

**SECURITY CHALLENGES IN CENTRAL ASIA
RUSSIAN-LANGUAGE PUBLICATIONS CONTENTS DIGEST**

February 2018

www.kas.de/zentralasien

We hereby present the fifth issue of the Russian and Persian language publication digest on regional security challenges in Central Asia. This issue will cover a vast array of topics.

Firstly, the growing terrorist threat to the region due to the redeployment of ISIS militants from Syria and Iraq to Afghanistan and Central Asia. Additionally, the exacerbating competition between the U.S., Russia and China, and how it will negatively impact the Middle East, Central and South Asia. The issue will further consider the fundamental differences in the strategic approaches of Russia and the U.S. to resolving the Afghan crisis: namely that Moscow attempts to convince all parties, including Washington, to support the launching of a peace process, while, in contrast, Donald Trump's administration is intent on persevering with its policy of exerting military pressure on the Taliban.

Finally, this issue of the digest will also cover the following: the prospects of regional integration in the light of Uzbekistan's new Central Asian policy; the vision of the new Kyrgyz President Sooronbay Jeenbekov for the fight against international terrorism; Central Asian cooperation with Russia and the Eurasian Economic Union; and the potential construction of a nuclear power plant in Uzbekistan, altering the region's traditional approaches to electricity generation and strengthening Moscow's technological clout in 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.

FEBRUARY/2018

The Central Asian Union 2.0: prospects remain foggy

*Margarita Knyazeva,
Journalist,
"Regnum" news agency (Russia)*

According to Andrey Grozin, Head of the Central Asia Department at the Institute of Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) Countries, the political situation in Central Asia in 2018 will be determined by several key trends. First of all, the region will continue to face the menace of Islamic terrorism despite the defeat suffered by ISIS in Syria and Iraq. Plenty of Central Asian militants are currently seeking the means to return to their countries from the Middle East with the aim of regional destabilisation. However, this threat is unlikely to materialise in the form of a direct offensive from Afghanistan. Most likely, it will be a

CENTRAL ASIA

www.kas.de/zentralasien

slow infiltration, marked by the accumulation of resources and the creation of terrorist cells and networks. Such prospects naturally cause anxiety in the states of Central Asia, which are, therefore, taking preventive measures.

Grozin points out that Tajikistan is currently the most active of Central Asian states when it comes to hunting for terrorists. He also stresses that the number of convicts on religious grounds in Tajik penitentiaries continues growing. Dushanbe feels threatened and therefore demonstrates its desire to rely on the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO). In turn, Kazakhstan changed the laws related to security issues in 2017, leading to an increase in the capacity of the National Security Committee (NSC). As a result, under present chairman Karim Masimov, the NSC has become the most powerful structure in the country. Similar processes of enlarging security apparatus have also taken place in other Central Asian countries. Grozin puts particular emphasis upon a new Uzbek regional policy that has had a positive effect on the political and economic climate in Central Asia. President Mirziyoyev's new regional policy has rekindled discussions on the potential creation of a Central Asian Union. However, Grozin believes that it is too early to talk of regional integration since there is still too much mutual mistrust between countries of the region. As regards Uzbek domestic affairs, Grozin opines that President Mirziyoyev will continue setting up his own team of loyal officials throughout 2018. Grozin further considers that substantial changes may be expected in Kyrgyzstan, where a new president, Sooronbai Jeenbekov, will possibly try to strengthen his influence in domestic policy, seeking to become more independent from the Ex-President Almazbek Atambayev. Should this prediction be accurate, Jeenbekov may replace the heads of the State Committee on National Security, the Kyrgyz army, and the Ministry of Internal Affairs. Grozin notes that Jeenbekov is swiftly gaining political experience, as evidenced by his official visit to Kazakhstan where he worked to alleviate tensions between Astana and Bishkek. These prior tensions were provoked by former President Atambayev in 2017, who accused the Kazakh leader, Nursultan Nazarbayev, of interfering in the presidential elections in Kyrgyzstan.

