Main Article

Non-traditional Threats in Central and South Asia: Problems and Prospects

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Introduction

In the Central and South Asia regions the challenges of facing non-traditional threats have become more complex and challenging in recent years. If before 2001 the main threat was posed by just a few main militant groups, recently their numbers have increased to some 40 groups that are freely operating in Afghanistan, Pakistan as well as crossing over to Tajikistan. These developments show that increasingly, foreign clandestine centres are promoting, assisting and sustaining the new militant groups, even designing and financing them in their geographical, ethnic and political determinations.

The increase in the number of research centres with military affiliations, working as analytical centres of the air force and other branches of the armed forces, have investigated the origins, objectives ideologies and tactics of insurgent movements. The latter have exported their "products" to practice in other regions as testing grounds—and have increasingly become involved in criminal activities, or have increased their contacts and cooperation with apolitical organized crime groups.

Therefore lately it has not been easy for both regions to cope with the increased scores of mobile militants groups. Meanwhile, some groups are openly operating in South Asian countries, while they are banned in Central Asian countries as terrorist organizations. They migrate to safer regions where the legality of their existence is opaque i.e. where so-called anti-terrorism legislation is not as developed or not directed against them.

Other risks include activities of members and adherents of militant groups gradually penetrating to business and political realms, like them emerging as parliament deputies and representatives of political institutions as is happening in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. This article focuses on various non-traditional threats facing both regions in their varied dimensions and suggests ways to deal with possible and likely scenarios.

Wider Nexus

For over a decade now, the eyes of most security analysts have been riveted on Afghanistan. The counter-terrorism approaches in South and Central Asia focus mostly on containment and curtailment measures to prevent threats of political violence and (violent) criminality, because militants, operating in Afghanistan, have nexuses with European, Albanian, Turkish and Kurdish drug mafias. These transnational organized crime networks have increased their
presence in the main production centres and have begun to gain more control over the whole supply chain. These networks also actively defend their markets and production networks. The militants control the opium and heroin traffics, money laundering, trade in small arms and convert their entire proceeding to hard currencies. For instance, drug money provides opportunities for organized crime groups; and drug proceeds enable terrorist groups to increase their manpower capacity for militant activities in the regions.

The regional security organizations operating in both the Central and South Asia regions are not so effective in countering the penetration of militant groups and drug trafficking, as from Afghanistan and Pakistan as well as from the Golden Triangle, where opium crops spread to more than 157 thousand hectares. The “high tribunes” of international organizations have urged the local governments to adopt interdiction measures to curb narcotic traffic. But in reality, the foreign military troops have been freely making a huge business for themselves through drug traffic, by delivering heroin in military cargo planes that are rarely checked at the military bases.

It has also been reported that huge amounts of precursors and angidrids—the main ingredients for heroine production—are transported to Afghanistan across the Pakistan border. Recently transporting heroin from Afghanistan became costly; hence the militants are transferring some of their laboratories to Central Asia. As a result Kyrgyzstan’s annual heroin output potential has suddenly skyrocketed to an estimated 180 to 220 tons.

The illegal laboratories in Kyrgyzstan also use indigenous ephedra that produce around 500 tons of ephedrine, which can be used in amphetamines. The Chu Valley, which extends across northern Kyrgyzstan and southern Kazakhstan, yields a very large crop of marijuana. That region is adjacent to the metropolitan centres of Bishkek and Almaty. According to reliable expert sources, Kyrgyzstan’s recent drug exports to the outer world have outpaced that of Burma.

For both regions other main threats emanate from the hidden laboratories that manufacture methaqualone and mandrax in addition to trafficking of ATC from Myanmar, that ultimately spread to the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) markets and beyond. Also the increased drug use worsens the AIDS epidemic, mainly from Vietnam. The narco dealers are directly linked to and also directly engaged in small arms trafficking, explosive materials and human trafficking.

