

Central Asia: heading for disaster

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Introduction

The five former Soviet Republics of Central Asia – Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan – are of immense strategic importance. Three of them border China, and three of them border Afghanistan. They are all members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), with Russia and China. Yet four out of the five (the partial exception being Kazakhstan) are facing catastrophic decline in their human and physical infrastructure at a time when increasing instability in Afghanistan is threatening to spill over into Central Asia. Tajikistan is further threatened by the presence of Islamist militants and its role as a major transit route for Afghan opium and heroin.

This combustible mix has the potential for catastrophe as the US begins to wind down its presence in Afghanistan. Any disintegration in Central Asia has the potential to enable Islamist extremism to flourish – and, potentially even more dangerously, to produce a serious clash of interests between Russia and China.

Post-Soviet stagnation

However ineffective communism was as a means of organizing a modern economy, the Soviet system did at least bestow a reasonable physical and human infrastructure on the republics of Central Asia. However, 20 years on from the collapse of the Soviet Union, that infrastructure has largely decayed. As the influential International Crisis Group reported in a powerful 2011 analysis: "Quietly but steadily Central Asia's basic human and physical infrastructure – the roads, power plants, hospitals and schools and the last generation of Soviet-trained specialists who have kept this all running – is disappearing. The equipment is wearing out, the personnel retiring or dying."

The two worst effected countries are Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, both of which face, according to the ICG, "catastrophic systemic collapse". But Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan "are heading in the same direction"; and the concern is that it was precisely anger over the state's failure to deliver a satisfactory level of basic services that led to the unrest that unseated Kyrgyzstan's President Kurmanbek Bakiyev in April 2010.

Power – or the lack of it – is the most obvious failing. In the winter of 2007-08, Tajikistan went for weeks without power, and the following year

Edited by JKC de Courcy

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Kyrgyzstan only avoided a similar fate through tough rationing. Little has improved since. In the Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, the energy sector remains unreformed since Soviet times, and subsidies undermine any attempt at efficiency. Both countries are dependent on energy-generating capacity built in the 1960s and 70s which is nearing the end of its useful life. Power cuts are common. Even in Ashgabat, the capital of Turkmenistan, there are power cuts several times a day lasting up to an hour each.

In the health sector, Tajikistan spends just 1.7% of GDP, far below the internationally suggested level of 5%. The figure for Kyrgyzstan is only slightly better at 2.1%. The competence of locally trained medical personnel is also decreasing throughout the region, where it is said that political loyalty often takes precedence over medical skills. Teaching standards have dropped dramatically since the demise of the Soviet Union. Among the problems noticed by observers are widespread misdiagnosis of common conditions, the over-use of antibiotics, poorly administered intravenous medications leading to the spread of HIV.

There are analogous problems in the education sector. In Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan there is simply no replacement generation of teachers for the Soviet-trained echelon now retiring. In Tajikistan, the shortage of teachers is already running at up to 30%. In Kyrgyzstan, over 40% of teachers are already beyond retirement age. Teachers in Kyrgyzstan are paid \$26 a month; in Tajikistan they get \$28. (The average monthly salary in Kyrgyzstan is \$65 and just \$38 in Tajikistan.)

Other signs of failing education include the fact that less than 40% of pupils in Kyrgyzstan have text books, while the capacity of schools is exceeded by nearly 40%. During winter and during peak periods for agricultural work, only about half of the pupils come to school. An international assessment undertaken in 2009 found 83% of Kyrgyz students were below minimum international standards in reading, 86% in maths, and 82% in science.

As in other areas of infrastructure, the position in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan is better, but still not good. There may be no major shortage of teachers, but the quality is exceptionally low – and there is both overcrowding and an acute shortage of text books. At the tertiary level, Turkmenistan has 4,000 university places for 20,000 applicants – a fact that feeds endemic corruption.

A crumbling transport infrastructure is another huge problem throughout the region. In Kyrgyzstan, for instance, 20% of all roads are beyond the point of repair. Even in Kazakhstan, the least decayed of the former Soviet Central Asian republics, 60% of national roads are in need of rehabilitation.

