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Afghanistan and regional instability: A risk assessment

Heidi Kjærnet and Stina Torjesen

[Abstract] The report offers a stocktaking of Afghanistan's regional challenges. It finds that domestic instability in Pakistan, strains in Pakistan–Afghanistan relations and insecurities associated with the US–Iran stand-off on Iran's nuclear programme continue to pose the most significant regional risks to the stability of Afghanistan. There are, however, a number of additional challenges: the failure of the USA and its allies to enable a substantial dialogue on Afghanistan with Russia and China, in addition to India and Pakistan's continued rivalry, create a suboptimal regional environment for Afghanistan's stabilisation process. There are also serious regional challenges related to drugs trafficking and water sharing. Finally, the report discusses the situation in two of Afghanistan's (lesser known) neighbours in detail. It finds that Uzbekistan is unstable: regime collapse in this country is one possible scenario – and this would entail grave consequences for Afghanistan, especially the northern regions. Turkmenistan, by contrast, whose long time dictator Saparmurat Niyazov died in December 2006, seems stable in the short to medium term. The report ends by providing a set of policy recommendations for Norwegian policymakers.

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Executive summary

The regional context of Afghanistan poses a range of challenges for the country's stabilisation process:

Pakistan

Pakistan's central government has lacked control of developments in the areas bordering Afghanistan (Baluchistan, the Federally Administered Tribal Areas and the North-West Frontier Province), making President Musharraf unable to implement the US-encouraged crackdown on Pakistani Taleban supporters. The Pakistani border areas have become a key source of weapons, equipment and new recruits for anti-government militant groups in Afghanistan, while Pakistan–Afghanistan bilateral relations remain, as so often before, strained. The Pakistani election results from February 18 2008 give grounds for cautious optimism. Nevertheless, the serious challenges stemming from Pakistan will continue in the short to medium term for Afghanistan.

Iran–US tensions

The standoff between Iran and the USA over Iran's nuclear programme has introduced difficulties in Iran–Afghan relations. Iran remains an important supporter of the Western-backed Hamid Karzai government. Nevertheless, in the face of US pressure, Iran is beginning to demonstrate, according to some reports, its ability to destabilise Afghanistan and derail Washington's Afghan campaign, as a means of enhancing its overall leverage regarding the USA.¹

Geopolitical rivalries

Geopolitical rivalries in the region preclude any optimal co-ordination of support to Afghanistan by neighbours and great powers. These tensions include the long-standing conflict between India and Pakistan as well as the serious Russian and Chinese unease over the US and NATO military presence in the region.

Regional trade difficulties

Security concerns and post-Soviet bureaucratic inertia prevent Afghanistan's northern neighbours from fully endorsing the vision, promoted by the USA and other nations, of Afghanistan's economic recovery being facilitated by denser integration into regional trade and communication links.

Uzbekistan

The government of Uzbekistan is highly authoritarian and deeply unpopular. Large-scale political and social upheaval remains one likely future scenario for the country. Upheaval in Uzbekistan would pose a serious challenge to the stability of Afghanistan's northern and western territories, including Mazar-e-sharif and possibly Meymaneh, where Norwegian troops are stationed. The German-run ISAF base located in Termez in Uzbekistan

¹ Robert M Gates, 'Statement to the House of Armed Services Committee', 11 December 2007.

near the Uzbekistan–Afghanistan border, and Mazar-e-sharif would be particularly vulnerable in case of upheaval in Uzbekistan.

Drugs

Drugs production and trafficking constitute one of Afghanistan’s central domestic challenges, but drugs trafficking can also be seen as a regional problem. The large-scale criminal activities and incomes associated with regional drug flows are undermining the states of the region: in this way Afghanistan’s neighbours – Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan in particular – are becoming weaker, more criminalised, more unstable and less able to act as constructive partners for Afghanistan.

Water

Afghanistan’s northern neighbours have a lengthy history of water disputes. If Afghanistan in the medium or long term decides to claim its legitimate share of the region’s water resources – as it may well do in order to further its economic development – then water-sharing in the region will become even more difficult. Bilateral and multilateral relations between and among the Central Asian states have been severely strained at times, although fully fledged ‘water wars’ have remained a remote prospect.

1. Introduction

Afghanistan's regional environment poses both grave challenges and promising opportunities that shape Afghanistan's stabilisation process in important ways. This report offers a stocktaking of some of the central challenges and opportunities embodied in the regional context of Afghanistan.