Drugs facilitate the quick flow of huge funds through hawala (informal value transfers according to Islamic law and customs) channels, and through illegal traders, who in turn finance most of the militant activities. During the start of the financial crisis of 2008, the drugs acted as “liquid goods” that enhanced the turnover of Western banks. These banks subsequently required additional financial investments that helped them avoid bankruptcy.

It is thus evident that banks do have interests in laundering “drug money”. Therefore the organized criminal nexus has grown too deep and too complex in South and Central Asian regions to be uprooted by simple interdiction measures. Who reaps the most benefits from
increasing non-traditional threats, and why it is essentially prone in these two regions, need further explanation.

**Contributing Factors**

Several factors contribute to the non-traditional threats posed by militant and criminal groups. First of all, it seems that big actors are not genuinely interested to see a strong Central and South Asia. Strong and powerful nations in the regions are not in consonance with their geopolitical strategies, concepts and ambitions. Escalating military situations in the regions provide them opportunities for exporting arms. Thus the major exporters of small arms delivered to Afghanistan are from Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Russia and the United States (Small arms survey 2004: 128). Unfortunately, these weapons are recently being used by non-state actors such as religious extremists and organized crime groups.

Experts opine that more than 10 million small weapons are currently circulating in Afghanistan illegally. And through porous borders with Tajikistan, they could easily proliferate across the Central Asian region. These small arms are freely available on the black markets of Afghanistan and Pakistan, especially in the Peshawar bazaars.

The huge quantities of these weapons could even, by themselves, increase the probability of new or intensified armed conflicts between ethnic groups in the region. Besides, the UK, France, Germany, Canada and Italy have approved huge arms supply exports to Saudi Arabia, some of which may fall into the hands of illegal political groups in that country. Over the years thousands of political or religious detainees have been jailed in Saudi Arabia.

The ongoing supply of small arms will lead to a regional arms race and a possible diversion of arms to militant groups, including radical fundamentalists and terrorists. In the short term, involvement of external actors in the Central Asian region would only deteriorate the security situation with an accelerated arms race that may make the region even more unstable than it is now.

The presence of religious-militant bases in Afghanistan could easily frustrate the proposed energy projects for exporting Central Asian energy resources to the countries bordering the Indian Ocean and beyond. This would ultimately deprive the Central Asian countries of a primary source of income, acutely dependent as they are on exporting energy resources to developing countries in particular.

The regional security structures lack the capacity to adequately prevent or combat the threats posed by well organized militant groups waging guerrilla warfare and following other various tactics. Moreover, the militants successfully use the rugged, mountainous terrain to cover their penetration into various cities of the regions. In Kyrgyzstan a radical booklet was found that described the economic situations in Bangladesh and Malaysia to draw attention and attract followers from among the illiterate population in rural areas.

The second contributory factor to non-traditional threats is the fact that the regional security organizations in the region have limited capacity, inadequate experience and lack unified
counterinsurgency and counterterrorism strategies. Sometimes, military forces rush to the field without a night-fighting capacity, inferior air support, inadequate communication facilities, no bullet proof armour, no proper maps of the area, no essential rations, and with helmets incapable of withstanding fire from a Kalashnikov assault rifle. However, the militants, armed with light weapons and night-vision goggles, are well armed for a prolonged armed struggle. All these deficiencies stem from the following problems:

Firstly, the member states of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) do not have well-trained, mobile forces ready to counter local terrorist operations, as in the mountainous terrain of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. The CSTO's military strategies are mostly directed at preventing macro-level threats emanating from conventional and regional armed conflicts rather than facing or countering militant activities in local areas.

Secondly, over the last few years there has been increasing mistrust between Euro-Atlantic and Eurasian regional security organizations such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the CSTO in countering terrorism. Member countries differ on collecting precise information, which would be used for prohibiting funding of the enemy, and for finding, fixing, targeting and then effectively engaging the enemy. The process remains too slow and creates barriers in dealing with the extant reality.

