the Iranian port Chabahar, located on the Indian Ocean coast. This shipment is part of the grant aid of Delhi to the Afghan people. Previously, most Afghan export and import operations were carried out through the Pakistani port of Karachi. Islamabad would then make use of the logistical dependence of Afghan businesses, deploying it as an instrument of political pressure. Islamabad would, for instance, often close the border crossings of Chaman and Spin Boldak, which led to huge traffic congestions and losses of hundreds of millions of dollars.

Given Pakistan's hostile policy, Kabul was forced to search for new forms of access to international waters. Nayebyzadeh, an Iranian journalist, emphasises the contribution of Dr. Abdulla Abdulla, Chief Executive of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, who persuaded Iranian and Indian officials, businessmen and investors to embark upon the Chabahar project, a successful venture of trilateral cooperation. Delhi agreed to invest 150 million USD in Chabahar, an Iranian port. Tehran, in turn, pledged to provide the needed infrastructure, which will be used by Afghan businessmen. Nayebyzadeh believes that cargo transportation via Chabahar will grant Afghanistan swift and cheap access to global and regional trade routes and markets, radically reducing Afghanistan's dependence on Pakistan. He notes that this should have positive knock-on effects, potentially aiding in the quest for peace and stability in this war-torn country, and becoming a stimulus for its economic development.

<http://af.farsnews.com/allnews/news/13960830001001>

(Translated from Farsi)

The five-sided agreement on the "Lapis Lazuli Corridor": Afghanistan's objectives

*Farzad Ramezani Bonesh,
Political analyst (Iran)*

Afghanistan's participation in the "Lapis Lazuli Trade and Transport Corridor" is here analysed. The agreement on creating this new route was signed by Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey at the 7th Regional Economic Cooperation Conference on Afghanistan (RECCA-VII) summit, which was held in Ashgabat on November 14-15, 2017.

According to Farzad Bonesh, an Iranian expert, through joining this agreement Kabul wants to lessen its transport, economic and political dependence on Pakistan. This move towards independence is desired for many reasons, one of which is a high level of mistrust towards Pakistan. Bonesh points out that a number of Pakistan's policies have been very

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challenging for Afghanistan, since they seem geared towards causing instability in the latter. This can be seen through Pakistan's support of the Taliban and the Haqqani Network; through Islamabad's non-compliance with bilateral economic treaties with Kabul; and through Pakistan's reluctance to cooperate with Afghanistan on the Chinese Silk Road project, CASA-1000 power project that will allow for the export of surplus hydroelectricity from Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan to Pakistan and Afghanistan, and The Turkmenistan–Afghanistan–Pakistan–India Pipeline (TAPI). In view of the above, Kabul chose to diversify its access to world markets, notably via Iran, Central Asia and the Caucasus. However, as Bonesh notes, many Afghan businessmen have reservations regarding the Iranian route, since it displays a number of weaknesses: namely, the underdeveloped infrastructure in Chabahar, the threat of the return of anti-Iranian sanctions, and the insufficiently developed cooperation with India through Iranian trade corridors.

Given these concerns, they see the "Lapis Lazuli Corridor" as a lower-risk, more cost-effective alternative. This route runs instead through Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan, flowing all the way through the Caucasus and to Turkey. Proponents of the "Lapis Lazuli Corridor" believe it will transform Afghanistan into a transport crossroads, expediting its integration into regional economic structures. This, it is hoped, will then attract investments in Afghan big-ticket economic projects, thereby creating conditions for the transition of Afghanistan from internal instability to sustainable development.

<http://npps.ir/ArticlePreview.aspx?id=151992>

(Translated from Farsi)

What does the Afghan market mean for Iran?