The key message is that domestic challenges in Pakistan, strains in Pakistan–Afghanistan relations and insecurities associated with the US–Iran stand-off on Iran's nuclear programme continue to pose the most significant regional risks to the stability of Afghanistan.

Aside from these well-publicised threats, several other important and lingering hazards face Afghanistan. These include:

- Geopolitical rivalries involving the USA, Russia, China, Iran, Pakistan and India
- Potential for large-scale political upheaval in Uzbekistan
- Drug trafficking undermining stability and state authority in neighbouring states
- Water scarcity and water conflict

On the positive side for Afghanistan, while geopolitical rivalry is a serious problem, outside powers' interest in trade, energy and transportation routes may bring increased investment and potential prosperity for the region. This could help to mitigate economic grievances in Afghanistan and perhaps turn old regional inter-state rivalries into constructive partnerships.

Another encouraging development in Afghanistan's regional environment has been the surprisingly calm situation in Turkmenistan following the death of President Saparmurad Niyazov's and the emergence of the new leader Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov. Instability seems to have been averted in the short to medium term. Moreover, Berdymukhammedov has signalled a willingness to expand economic co-operation with Afghanistan, including making tangible efforts to encourage the realisation of the Turkmenistan–Afghanistan–Pakistan gas pipeline. In this way, developments in Turkmenistan are aiding Afghanistan's recovery – rather than undermining it.

This report will first analyse geopolitical tensions in the region and their impact on Afghanistan. We then assess the potential for instability in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. Next, challenges associated with Central Asian trans-boundary rivers and implications of the large-scale drugs trafficking are analysed. We conclude by highlighting the policy implications for Norway and the Norwegian armed forces.

2. Geopolitics: challenges in Afghanistan's regional environment

Studies of civil wars and their aftermath stress the central importance of co-ordination and joint approaches by regional neighbours when attempting to stabilise war-torn countries.² The regional environment facing Afghanistan today is more benign than in the 1980s and 1990s.³ Nevertheless, many of the key issues that make stabilisation in Afghanistan painstakingly difficult stem from the regional context.

2.1 Pakistan's role in fuelling the insurgency in Afghanistan

Pakistan has historically been heavily involved in the internal affairs of Afghanistan.⁴ At present the challenges stemming from Pakistan are primarily linked to the political situation in areas bordering Afghanistan: Baluchistan, the Federally Administered Tribal Areas and the North West Frontier Province. Political factions sympathetic to the Taliban and Al Qaeda gained strength in these territories after 2001.⁵ This helped facilitate an increasing influx of weapons, money and recruits from Pakistan to Afghanistan.

The growth in political strength of pro-Taliban forces was tied to the rising influence of Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA) – a coalition of six political parties where three Deobandi and ethnic (Pakistani) Pashtun groups are particularly important. In the October 2002 elections the MMA became the second largest party in Baluchistan; it gained an absolute majority in North-West Frontier Province and became the third largest party in the national parliament of Pakistan. The MMA's political influence and interaction with the Taliban unfolded differently in the three border regions, but common to all was a situation where MMA affiliates and other traditional networks were more influential than representatives of Pakistan's central government and where the MMA helped create an environment ideologically and politically supportive of Taliban groups.

² See D.L. Byman & M K.Pollack, 2007, *Things Fall Apart: Containing the Spillover from an Iraqi Civil War* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press); and M. C. Pugh, N. Cooper & J. Goodhand, 2004, *War economies in a regional context: challenges of transformation*, A project of the International Peace Academy (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner). One key factor in the successful stabilisation of Tajikistan was the co-ordinated approach by the key states engaged in affairs related to Tajikistan; see S. Torjesen & N. MacFarlane, 2007., 'R before D: the case of post conflict reintegration in Tajikistan', *Conflict, Security and Development*, vol. 7, no. 2.

³ Kristian Berg Harpviken, 2003, 'Afghanistan: from buffer state to battleground – to bridge between regions?', in James Hentz & Morten Bøås, eds, *New and Critical Security and Regionalism: Beyond the Nation State*. Aldershot: Ashgate; and A. Kniazev, 2004, *Afganskii Krizis i besopasnost' Tsentral'noi Azii* Dushanbe: Donish.

⁴ For a historical overview of Pakistan's engagement see Harpviken, 2003., 'Afghanistan: from buffer state to battleground – to bridge between regions?' (cf note 3 above).