As regards Turkmenistan, several economic and geopolitical trends will require Ashgabat to jettison its traditionally impartial political course based on the tenets of "positive neutrality" and isolationism. These trends include: the increasing Chinese clout in the Turkmen gas sector; shrinking export earnings; and Tehran's plans to diminish its dependence on Turkmen gas via building its own gas distribution networks in the Northern provinces. Grozin opines that, in 2018, Ashgabat – in order to find a way out of deepening difficulties – will perhaps try to break the long-standing impasse around the signing of the convention on the Caspian Sea's juridical status. Such an act would blaze a trail for Turkmen westward gas exports. Yet even the signing of the convention won't fully guarantee the realisation of Ashgabat's export plans. This is

CENTRAL ASIA

www.kas.de/zentralasien

namely because their ambitions conflict with the long-term interests of China, Russia and Iran in the Caspian region and Central Asia. Beijing for instance, would rather remain an exclusive purchaser of the cheap Turkmen natural gas; competition from western buyers, therefore, runs counter to its interests.

Ashgabat may also attempt to reach a breakthrough agreement with "Gazprom" so as to resume gas supplies to Russia. In 2016, however, Ashgabat spurned a "Gazprom" request for a price reduction amid the slump in global oil and gas prices. This caused the termination of bilateral energy cooperation. Grozin points out that the Turkmen side currently has little to offer the Russian energy giant.

<https://regnum.ru/news/2372453.html>

Central Asia: in the terrorists firing line

*George Asatryan,
Political scientist (Russia)*

The new Kyrgyz President, Sooronbai Jeenbekov, in an interview to the Russian daily "Izvestia", outlined his vision for Kyrgyzstan's policies towards Russia, the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), and the fight against international terrorism. Jeenbekov stated that he would maintain a traditional course for cementing a strategic partnership with Russia in political, military, trade, economic, cultural and humanitarian areas. He underlined that Bishkek participates in all events on countering extremism and terrorism held under the auspices of the Russian Federation. In his opinion, cooperation with Moscow is critical for Central Asia, since terrorist and extremist organisations still view the region as a target for expanding their influence.

Jeenbekov further mentioned the recently adopted state programme for fighting extremism and terrorism for the period of 2017-2022. He also declared that he highly appreciates the efficient work of the Russian-led CSTO. Jeenbekov also assessed Kyrgyzstan's involvement in the EEU positively. He noted that Kyrgyzstan currently demonstrates the fastest pace of economic growth among all EEU member states. In 2016, Kyrgyz GDP grew by 3.8 percent; exports increased by 9% to 447.2 million USD; and the inflow of investment from EEU countries in Kyrgyzstan grew by 40 percent. In addition, Bishkek's membership in the EEU allowed more favourable conditions to be created for Kyrgyz migrants working in the countries of the Union. Employment procedures were vastly simplified, and social living conditions improved, for Kyrgyz migrants and their families. Eventually, all it led to an increase in remittances to Kyrgyzstan.

In regard to his recent meeting with Vladimir Putin, Jeenbekov stated that they had a constructive and confidential dialogue on the

CENTRAL ASIA

www.kas.de/zentralasien

whole range of interstate relations – ranging from bilateral cooperation to the two countries' interaction within the framework of integration associations and international organisations. At this meeting, Jeenbekov stressed the need to gradually increase the exports of Kyrgyz goods to EEU markets, attract more investments, and more actively set up joint ventures in Kyrgyzstan.

Regarding the possible readiness of Bishkek to participate in UN peacekeeping operations in postwar Syria, Jeenbekov noted that this issue had already been debated at the expert level and in media, as well as at the meeting of the Permanent Council of the CSTO. This being said, Kyrgyzstan has neither received an invitation, nor is it currently negotiating with any party on sending its servicemen to Syria. Jeenbekov declared that this issue will necessarily require a unanimous decision of all CSTO member states, the receipt of a positive resolution of the UN Security Council, and, most importantly, the consent of the Parliament of Kyrgyzstan.

