

SECURITY CHALLENGES IN CENTRAL ASIA RUSSIAN-LANGUAGE PUBLICATIONS CONTENTS DIGEST

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We hereby present the eighth issue of the Russian and Persian language publication digest on regional security challenges in Central Asia. This issue focusses upon a number of events with the potential to shift the regional balance of geopolitical and economic power in the near future.

These are, primarily: the signing of the Convention of the Legal status of the Caspian Sea by five lateral countries; the outcomes of Tajik President Emomali Rahmon's state visit to Uzbekistan; the intensified military activity of the Taliban across Afghanistan; and the possible resumption of Turkmen gas supplies to Russia.

This issue additionally touches upon some of the causes of anti-migrant sentiment in Russian society, and the slump of popularity which ideas of Islamic consolidation in Central Asia have undergone since the Arab spring in the Middle East.

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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Five littoral countries define the legal status of the Caspian Sea

RIA "Novosti" (Russia)

The leaders of Russia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Iran inked the Convention on the Legal Status of the Caspian Sea in Aktau (Kazakhstan) on August 12, 2018. One of the most important provisions of this landmark document is that regarding the prevention of extra-regional powers' armed forces in the Caspian Sea. Further to this document, all five Caspian littoral states are responsible for maintaining maritime security and managing its resources. This provision may be viewed as a strategic victory for Moscow.

According to the Deputy Dean of the Faculty of World Economy and International Affairs of the Higher School of Economics, Andrei Suzdaltsev (Russia), the Convention makes it impossible for NATO and the U.S. to set up their bases in the Caspian Sea. This will also allow Russia to reduce the costs of protecting the Sea's southern borders, relying instead on the bloc of like-minded states.

Oleg Matveychev, political analyst, Professor of the Higher School of Economics, believes that the Convention will spur the development of economic projects in the region since the Caspian Sea is a tremendous transport artery and oil reservoir.

Liu Qiang, Expert of the Academy of Chinese Energy Strategy (China), points out that the Convention will create favourable conditions

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for regional stability and development, including spurring the development of the oil and gas sector, which will raise the region's investment attractiveness for Chinese companies accordingly.

<https://ria.ru/economy/20180813/1526422983.html>

https://ria.ru/radio_brief/20180813/1526418980.html

<https://ria.ru/economy/20180811/1526363055.html>

Tajikistan and Uzbekistan: the end of the cold war

Aydin Mehtiev,

Journalist and political analyst (Russia)

Tajik President Emomali Rahmon's state visit to Uzbekistan is the first of its kind in the last 17 years, symbolising, in Aydin Mehtiyev's view, the end of the cold war between the two states. Following the talks, the two leaders signed 27 bilateral documents, the most important of which is the Strategic Partnership Treaty. It is noteworthy that immediately after the successful visit of Rahmon to Tashkent, the two countries held joint military exercises on the border, during which the sides repulsed a conditional incursion of armed militants.

One of the most fundamental outcomes of the visit was the decision to settle the dispute on the Rogun hydropower plant. Tashkent and Dushanbe also agreed to start joint construction of two hydropower stations on the Zarafshan River with a total capacity of 320 Megawatts. This project will be mainly funded from the Uzbek budget. Mehtiyev evaluated the strategic alliance of Dushanbe and Tashkent as another significant diplomatic success of Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev. It is possible that Mirziyoyev may continue in this vein, building partnerships not only with the countries of Central Asia, but also with Azerbaijan and Turkey. This openness of the Uzbek leader has dramatically elevated the investment rating of Uzbekistan in the eyes of Western companies.

www.pravda.ru/world/formerussr/20-08-2018/1391609-tadzhikistan_uzbekistan-0/

A strengthened Taliban imposes dialogue upon the U.S.

Alexander Rybin,

Editor of "Ferghana" News Agency (Russia)

The recent battle between the Taliban and the Afghan army for control of Ghazni – a strategically important city, located on the road between Kabul and Kandahar – showed the capacity of the Talibs to capture large urbanised regions. It should also be noted that the Taliban has successfully smashed the ISIS bulwark in the Northern provinces. The many recent advances of the Taliban lead to renewed questions on the efficacy of President Trump's strategy towards Afghanistan, which was initially aimed at the total eradication of anti-government armed

movements through a build-up of U.S. troops and by intensifying their cooperation with the Afghan army.

Realising its increased capabilities, the Taliban expressed readiness to commence negotiations with the U.S. At the same time, the movement's leaders continue to reject the idea of face-to-face talks with Kabul, since they regard it as a non-independent actor. In turn, the Americans are also seeking contacts with the Taliban, judging by the information coming from the Taliban office in Qatar. However, the likelihood of a successful outcome to the potential peace negotiations is significantly reduced by a precondition of the Taliban: they insist upon a complete withdrawal of foreign troops from the territory of Afghanistan. Yet the West is not ready to leave the country since this would be tantamount to admitting defeat.

<https://www.fergananews.com/articles/10128>

Afghanistan and regional tension

*Independent newspaper
"Hasht Sobh" (Afghanistan)*

The editorial analyses the goals the Taliban pursued in its recent assault upon Ghazni and the possible links of Russia, Iran and Pakistan to this armed movement. It is noted that the Taliban's assault upon Ghazni revealed shortcomings in the Afghan cities' defence system, which should be addressed as quickly as possible, because otherwise the Taliban may repeat such attacks in other provinces.

It is further detailed that the Taliban didn't in fact intend to capture this provincial centre. Apparently, they merely planned to capture weapons and ammunition, and also to inflict heavy losses on the Afghan army. The additional goal was to achieve the dominance of the Taliban in the information space, and ultimately in the negotiations process.