⁵ There are various reasons why the radical Islamic factions in the Pakistani border territories have gained strength; they include the relocation of Taliban and Al Qaeda supporters to the Pakistan–Afghanistan border areas as well as the outcry against the loss of civilian lives in southern Afghanistan – both direct consequences of Operation Enduring Freedom. See M. Norell, 2007, 'The Taliban and the Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA)' *China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly*, vol. 5, no. 3.

The accord on North Waziristan in September 2006 was indicative of the central government's weakness and the prominent role of the MMA, which helped broker the deal.⁶ The Pakistani military had attempted to track down Al Qaeda and Taleban groups since 2002 in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas, but faced serious difficulties. In the 2006 accords tribal leaders pledged to ensure that militants do not move across the Pakistan–Afghanistan border or attack the Pakistani military. The actual effect of the accords has, however, been the reverse: protection and room for manoeuvre for the Taleban. The accords have been interpreted by many as a *de facto* surrender by the Pakistani army in the border regions. Magnus Norell notes that there was a three-fold increase in attacks on coalition forces in southern and southeastern Afghanistan after the accords were signed.⁷

The central government's powerlessness vis-à-vis the radical political groupings in the border areas was compounded by the previous close ties of the Pakistani Directorate for Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) and the Pakistani army to MMA representatives. Much has also been made of alleged continuing close contact between ISI and Taleban representatives in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Regardless of the actual level of contact between government agencies and radical legal and illegal groups, the overarching problem in the Pakistan–Afghanistan border regions seem to have been the dominance of legal political groupings that pursued a political agenda at complete odds with President Musharaf's US-encouraged policies of curbing the Taleban and their sympathisers.

The Pakistani national assembly elections and provincial assembly elections (North Western Frontier Province and Baluchistan) on February 18 2008 gave a considerable blow to the position of the MMA. Its share of national assembly seats were reduced from 63 to 6 and the MMA incurred considerable losses in the North Western Frontier Province and Baluchistan. Moderate parties gained seats at the expense of MMA. This could herald a reconfiguration of the political landscape in the areas bordering Pakistan. Nonetheless, MMA and other groups rejecting President Musharaf's proclaimed anti-terror agenda seem set to maintain considerable degrees of influence in these areas.

Official Pakistani–Afghan bilateral relations have remained highly strained over recent years, although the Afghanistan–Pakistan 'peace jirga' in August 2007 represented a welcome diplomatic step forward.⁸ Nevertheless, with the profound political crisis that faced Pakistan in Winter 2007/07, efforts to follow up and develop bilateral relations were put on hold.⁹ With the election results of February 18 2008, there is increased hope that Pakistan–Afghanistan bilateral relations may improve further. Still, domestic political struggles and developments in Pakistan will persist in having a profound bearing on Afghanistan. In this way, Pakistan will most likely continue to be the source of Afghanistan's most serious regional challenge for years to come.

⁶ The accord on North Waziristan is one of several accords brokered by MMA associates since 2002: see Norell, 'The Taliban and the Muttahida Majlis-e-Amal (MMA)' (cf note 5 above).

⁷ Norell, *op.cit.*

⁸ Frédéric Grare, 2006, 'Pakistan–Afghanistan relations in the post-9/11 era'. *Carnegie Papers* 72., Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, p. 3.

⁹ Interview with Western diplomat, Kabul, 25 November 2007.

2.2 The US–Iran stand-off: implications for Afghanistan

Iran is an important and effective supporter of Afghanistan's stabilisation process. Tehran has provided close to USD 1 billion in aid since 2001, and trade between the two countries stands at USD 260 million.¹⁰ Iran supplies electricity to Afghanistan's western areas, and the country has initiated major infrastructure projects, road reconstruction in particular. There are also plans to extend Iran's railway system in a way that would link Afghanistan to the port of Chabahar. The Iranian leadership is strongly committed to and supportive of President Hamid Karzai's government.¹¹ Nevertheless, some analysts have recently become more sceptical of Iran's actions towards Afghanistan. Two issues are particularly problematic. Iran has initiated an aggressive policy of forced return for the approximately 1.5 million illegal and 95,000 legal Afghan refugees in the country. Up to 2000 are returned every day, and this heavy influx of returnees could prove destabilising for Afghanistan.¹² Second, there have been recent discoveries of Iranian-produced weapons and explosive devices among insurgent groups in Afghanistan. These weapons could originate from old Northern Alliance commanders who received weapons from Iran during the civil war. The USA, however, thinks otherwise. Secretary of Defence Robert M. Gates stressed in a statement that 'weapons and financing' were coming from Iran, while the well-known Afghan journalist Halim Fidayi has labelled Iran 'a wolf in the clothes of a sheep slowly turning Afghanistan into Iraq'.¹³