<https://iz.ru/688428/georgii-asatrian/tcentralnaia-aziia-v-pritcele-terroristov>

Moscow called on not to sleep through an ISIS attack on Central Asia

*RIA "Novosti",
Federal news agency "Riafan" (Russia)*

Moscow has expressed growing concerns about the further strengthening of ISIS positions in Afghanistan. According to the Russian foreign ministry, as of now, Afghanistan holds more than 7.000 ISIS militants, turning it into a new foothold for the terrorist movement. Zamir Kabulov, Russian presidential envoy to Afghanistan and Director of the 2nd Department of Asian affairs in the Russian foreign ministry, underscores that ISIS militants arrived in Afghanistan not to fight against Americans, but in order to create a springboard for further penetration into Central Asia.

Vladimir Shapovalov, Deputy Director-General of Moscow's Institute of History and Politics, points out that a large number of ISIS militants have started arriving in Afghanistan in recent months due to the ISIS defeat in Syria. The heads of so called "Islamic State" decided to set up new bases in other countries, including Afghanistan, to continue their terrorist activities. Shapovalov controversially asserts that there are sufficient grounds to believe that such large-scale redeployment of some thousands of militants via the territory of several countries couldn't have been carried out without U.S. support. The reason for this would be that Americans try to use such militants in other theatres of operations. The Russian historian considers Afghanistan to be a first-class bridgehead for ISIS from which it can organise diversionary attacks and terrorist acts

against Central Asian states, as well as threaten the security of Russia and Iran.

<https://ria.ru/world/20180201/1513784893.html>
<https://riafan.ru/1013056-siriya-afganistan-v-islamskoi-respublike-unichtozheno-bolee-60-chlenov-ig-pribyvshikh-iz-sar-i-iraka>

Zamirov Kabulov: I hope the U.S. will join the peace process in Afghanistan

RIA "Novosti" (Russia)

According to Zamir Kabulov, Russian presidential envoy to Afghanistan, Moscow developed an ad hoc plan for national reconciliation in Afghanistan, set to run until the end of 2020, without determining the exact dates of the beginning of negotiations between the Afghan authorities and the Taliban. Kabulov emphasises that this plan is a Russian initiative, created with the expectation that the warring parties will take advantage of its proposals when necessary conditions mature. To advance its initiative, Russia invited Lieutenant General Tariq Shah Bahrami, Afghanistan's Minister of Defence, to participate in the 7th Moscow Conference on International Security, and Mohammad Haneef Atmar, National Security Advisor of the government of Afghanistan, to participate in 9th International Meeting of High Representatives for Security Issues. Both events will be held in April 2018. Russian diplomats are also working on setting up official visits to Russia of Wais Ahmad Barmak, Afghan Minister of Interior, and Mohammad Hamid Tahmasy, Transportation and Aviation Minister. Moscow hopes that the visits of top Afghan officials will kickoff discussions concerning bilateral relations, including Russian assistance to Afghan national security forces, and the prospects of economic cooperation.

Regarding the participation of the U.S. in the Moscow format of consultations on Afghanistan, Kabulov said that the doors for American partners remain open. In his words, Moscow hopes that Washington will eventually understand the ineffectiveness of its current heavy-handed approach and join the efforts of the regional states to facilitate the Afghan peace process.

Kabulov also touched upon cooperation with Pakistan, a leading player in the Afghan geopolitical field and an SCO member state. He noted that counter-terrorism is one of the priority areas of Russian-Pakistani cooperation, noting that both countries widely interact through the channels of special services as well as within the framework of the counter-terrorism working group – the 7th meeting of which should be held in Islamabad this spring. Kabulov added that the two countries have already held two phases of the joint tactical military exercise "Friendship", focussed on anti-terrorist operations in mountainous

CENTRAL ASIA

conditions, and that Russia plans to continue this practice so as to strengthen the fighting capacity of Pakistani security forces.