Thirdly, there is limited or no interregional military cooperation to face the challenges of non-traditional threats. As a result, fleeing insurgents are not caught, they roam free and all counterinsurgency operations are rendered fruitless. The absolute absence of a common approach to countering non-traditional security threats in the region is a major roadblock to dealing with these threats.

Fourthly, a number of regional security organizations carry functions duplicated by their counterparts in other countries. This creates more problems than had been anticipated, and could have been avoided. As states grow complacent and incapable, the militants grow strong and capable. Despite overlapping memberships in the three regional bodies (CSTO, SCO and OSCE) there is a lack of coordination among the members and a substantive duplication of efforts instead, including in their counterterrorism and counterinsurgency strategies.

The non-state actors either enjoy overt support of one or more particular states or operate covertly in connivance with state agencies. They link the entire nexus from Central Asia to the “Golden Crescent” (comprising Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran) and the “Golden Triangle” (comprising Myanmar, Laos and Thailand). These are the two major routes of drug trafficking.

Many terrorist organizations have links to nongovernmental international organizations. For instance militant organizations have regularly received financial support from liberal
offshore banks, foreign law enforcement agencies, companies, wealthy individuals and NGOs as Aid and Relief Organizations.

However, money from narcotic trafficking constitutes the bulk of their financial support. Estimates suggest that drug trafficking from Afghanistan has already reached an export value of around $4 billion per year of which only a quarter goes to the opium farmers and the rest is appropriated by local officials, militants, field commanders and drug dealers. The UNODC estimates that a huge volume of opium is consumed in the Islamic Republic of Iran, approximately 450 metric tons per year. The total consumption of opium in the neighborhood of Afghanistan such as in the Islamic Republic of Iran, Pakistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan has been estimated at 650 metric ton per year.

**Cyber Issues and Security**

In midterm perspectives, it may well be that virtual warfare would remain primarily an information war by militants groups and other non-state actors waged against the state to affect and destroy the cyber-warfare capability of the state. Making it dysfunctional is the leitmotif of many or most militant groups, by targeting the computerization systems in business, social services, governance and defense sectors.

Cyber tactics has become one of the most “effective tools” in the hands of religious militants, especially after the encyclopedia of “jihad” was displayed on the internet space. The main objectives of such cyber tools are increasing the number of adherents through websites, twitters and blogs. Countermeasures against cyber warfare by these militant groups are underdeveloped or even undeveloped in the Central and South Asian regions. Therefore, cyber war creates another critical shift in the nature of new militant threats in the regions.

The idea of the “one-man army” is more completely realized in the shape of the well-trained hacker than it had been ever hoped for by the militant through any other technology. The safest and surest mode of communication for the extremist is through the Internet and through the use of various “chat houses”. Since no one knows—or can easily know—who is at either end of the “electronic conversation”, no one knows too the significance of what is being communicated. The militant groups have become so sophisticated in encrypting their messages that even the spoken words do not communicate the real meaning of the conversation. And thus the propagandist messages of militant groups are spread.

**Actors Sans Results**

Like ‘too many cooks spoil the broth’, as in the double standard applied by external regional organizations in countering terrorism—making in that sense the statement true that ‘one's man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter’—has led to lack of practical studies on new types of non-traditional threats. Current studies still tend to focus on related issues of the same traditional threats. As a result, non-traditional actors, who pursue their objectives of
Creating vulnerable security situations in the Central and South Asia regions, directly penetrate neighbouring countries.

Besides, these regions have become a hotbed of some of the most ferocious religious militant groups, mostly pursuing geopolitical objectives. Most militant groups receive their training and learn all relevant fighting tactics in training camps located outside the regions in the Caucasus and Pakistan. There they combine various nefarious methods to escalate conflicts. They play it as a geopolitical game to involve international militant groups, who help them effectively achieve their strategic goals. Therefore, there is an urgency to consider the following counter measures:

First of all, there is a need to activate prevention mechanisms to detect and deter destructive propaganda, coming from the militant groups. They have been using sophisticated communications systems for expanding the base of their radical propaganda through internet and digital systems. Such activities ought to be considered a cybercrime against the state in many countries and the guilty must be brought to book.