Iran has an understandable security grievance against Washington, because of the US forces stationed at Shindand airbase just 100 km from the Iranian border, which could constitute a particular vulnerability in case of a US attack on Iran. Moreover and more importantly, Iran might be using its potential for destabilising Afghanistan to increase its leverage towards the USA. From this perspective, the believed recent negative actions from Iran could be intended as a signal to Washington of Iran's central role for Afghanistan's stability – thereby raising the bar for US decision-makers wanting to respond to Iran's nuclear development plans with military actions. Disciplining Iran could come at the cost of derailing the US-led Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan.

Regardless of whether Iran is indeed playing this perceived second game of destabilisation in addition to its explicit and tangible support to the Karzai government, it remains a fact that any further escalation of tensions in US–Iranian relations are highly likely to have a negative effect on Afghanistan.

2.3 Geopolitical rivalries

Two clusters of geopolitical grievances in the region affect Afghanistan. Firstly, Russia and China, both members of the increasingly significant Shanghai Co-operation Organisation (SCO), are uncomfortable with the US and NATO troops stationed in Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan as part of Operation Enduring Freedom and ISAF. Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are former Soviet republics and constitute parts of

¹⁰ Anij Chopra, 2007, 'Iran in Afghanistan', *ISN Security Watch*, 6 June.

¹¹ Interview with Western diplomat, Kabul, 25 November 2007.

¹² Chopra, 2007, 'Iran in Afghanistan' (cf note 10 above).

¹³ Chopra, 2007; and Robert M Gates, 'Statement to the House of Armed Services Committee', 11 December 2007.

Russia's intended 'security belt' around its own territory.¹⁴ Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan border China. This brings the ISAF and OEF bases on these countries in very close proximity to China.

Both Moscow and Beijing endorsed the US-led invasion in Afghanistan in autumn 2001 and still share Washington's interest in combating terrorism. An important precondition for the support in 2001, however, was the understanding that the US and NATO bases in Central Asia would be short-term. With the prolonged stay, China and Russia have developed an 'increasing anger' over this Western presence near their borders.¹⁵ China is particularly concerned over the prospects of an enduring US base on its doorstep, while Russia wants to consolidate the dominance of the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) in Central Asia. This regional grievance on the part of Russia and China ties in with other tensions on the global level between the two powers and the USA.¹⁶ Together these controversies prevent the USA, Russia and China from developing joint approaches to Afghanistan's stabilisation process. At present, Russian and China seem antagonised by the Western-led stabilisation efforts and have remained largely passive – even if they both share the end-goals of ISAF and OEF. The inability of the USA and other ISAF-contributing nations to initiate a constructive dialogue on Afghanistan and the failure to encourage more participatory roles for China, Russia and the SCO constitute a significant loss of input and support to the stabilisation process in Afghanistan.

The second cluster of geopolitical rivalry concerns the long-running dispute between India and Pakistan, where the two countries' conflicting claims on Kashmir lie at the centre of bilateral tensions. Pakistan's insecurity towards India has historically constituted a key rationale behind Pakistan's intense involvement in Afghanistan's internal affairs. Facing the prospect of a new war with India, Pakistan has identified a need for 'strategic depth' beyond its western and northern borders. In practical terms, this has entailed a quest for ensuring that Afghanistan and its leadership will remain friendly, supportive allies of Pakistan.¹⁷

The Pakistan–India dispute prevents the two countries from developing a complex joint approach to facilitating Afghan recovery, and it is not unlikely that the two countries are also undermining each other's efforts towards Afghanistan. One manifestation of these tensions and detrimental affects can be seen in trade arrangements. While Pakistan allows Afghan exports to transit Pakistan to India, it does not allow Indian exports to transit Pakistan to Afghanistan. This hinders the full development of Afghanistan–India trade, even as India has taken significant steps to enhance Afghanistan's export potential to In-

¹⁴ Russian Federation, 1993, *Kontseptsiia vneshnei politiki Rossiskoi Federatsii* (Moscow: Ministry of Foreign Affairs).

¹⁵ A. Bailes, P. Dunay, P. Guang and M. Troitskiy, 2007, 'The Shanghai Cooperation Organization' *SIPRI Policy Paper No. 17* (Stockholm: SIPRI).