<https://ria.ru/interview/20180208/1514175710.html>

www.kas.de/zentralasien

**American "Anaconda" in the Caucasus and Central Asia:
challenges and threats to the Collective Security Treaty
Organisation (CSTO)**

*Alexey Baliev,
Political analyst (Russia)*

The U.S. has decided to launch a new strategy to pave the way for strengthening its positions in Central Asia with the goal of pushing Russia and China out of the region and weakening the CSTO and the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), notes Alexey Baliev, Russian political analyst. The U.S. is likely to use a 5+1 policy: namely, the U.S. and five Central Asian countries. It will also work to cement bilateral ties with Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, as well as to fuel armed conflict along the borders of Russia and China. Baliev deems that the main purpose of Trump's administration in the Central Asian region is to restore the high level of influence, which the U.S. enjoyed 10 years ago, prior to its eviction from its military bases after combined pressure of Russia and China on regional states. Baliev refers to the opinion of Canadian political scientist Arno Rumien who believes that Washington is trying to redress its past mistakes in Central Asia, especially the forced evacuation of U.S. military bases from the Uzbek "Khanabad". Following this line of thought, the U.S. now seeks to create the impression that the "new" American activity in the region is not directed against Russia. However, in reality, Washington endeavours to limit both Russian and CSTO influence in this region. The White House thus pays special attention to Kazakhstan, which has very long frontiers with Russia. It is through Kazakhstan that Russia maintains its economic ties with the other countries of Central Asia, and provides its military-technical assistance to Tajikistan. In turn, the Kazakh authorities understand the advantages and benefits they can derive from the game of balancing between the Russian Federation and the United States; therefore, they strive to play along with both Washington and Moscow.

Baliev also draws attention to increased U.S. activity towards post-Karimov Uzbekistan, which pursues an obvious goal of obtaining Tashkent's consent regarding the strengthening of Washington's military and political positions in Central Asia. He further considers that by cooperating with the Central Asian states, Washington may reformat regional communication networks so as to reflect the conditions of the new cold war with Russia. The goal of such a policy would be to secure safe military passage for U.S. troops. Securing such a route is necessary in order to ensure the rotation of U.S. troops in Afghanistan, ensuring against the risk of Pakistan closing the transit routes through its territory.

CENTRAL ASIA

www.kas.de/zentralasien

Analysing the new approaches in U.S. strategy, Baliev points out that the intensification of American relations with the countries of Central Asia – many of which participate in the CSTO – , is taking place against the backdrop of tightening U.S. sanctions against Russia. He stresses the fact that none of the CSTO and/or EEU countries has either officially condemned the anti-Russian sanctions, or supported Moscow's retaliatory food sanctions against Washington and other Western states.

http://vpoanalytics.com/2018/01/25/amerikanskaya-anakonda-na-kavkaze-i-v-tsentralnoj-azii-vyzovy-i-ugrozy-dlya-odkb/?utm_source=warfiles.ru

2018 and the vague future of Afghanistan

"Iranian Diplomacy" analytical website (Iran)

Analysing Trump's new strategy for Afghanistan, Pir Mohammad Mulozahi, an Iranian expert on Western Asia, comes to the conclusion that it leads to the fomenting of competition between the U.S., Russia and China, not only in Afghanistan, but also the Middle East, South and Western Asia, and even in Eastern and South-East Asia. Following this logic, Afghanistan would appear to have acquired a special strategic importance for the White House. Trump's intention to increase the number of U.S. troops and to strengthen American bases in Afghanistan in the near future highlights this importance. For context, it is worth recalling that former U.S. President Barack Obama pursued an opposite policy – of withdrawal of troops from this country.