The conclusion of the ICG's 2011 report on Central Asian infrastructure is as follows: "The countries can be placed in three groups. Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are in the worst shape. Infrastructure is at the edge of collapse and has been deprived of investment. Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan are experiencing slow but consistent decline. Their situation in the near future may be no less disastrous than in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, as the scope of decline becomes harder to hide. There is little hope that the downward spiral in

these four countries can be stopped. Kazakhstan has made patchy progress in some sectors and conserved Soviet endowments in others. Much of the success however can be attributed not to state policies but to the country's oil money."

The tinder box

The catastrophic collapse of the human and physical infrastructure throughout Central Asia provides ample tinder for a serious conflagration. The spark is most likely to be provided by Islamist insurgency in Tajikistan, the Central Asian country most affected by events in Afghanistan.

Tajikistan's internal stability is threatened both by local warlords and by the resurgent Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), an ally of the Taliban's in Afghanistan which may or may not also be beholden to Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence agency (ISI). The problems with tackling these security challenges are hugely compounded by the role that Tajikistan plays as a conduit for Afghan opium and heroin to Russia and beyond.

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and transformed itself...*

The IMU was virtually destroyed after the US intervened in Afghanistan in 2001, but in recent years it has regrouped and transformed itself into an ethnically diverse group of jihadists from right across Central Asia, the Caucasus, and possibly Xinjiang in China. It first began to regroup, along with the Taliban, in Pakistan's Waziristan, where it welcomed reinforcements from Chechnya, Dagestan, and other areas where jihadists were under increasing pressure. The May 2005 uprising in Uzbekistan and the June 2010 ethnic violence in southern Kyrgyzstan are also said to have provided the IMU with additional recruits.

There are plausible allegations that the IMU's resurgence in activity in northern Afghanistan has been instigated by the Taliban and ISI. The Taliban because it wanted to put pressure on the Western allies in the north of the country as a diversion, the ISI because of fears that the US and Nato might redirect more of their Afghanistan supply chain to Central Asia rather than Pakistan (where it provides a profitable infusion to the economy).

The fear now is that the IMU will increasingly move into Tajikistan, possibly even to the extent of threatening an enfeebled regime. At the very least, they could create a 'new Waziristan' in the east of the country. Certainly, this becomes a serious prospect as the US progressively withdraws from Afghanistan. As the Taliban re-establishes its influence within Afghanistan (as it must), then the jihadist focus will inevitably shift, and Tajikistan is nothing if not 'low-hanging fruit'.

Not only is there the problem from a failing infrastructure, described earlier in this report, there is also a visible Islamization going on. Even in the capital Dushanbe, Friday prayers are now a dominating feature in a way that was not previously the case. Unemployment is at least 35%, with about half the population living below the poverty line. Corruption is all-pervading, fed by the huge drug trade.

About 95 tonnes of heroin (which represents a quarter of Afghanistan's out-

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put) is thought to transit Central Asia on the way to Russia and elsewhere. To this can be added around 130 tonnes of opium. And the problem with the drug trade (and its associated corruption) is that it ensures that the border is kept permeable. In the most recent year for which we have figures, Tajikistan's border troops – with guerrilla war on one side and a fairly significant arms black market on the other – confiscated only about 50 firearms. This is hardly a discouragement to would-be infiltrators from the IMU.

Superpower interests

The nature of Central Asia, with its long and poorly guarded borders, is that a collapse in security in one country is bound to affect its neighbours. For China, the danger is that there could be a spill-over into Xinjiang, which has a 400km border with Tajikistan and which is one of the most troublesome of China's regions, with its Muslim Uighur population. Russia would be equally concerned about contagion from Tajikistan boosting Islamist separatism in the north Caucasus.

The dangers of a serious clash of interests between China and Russia hardly need rehearsing. On the other hand, the fact that Central Asia is so clearly part of the Russia-China sphere of influence - formalized in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization - means that America's freedom of action in searching out and destroying any new haven for Islamist radicalism and jihadist terrorism would be greatly restricted.

What happens in Central Asia matters greatly, and the omens are far from encouraging.

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