¹⁶ For a further discussion on this see D. Trenin, 2006, 'Russia leaves the West', *Foreign Affairs* July/August, and Bailes et al., 2007, 'The Shanghai Cooperation Organization' (see note 15 above).

¹⁷ Another reason for Pakistan's meddling in Afghanistan's internal affairs has been the fear that an ethnic Pashtun government beyond the control of Pakistan would lay claim to Pashtun-dominated areas in Pakistan. For a good discussion of this see Harpviken, 2003.

dia. Afghanistan has been granted exemption from Indian import duties and the country is set to join the India-led South Asian Free Trade Agreement (SAFTA) in February 2008.

2.4 Difficulties with enhancing Afghanistan's regional economic integration

In September 2007 a new bridge between Afghanistan and Tajikistan, sponsored by the USA and Norway (among other donors), was opened. This is the most visible manifestation so far of US efforts to enhance Afghanistan's trade and interaction with its neighbours, particularly the former Soviet Central Asian states of Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan.¹⁸ Other countries, among them Afghanistan itself, have also stressed the importance of regional integration. The sixth meeting of the Joint Co-ordination and Monitoring Board (JCMB-VI) for Afghanistan had regional economic co-operation as its key focus. This built on earlier major regional co-operation conferences in Bishkek (2004) and New Delhi (2006) involving all states in the region. The Economic Co-operation Organization (ECO), whose members include Iran, Turkey, Pakistan and the former Soviet Central Asian states, has also adopted regional economic integration as a central focus.

However, the strongly articulated consensus in the diplomatic arena on the necessity for regional integration has translated into few tangible improvements in the regional trade and economic regimes facing Afghanistan. One reason is the ambivalence of neighbouring countries towards the immediate security threats that might ensue from greater openness towards Afghanistan: increased drug flow and crime threats. In this way, short-term goals of containing drugs, crime and insecurity associated with Afghanistan prevent the states from endorsing the long-term stability gains that increased economic interaction between Afghanistan and its neighbours could bring. All the bridges over the river Pyandz connecting Afghanistan with Uzbekistan and Tajikistan are at present subject to difficult border-control regimes that hinder trade flows.

A second and perhaps more significant reason for ambivalence on the part of Afghanistan's neighbours is the poor track record that these countries hold in facilitating trade among themselves. This is particularly the case for the former Soviet states, where post-Soviet bureaucracy and corruption have resulted in very high formal and informal barriers to trade in the region.¹⁹ These barriers exist both between the former Soviet states, and between these states and Afghanistan. In turn, any increases in trade, investment and business contact between Afghanistan and its northern neighbours have been far from optimal, rendering Afghanistan's economic recovery even more difficult.

¹⁸ Addressing ministers from the five former Soviet states of Central Asia, US Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs Evan A Feigenbaum remarked: '...we see opportunities to help nurture [trade ties] in every direction of the compass – but increasingly to the south precisely because it is the least developed of the four points on the compass and also because of our unique role in a reopened and rebuilding Afghanistan', US State Department 'Remarks to participants of the Third Annual Meeting of the U.S.–Central Asia Trade and Investment Framework Agreement at the U.S Chamber of Commerce' 19 July 2007, Washington DC.

¹⁹ World Bank 2005, *Tajikistan trade diagnostic study*, Washington DC: World Bank; World Bank 2004, *Trade performance and regional integration of the CIS countries*, Economic Sector Work, Washington DC: World Bank.

One area where the potential gains of regional economic co-operation are particularly high for Afghanistan is energy and energy transportation. Afghanistan could become an important transit and receiver country of cheap gas and hydropower if the proposed gas TAPI pipeline (Turkmenistan–Afghanistan–Pakistan–India) could be realised and Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan expanded their export of hydropower resources southwards.²⁰ A joint India–Pakistan gas pipeline could also help to mitigate tensions between these two countries. So far however, insecurities associated with Afghanistan as a transit country and the sheer size of the investments needed to realise these transport projects have stalled progress. In the case of TAPI, geopolitics also make the matter more difficult. Russia is keen to keep Central Asian gas flowing northwards through its territory, while China has been making efforts to initiate a gas pipeline going east from Turkmenistan via Uzbekistan to China.²¹ These two competing routes – should it prove that the size of Turkmenistan’s gas reserves is not great enough to satisfy all export options – would challenge the realisation of TAPI.