Mulozahi considers that Washington doesn't seek to resolve the security crisis and establish peace in Afghanistan with the help of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). Quite to the contrary, he considers that its genuine purpose is to create controlled instability in Western Asia. Had the United States truly wanted to solve the crisis in Afghanistan, Mulozahi notes, they could have done so for the past 17 years, since all the requisite political and military capabilities are available to them. The reason they have not, he notes, is that the U.S. needs controlled instability in Afghanistan to derive strategic benefits from its geopolitical competition with Russia and China. Mulozahi predicts that this competition will enter a new phase in 2018, since Vladimir Putin's probable victory in the forthcoming presidential elections in Russia will give a new impetus to his rivalry with Donald Trump. This new competitive momentum bodes ill for Afghanistan: 2018 may well become a year of insecurity and instability for this country.

Another factor that may increase tensions in the region is the new toughening of U.S. policy towards Pakistan. In Washington's outlook, Pakistan has already ceased to play the role that it once had in the era of the Cold War and confrontation with the USSR. The growing threat to the West from radical Salafist movements associated with Pakistan has been primarily responsible for this shift. According to Mulozahi, Pakistan – along with Saudi Arabia – has played a key role in the transformation of Salafist ideology from its moderate version into Salafi Jihadism, and then

CENTRAL ASIA

www.kas.de/zentralasien

Takfiri Salafism. A "Takfiri" is a Muslim who accuses another Muslim or adherents of other Abrahamic religions of apostasy. In turn, the ideas of radical Salafism gave rise to Al-Qaida, the Taliban and ISIS. After the start of U.S. military operations against the Taliban in Afghanistan, it was Pakistan that became the axis of Taliban support and the formation hub of Takfiri Salafism.

Therefore, in order to exert pressure on Islamabad and to force it to abandon the support of Takfiri movements and other radical religious groups, the United States began applying sanctions against some representatives of the Pakistani political establishment, some high-ranking military officials, the Inter-Service Intelligence officials, and the Muslim League, which is the oldest and one of the most influential of Pakistan's political parties. The new tough US approach to Islamabad will most likely determine the climate in US-Pakistan relations in 2018, and also have a direct impact on the development of the situation in Afghanistan.

<http://www.irdiplomacy.ir/fa/page/1974022/2018>

(Translated from Farsi)

Nazarbayev tries to move Russian - American relations from the zero point

*Marina Baltachova and Nikita Kovalenko,
Correspondents of
"Vzglyad" Business newspaper (Russia)*

Nursultan Nazarbayev, in his state visit to the U.S. and his negotiations with Donald Trump, pursued a few long-term purposes. First of all, he wanted to convince U.S. big-name companies to invest more in the Kazakh economy, especially in the oil and gas sector, and in high-tech industries. As per the information provided by the Kazakh side, Nazarbayev's team managed to sign more than 20 agreements, including contracts with Boeing and Chevron, worth 7 billion USD; there is, however, a discrepancy, given that, according to the U.S. Department of State, the total value of the contracts was of just 2.5 billion USD.

Trump and Nazarbayev also expressed their intention "to consult with each other on the issue of sanctions so as to avoid any unintended consequences for the economy of Kazakhstan". During negotiations they touched upon the prospects of security cooperation, non-proliferation of nuclear weapons, the fight against international terrorism, and the Afghan issue. Both presidents also agreed to study the possibility of Kazakhstan's joining the Convention on Cybercrime. Dosym Satpayev, Director of an Almaty-based Risk Assessment Group, points out that it is crucial for Astana to receive some kind of positive signal from Trump, which would show that Kazakhstan is an important partner for Washington in Central Asia.

During his visit, Nazarbayev sounded out his offer to be an intermediary in Russian-American relations, with a view to helping both parties out of the crisis. This is in Kazakhstan's interest since a war of sanctions harms the Eurasian Economic Union and negatively affects all

of its member states, including Kazakhstan. In Satpayev's opinion, Kazakhstan – from the perspective of the West – plays a role of one more channel of communication with the Kremlin, since Astana has a reputation of flexibility when it comes to relations with both Occident and Orient. However, Satpayev deems that one shouldn't overestimate the possible role of Astana as a mediator, because, if Washington wants to build bridges with Moscow, it will do it directly.