Collective precautions should be taken to prevent religious propaganda aimed at manipulating views of the population by provoking them with false religious ideas. Efficient countermeasures in this direction would be of immense use to harness religious and cultural potentials of the Central and South Asian regions against destructive militant ideologies in these regions. What the countries of Central and South Asia need to do is to launch a global educational and informational campaign against militant terrorists and religious extremists in order to educate the population about their heinous designs.

The Central and South Asian regions are located at the crossroads of historic junctions between multitudes of cultures, religions and civilizations marked as of crucial geopolitical significance. Samarqand and Bukhara played a significant role in the Islamic world as civilizations with 2500 years of history. So were the Seljuks in the Turkic world. The seminal contributions of the Timurid and Baburid rulers were no less significant. For this historic-cultural reason alone, outside powers should help to promote stability, democracy, tolerance and prosperity in the region, rather than undermine these by narrow, self-interested designs.

After 2014 most external actors in the region would focus more on Central and South Asia. Therefore it is urgent to collectively throw a fresh look at the issues related to regional stability. The Central and South Asian countries have significance to the Western external powers as strategic partners in the region to be pitted against other regional powers such as Russia, China, and Iran. Such a power configuration in the region is in the interest of the West and would protect the commercial concerns in the exploitation of Caspian energy resources. The primary American interest is in security across the region, which entails its continuing presence in Central Asia, particularly after the turbulence of the Arab Spring.

After the withdrawal of (nearly) all Allied forces from Afghanistan in 2014, new or increased threats could easily emerge across Central and South Asia. Western countries may use the fluid situation by forming closer bilateral relations with certain countries in Central and South Asia, as a divide-and-rule strategy to weaken the cooperation between those countries.
in the region, and thereby further their own geostrategic and even hegemonic interests. Implementation of an effective counterterrorism strategy in these regions requires a well thought-out roadmap, collectively approved and collectively pursued so that the collective endeavor would ultimately bear fruit.

A solid regional security system in both the regions through the SCO framework may contribute in this regard to establish such a counterterrorism strategy. Local experts opine that it is necessary to create an “anti drug belt” around Afghanistan in which joint counter operations with EU, UN and neighbors of Afghanistan and Central Asian countries would play a prominent role in throttling the financial flow to militant activities. However, a CSTO dominated by Russia would not approve an active role by the SCO. Therefore, with a view to effectively counter the menace of contemporary militants, a universal approach should be worked out to combine all possible measures: military, political, academic, educational, religious, and cultural.

**Russian Interests**

Enhancing the military and strategic presence of Russia in the region entails increased vulnerabilities of Central Asia's security systems and economic development. In addition to obtaining control over energy resources of Central Asia, the US will try to involve Central Asian countries in alternative energy projects, so as to limit Russia's power and influence which it has already done through the pipelines of Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan and the proposed Nabucco. Russia is keenly interested in restoring or enhancing her influence in Central Asia and the Caucasus.

Russia's traditional fields of action would be direct: energy policy, military-technical cooperation, and other plans to shift the balance of military forces in the region to its own benefit. Projects for transporting gas from Turkmenistan and the broader Caspian Basin across Afghanistan to South Asia, which were aborted by the instability in Afghanistan, could be revived in the long run in the context of a broader effort to restore and improve road, rail and other transport and communication links. The revival of Central Asia's future links with India, which have been frustrated by the war in Afghanistan, opens up the possibility of access to Indian ports as well as markets for Russian and Central Asian goods.