Iranian students' news agency (Iran)

Iranian experts are currently studying the ways to further bolster Tehran's economic position in Afghanistan. In the first half of the current year, Afghanistan became the sixth largest export destination of Iranian export goods. Afghanistan's overall imports are estimated at 7.5 billion USD per annum, of which 2.5 billion USD - or 30% - are spent on Iranian exports. The economic relationship between Kabul and Tehran is, however, not one-sided: for the five months of this year, Afghanistan exported goods to Iran worth a total of 585.000 USD. Traditionally, the main Afghan export commodities are sesame; vegetable seeds and other plants that are used in perfumery and pharmaceuticals; various types of juices and plant extracts; marble and lime tuff (travertine). The Afghan market has been shrinking for the last years due to the reduction of international aid. Regardless of this, Tehran plans to double its exports to Afghanistan. These plans are grounded upon the territorial and cultural affinity between the two countries; the commodity shortage in the Afghan market which has arisen due to the inability of domestic industry to meet domestic demand is another aspect grounding Tehran's export hopes. Finally, trade links established by Afghan citizens living in Iran are also an aspect to be considered. Approximately 3 million Afghans reside in Iran,

many of whom regularly dispatch various Iranian goods to their homeland. Some experts believe that Tehran could strengthen its positions in the Afghan car market, in particular. Currently 95 percent of cars used in Afghanistan are produced by Toyota, and at least 80 percent are badly worn-out. This, it is assumed, creates a market opportunity.

<https://www.isna.ir/news/96082011332/>

(Translated from Farsi)

Prospects for the SCO's expansion and economic development

RIA Novosti,

NTV TV channel (Russia)

Iran and Afghanistan continue to demonstrate a strong desire to become fully fledged members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). The Prime-Minister of Russia, Dmitry Medvedev, voiced Moscow's position on this issue at the summit of the SCO countries' prime-ministers in Sochi (Russia). According to him, Moscow doesn't see any obstacles for Iran's entry into the SCO since this country successfully resolved its international difficulties related to its nuclear programme. Medvedev underscored, however, that decisions regarding the entry of new members into the SCO are taken on a consensus basis. As for Afghanistan, Medvedev said that one should take into account the challenges Kabul is currently facing: the country is under the pressure of very complex political factors, and is at war with terrorism.

He further touched upon the prospects of economic cooperation and development within the SCO. Possibilities to boost economic growth solely through cheap labour force and commodity exports have, in his opinion, been exhausted. SCO member states would thus need to shift attention to high technology, agriculture and ensuring food security. Medvedev further noted that Russia is ready and willing to supply its agricultural products to all SCO partners with the purpose of strengthening their food security. He recalled that Russia harvested nearly 140 million tons of grain this year.

<https://ria.ru/world/20171201/1510026556.html>

<https://ria.ru/world/20171201/1510027753.html>

<http://www.ntv.ru/novosti/1957384/>

Russia's degree of influence in Central Asia: disproportionately low given the magnitude of its financial aid

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*Kirill Sokov,
Political analyst (Russia)*

According to Kirill Sokov, Russian political analyst, Moscow should more effectively convert its financial assistance to Central Asia into political and economic influence. Russia's assistance - provided both on a bilateral basis and through international organisations, including projects and programmes of sustainable development - amounted, over the last decade, to over 6 billion USD. The overall volume of accumulated Russian investments in Central Asia exceeds 20 billion USD. Moreover, remittances sent by Central Asian labour migrants from Russia to their homelands, for the period of 2013-2016, amounted to 37 billion USD. In other words, remittances have become one of the main currency sources for the Central Asian countries. In addition to investments and remittances, Russia also supplies refined products to Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan on a duty-free basis – 1 and 1.5 million tons respectively.

Furthermore, students from Central Asia at the Russian universities number almost 150.000 per annum. Educational links are further developed by Moscow, in a number of ways. Twenty-eight Russian-language teachers were officially sent by Moscow to Tajikistan, along with 60.000 Russian textbooks. At present both countries are considering building five Russian schools in the biggest cities of Tajikistan. In September 2017, a Russian school was opened in Bishkek (Kyrgyzstan) with the support of the Russian World Fund. Its graduates have the opportunity to take examinations according to Russian educational standards, and then to study at universities in Russia.