The tensions between major global and regional actors also contribute to the enhancement of the position of the Taliban. The ongoing aggravation of relations between the U.S., on the one hand, and Russia, Iran and Pakistan, on the other, compels the latter to establish links with the Taliban.

As per Afghan sources, the families of many Taliban militants have found refuge in Iran. Additionally, last year, the Taliban delegation visited Tehran to discuss the issue of Afghan immigrants in the country. Russia in turn believes that U.S. presence in the region no longer meets its interests, and has thus begun to consider the Taliban as an effective tool with which to pressure Washington. However, as the editorial emphasises, Russia has not yet provided the Taliban with weaponry of the kind which could change the power balance in the Afghan theatre of hostilities.

Against this backdrop, the editorial underscores that the people of Afghanistan are not in favour of the return of the Islamic Emirate, and that this support significantly strengthens Kabul's negotiating positions.

<https://8am.af/afghanistan-and-regional-tensions/>

(Translated from Farsi)

Gazprom may return to Turkmenistan

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Viktoriya Panfilova,
Journalist of "Nezavisimaya Gazeta" (Russia)

Turkmenistan may resume selling its natural gas to Russia. It is expected that the possible visit of President Putin to Ashkhabad in this autumn may revive the bilateral negotiations process on this issue. Turkmenistan has extreme need for a breakthrough in this direction so as to relieve itself from its over-dependence on China in gas exports, and to fill the budget with readily usable capital. Experts have noted that it was the termination of cooperation with Gazprom, in 2016, which sparked off an ongoing economic crisis in Turkmenistan.

Sergei Pravosudov, General Director of the National Energy Institute (Russia), believes that Gazprom doesn't need the Turkmen gas as it can increase the production of its own hydrocarbon raw materials. Moreover, Gazprom keeps buying Uzbek gas, which is supplied to Kyrgyzstan. As is widely known, the Russian energy giant has bought the gas transportation system of Kyrgyzstan and is currently carrying out the gasification of this Central Asian state. Nevertheless, as per Pravosudov, Gazprom might resume purchasing Turkmen gas if Ashkhabad offers a sufficiently appealing price.

http://www.ng.ru/cis/2018-07-30/5_7277_turkmenia.html

Social problems faced by Asian migrants in Russia

RIA "Novosti" (Russia)

Russia ranks fourth in the world in terms of number of migrants, after the U.S., Germany and Saudi Arabia. It is a circumstance which causes social tensions in Russian society. According to Elena Nikiforova and Olga Brednikova from the Centre for Independent Social Research (St. Petersburg, Russia), almost all social problems related to migrants are the product of two interlocking phenomena.

The first is the lack of mechanisms for the integration of migrants' families and children into Russian public life. This lacuna compels labour migrants to illegally bring their families to their new homeland, often with the help of corrupt officials and criminal intermediaries. The second source of problems is connected to the migrants themselves. Very many of the Central Asian migrants currently moving to Russia are first generation migrants, born after the collapse of the USSR. This is a generation which is not so well-versed in both Russian culture and language as the previous ones have been. This makes them be seen as "strangers" in the eyes of ordinary Russians and produces numerous frictions on a personal level.

Both of these two factors lead to the perception of labour migrants by the Russian state and society as something "temporary", not having the right to permanent existence and life. Such "temporality" opens space for corruption and prevents the integration of migrants into a functional social environment. Experts believe that a successful integration of

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migrants into society would help the government alleviate social tensions related to their growing presence in the large cities, as well as aiding with the demographic crisis in the country.

The Transnationalism and Migration Process Laboratory of the St. Petersburg State University conducted its own survey among migrants from Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan so as to find out why they had decided to move to Russia for work. It turned out that the majority of the citizens of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan went to work in Russia so as to help their families in their homeland. Simultaneously, the majority of respondents from Uzbekistan pointed out that the chief reason for their move to Russia was the need to earn money for a wedding.

According to the calculations of the Laboratory's experts, an average Central Asian migrant, who intends to go to Russia, should have at least 500 USD at his disposal: about 110 USD are spent on tickets to Russia; nearly 230 USD are expenses for the first month of residence; and about 200 USD are spent on obtaining an official status in Russia. Given the difficult economic situation in most Central Asian countries, migrants are forced to borrow money from friends, relatives or credit organisations to cover their initial expenses.

<https://ria.ru/science/20180705/1523987524.html>

<https://ria.ru/world/20180307/1515958346.html?inj=1>

Does Central Asia distance itself from the Islamic world?

Central Asian Information Portal "News Asia" (Russia)

Following the Arab Spring – that led to the destabilisation of vast territories and brought colossal suffering to many ordinary people – the Middle East is increasingly perceived in Central Asia as a source of radical Islamism, which ought to be feared. Ideas of secularism have also been increasingly supported by Central Asian societies. In turn, regional leaders have started to publicly criticise strict Muslim customs, such as the obligatory wearing of the "hijab" and "niqab" (Muslim women's vesture), justifying this by their inconsistency with local traditions.

As a result, the possibility of Central Asian foreign policies being formed towards the Middle East in favour of political consolidation, on the grounds of common Islamic values or ideas, is no longer likely. Such political attitudes have been replaced by dry pragmatism. Today, the regional leaders are predominantly preoccupied with the matter of how to structurally transform their national economies and draw Western investment, technologies and knowledge. Which, in turn, is a further reason why Central Asia is gradually distancing itself from the Islamic world.

www.news-asia.ru/view/kz/topical/11481