<https://vz.ru/politics/2018/1/17/903868.html>

The onset of debates: whether or not a nuclear industry will appear in Uzbekistan?

*Rustam Makhmudov,
Political analyst (Uzbekistan)*

In December 2017 Uzbekistan and Russia signed a memorandum of cooperation regarding the use of atomic energy for peaceful purposes. This document contains a clause which provides for the opportunity of building a nuclear power plant (NPP) in Uzbekistan. The Russian state-owned corporation "Rosatom", in case of consent from the Uzbek side, intends to build two NPP units with a 3+ generation VVER-1200 reactor. When it broke, this news immediately brought about hot debates in the Uzbek Internet segment. Opponents of the project declare that a NPP will be a time bomb posing a permanent threat to the country's ecological security. They cite the Chernobyl and Fukushima catastrophes to illustrate the scale of the potential menace. They further point out that Uzbekistan is located in a zone of increased seismic activity. On the opposite side of the debate, NPP proponents believe that a VVER-1200 reactor completely excludes the possibility of a Fukushima style disaster, as this type of reactor has two protective sheaths and a passive stand-alone security system.

Uzbek expert Rustam Makhmudov notes that regardless of whether a NPP will be built, Uzbekistan will need to begin tackling the issue of creating new electricity generation capacities in order to satisfy the national economy's burgeoning energy hunger. Forecasts indicate that domestic energy consumption will increase from 57 billion kWh in 2016 to 105 billion kWh by 2030. Currently, the bulk of electricity in Uzbekistan is produced by thermal power stations (TPS), burning natural gas. However, the available reserves of natural gas are insufficient, and so unlikely to allow Uzbekistan to meet its growing energy needs in the long term; Tashkent will thus be forced to search for new energy sources. Makhmudov's opines that there are four options via which to develop the Uzbek electricity generation sector. The first is to increase the focus on developing renewable energy. Such a choice would be welcomed by NPP opponents. However, a bet on renewables would not be without difficulties. There are still no solar plants or wind farms in Uzbekistan, which means there is a dearth of reliable empirical data. Without such data it is difficult for specialists to make an accurate evaluation as to the expediency of giving priority to the development of renewable energy projects in the conditions of Uzbekistan.

CENTRAL ASIA

www.kas.de/zentralasien

The second option is to increase the share of coal in power generation. Tashkent targets to raise coal production from 4.4 million tons in 2016 to 8.34 million tons in 2020 and 15 million tons in 2030. In total, this should raise the share of coal in the country's energy mix from 4.2 to 20 percent. Intensive coal burning can, however, cause serious damage to the environment. One possible remedy might be the use of carbon capture and storage (CSS) and carbon capture and storage, enhanced oil recovery (CCS-EOR) technologies, but they are still very expensive.

Uzbekistan could also start importing natural gas from neighbouring Turkmenistan and building new TPS. The Turkmen deposits contain more than 20 trillion cubic meters of natural gas. This option's forte is the geographical proximity of Turkmenistan, leading to low transportation costs. On the other hand, the main risk of doing business with Ashgabat is that it can be quite inflexible when negotiating – a trait which has led it to lose the gas markets of both Russia and Iran.

And, finally, the fourth option would be the creation of a balanced energy mix. It is obvious that Uzbekistan has a serious disproportion in the structure of electricity generation, since 90 percent of its TPS burn natural gas. Therefore, the construction of a nuclear power plant in Uzbekistan could seriously improve the situation and balance the energy generation system. The strength of this option is that Uzbekistan has its own large uranium reserves.

<http://uz24.uz/opinions/nachalo-debatov:-sostoitsya-li-atomnaya-energetika-v-uzbekistane>