Sokov points out that Russia's financial and humanitarian activities occur against a background of reduced US participation: US financial aid to Central Asia and the Caucasus has halved, from 218.1 to 93.1 million USD. He also stresses the difference in nature of Russian aid to that of China. Sokov notes that Moscow gives most of its financial assistance free of charge, whereas Beijing gives loans which may, depending on their conditions, ensnare regional states. Russia's financial assistance is, however, not fully decoupled from pragmatic objectives. Moscow needs stability in Central Asia for a number of reasons: so as to protect its southern borders, curb radical Islam and drug trafficking, and also economically and morally support the 4 million Russians, currently residing in Central Asia.

<https://www.ritmearia.org/news--2017-11-20--stepen-vlijanija-rossii-ustupaet-masshtabam-ee-finansovoj-pomoschi-stranam-ca-33572>

The propagandists of religious extremism are increasing their focus on migrants

*Rinat Fayzulin,
Expert on Central Asia (Russia)*

Despite the struggle against the expansion of religious extremism in Kyrgyzstan, the number of radical Islamists in this country continues to steadily grow. The official Kyrgyz statistics indicate several troubling trends. If, in 2013, only 81 people were convicted for terrorism and extremism, in 2016 the number reached 180. To curb the spread of radicalising propaganda in prisons, convicted radical Islamists are kept separate from other inmates. Kyrgyz law enforcement agencies and civil society representatives also conduct preventive work among the population. For instance, in Osh city, 13 mobile groups of civil society activists inform people about the threats of radical religious ideology. These efforts notwithstanding, the situation leaves much to be desired. Igor Shestakov, Kyrgyz political analyst, believes that insufficient cooperation between public organisations, religious and law enforcement bodies and other power structures doesn't allow for the successful countering of religious extremism in Kyrgyzstan.

As regards Kyrgyz labour migrants in Russia, Rinat Fayzullin, a Russian expert, notes that they are seen as one of the most vulnerable groups for radical Islamist propaganda. There are between 0.8-1 million Kyrgyz migrants - 20-25 percent of Kyrgyzstan's working population - in Russia today. These migrants are targeted by terrorist and extremist organisations and groups, such as the Taliban, ISIS, Tauhid wal Jihad, Ahrar al-Sham, and Hizb ut-Tahrir, all of which actively attempt to enlist them through a variety of means, including various social networks.

<https://www.ritmeurasia.org/news--2017-12-06--propagandisty-religioznogo-ekstremizma-vse-aktivnee-osvaivajut-migrantskuju-sredu-33888>

Nazarbayev switches Kazakh language to Latin alphabet: why?"

*Alexey Nechaev,
Journalist,
"Vzglyad" Business newspaper (Russia)*

The President of Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nazarbayev, signed a decree according to which the government should form a National Commission to switch the Kazakh alphabet from Cyrillic to Latin by 2025. Andrei Grozin, Head of the Department on Central Asia and Kazakhstan at Russia's Institute for Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) Countries, believes that this reform is the result of Nazarbayev's personal decision since no sociological surveys were conducted. Grozin notes, moreover, that Nazarbayev's successor may well return the Cyrillic alphabet. He further states that the introduction of the Latin alphabet will weaken Russia's soft power in Kazakhstan, split Kazakh society, and worsen its educational level.

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The Head of “Real politik” analytical service (Kazakhstan), Talgat Mamyrayymov, considers that Nazarbayev’s plan isn’t feasible due to insufficient funding, currently estimated at 115 million USD. In his opinion, this reform is just a red herring and a PR stunt, aimed to gain both the ethnic Kazakh electorate’s vote, and the West’s support. According to Mamyrayymov, Nazarbayev seems to understand that he may become a victim of the conflict between Russia and the West, and so he needs the West’s support so as to seamlessly hand over power to his successor. Given this consideration, the idea of the Latin alphabet may be treated as a form of flirtation with the West.

There are, however, very divergent opinions on the matter. For instance, one of the leaders of pro-Nazarbayev movement “Kazakhstan-2050”, Mukhtar Mankeev, views the move as a step forward. He notes that, in recent decades, the Latin alphabet has become both basis and unalienable part of technological progress, granting access to the world of cutting-edge knowledge, scientific discoveries and cyber communications.

It should be noted that after the collapse of the USSR, three Turkic-speaking republics – Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, switched their state languages from the Cyrillic to the Latin alphabet.

<https://vz.ru/world/2017/10/27/129601.html>