Given Russia's ongoing interest in the North-South freight transportation corridor, Russia can play a particularly important role in developing infrastructure and bringing the landlocked Central Asian countries into the global marketplace by connecting them to that corridor. Here, the United States could also play a role by encouraging and assisting Russia in the development of this route as a complement to the East-West transportation routes from Central Asia across the Caspian, to the Caucasus and the Black Sea.

While the East-West route became a focus of early competition between America and Russia, the development of a North-South route, binding Central Asia to Europe and Asia could easily become a platform for cooperation. Without cooperation between the big external powers, the prospects for stability in Central Asia are fairly slim. In addition, replaying the
“Great Game” would only ultimately undermine the US and Russian efforts to safeguard their national interests in the region.

**Conclusion**

Generally, the problems for the stability of South and Central Asian regions are all too often worsened by the narrow geopolitical concepts and initiatives of the external powers. Concepts such as “Wider Black Sea Strategies”, “Bigger Central Asia”, “New Silk Routes” and others initiatives have one hegemonistic objective in common: to ensure total control over strategic regions by creating “rings [spheres] of influences”.

The ongoing conflicts in Afghanistan as well as the insurgency movements and religious conflicts spreading across the Middle East should serve as a sobering reminder to foreign powers to change their narrow geopolitical views in favor of setting up a global organization to quickly implement common counter measures to dispel the threats of terrorists and other militant groups. Thus the only way to mitigate or even defeat the common threats from such groups is by way of overcoming differences and setting up a collective mechanism for combating various non-traditional threats never earlier present in such a degree and constellation in the two regions. Central Asian and South Asian geo-cultural, geopolitical and geo-economic milestones could provide long-term anchors to regional security and stability.

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**Endnotes—References**

3. Anatomical Therapeutic Chemical Classification System is used for the classification of drugs.
5. Small arms black markets are located in Karachi, Peshawar, and in Quetta to the northern tribal belt. See *Daily Times Monitor*, Site Edition, 23 August 2012.
6. Russia is prepared to spend $1.1 billion on modernizing Kyrgyzstan’s army and $200 million on meeting the needs of Tajikistan’s armed forces: see [www.kommersant.ru/doc/2060903](http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/2060903).
7. The militants were armed with Kalashnikov assault rifles and their rounds would not be stopped by the helmets issued to the Kyrgyz soldiers: Otorbaeva, ‘Kyrgyz Private Relives Batken Nightmare’ *Military Parade*, [www.milparade.com/ru/content1.htm](http://www.milparade.com/ru/content1.htm).
The Central Asian countries neither consider each other as potential enemies, nor as allies in terms of traditional (military) security. Consequently, there are no amity/enmity relations and no tendencies of regional structuring; regional security is simply not considered in terms of a security dilemma. Thus, terms such as conflict formation, security regime or pluralistic security community are neither applicable, nor can Central Asia be considered a regional security complex. Additionally, a peculiarity of such threats in Central Asia is that they are perceived as being mainly connected with the situation in Afghanistan, which is not considered part of the region. Thus, the main source of threats and challenges is located outside the region and it is seen to be an external danger. Today post-Soviet Central Asian countries are facing problems caused by old security challenges and the emergence of completely new threats. These threats may influence the prospects of secular statehood in the region. This is a serious obstacle to modernization. One of the old security challenges is the situation in neighboring Afghanistan where crisis phenomena continue to become aggravated. The most dangerous threat is posed by the concentration of militants in northern Afghanistan (on the border with Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan) during 2014 and 2015. Since South Asia is, unfortunately, the flash political parties in Bangladesh or the power struggle point for the Global War on Terror, despite its linkages in Afghanistan after Soviet withdrawal, South Asia in the Arab world with particular reference to Al-Qaeda faces regional security threats because of internal politics, post-9/11 global politics have altered the crisis and conflicts of the states. Being one of the most internal dynamics within the societies and the states ethnically, culturally and linguistically diverse in the forefront of the war on terror, such as Pakistan, regions, it has witn