²⁰ World Bank, 2004, *Water and energy nexus in Central Asia improving regional cooperation in the Syr Darya basin*, Washington DC: World Bank.

²¹ European countries are also hopeful that there will be a trans-Caspian pipeline, although at present this seems to be the least likely pipeline project to be realised.

3. Uzbekistan

On the surface level, Uzbekistan may appear to be stable, but there is a potential for future large-scale political and social upheaval in the country. In a worst-case scenario, this could pose severe challenges to the ISAF forces in northern Afghanistan and augment instability in Afghanistan.

In this section we assess the internal situation in Uzbekistan. First, however, we offer a note on how potential instability might affect northern Afghanistan. As part of its ISAF contribution, Germany operates a support base in the southern Uzbekistani city Termez. The 'Lufttransportstützpunkt 3' hosts approximately 300 German soldiers, seven C-160 transport planes and five CH-53 helicopters.²² Termez lies close to the Uzbek–Afghan border and the Afghan city Mazar-e-sharif, where some of Norway's military troops are based. Instability in Uzbekistan would put the Termez ISAF operations in jeopardy, which in turn could undermine ISAF operations in Northern Afghanistan – not least by disrupting supply chains.

One of Northern Afghanistan's most influential politicians, former warlord General Dostum, is an ethnic Uzbek. Dostum enjoyed extensive support from Uzbekistan during the Afghan civil war, although it is uncertain how far his powerful position in Afghan politics today is upheld by support from Uzbekistan. In any case, should the regime of President Islam Karimov in Uzbekistan fall and chaos break out in that country, then this might affect the power balance between the various 'strongmen' in northern Afghanistan, and in turn trigger instability and jockeying to (re)-establish power positions.

Regime collapse in Uzbekistan would also increase the power and presence of groups advocating radical political Islam in the country. It is unlikely that such groups will become as dominant as they have in the Pakistan–Afghanistan border territories. Nevertheless, an increase in groups sympathetic to the rhetoric of the Al Qaeda and the Taleban in areas bordering Northern Afghanistan would benefit the Taleban and other anti-government forces in Afghanistan and further complicate the security situation in Northern Afghanistan.

3.1 Potential for social unrest

President Karimov's rule is characterised by a high degree of personalised presidential control, low degree of legitimacy, and blatant human rights violations. The opposition is to a large extent crushed and dispersed after years of government repression.

In 2005 the people's frustration and sense of injustice and the widespread anti-Karimov sentiments led to a mobilisation against the Uzbek state. In Andijan on 12–14 May protests against a local court trial of 23 entrepreneurs accused of belonging to a radical Islamic group escalated into mass upheaval. A prison was stormed on 12 May, freeing up to 500 prisoners. The government responded to the large-scale protests in the city's main

²² Anja Schoeller-Schletter, 2005, 'Germany takes low key approach towards Uzbekistan', *Eurasia insight* 9/07/05, see also 'Sendehinweis Bundeswehrcamp Termez' <http://www.deutschesheer.de>

square by ordering army troops to fire indiscriminately into a crowd of mainly unarmed civilians, reportedly killing as many as 750 people.²³ In the aftermath of Andijan, the government cracked down on virtually any opposition in the country. The Andijan events resulted in international sanctions against the country, including a visa ban for central regime actors.

The demonstration in Andijan formed part of a series of demonstrations in 2004 and 2005. The main reasons for protests were the government's ruinous economic policies, and the repercussions on the livelihoods of ordinary people.²⁴ In particular, conditions for cotton farmers and new restrictions on bazaar trade and shuttle trading had Uzbekistan's many poor people outraged. Protests took place across the country. Protests were also triggered by the frequent gas and electricity disturbances during the harsh winter of 2004/ 2005.²⁵

3.2 What comes after President Karimov?

President Islam Karimov turned 70 in January 2008, and for years there have been reports of his ailing health. The president has failed to appoint a successor, and, however the succession occurs, many observers fear that it is unlikely to be smooth.²⁶ A sudden acuteness in the succession issue, caused either by Karimov's health or a palace coup of some kind, could throw Uzbekistan into a struggle for political power and national crisis.

On the other hand, there are also precedents for smoother successions in systems of strong presidential power in Central Asia, as the case of Turkmenistan has shown. The cost of political opposition to a strong president in a system of arbitrary rule is potentially very high and probably acts as a strong incentive for possible contenders to bow to whoever seems to be the strongest candidate. This could reduce the risks of a protracted power struggle if the Uzbekistan succession issue should come acutely to the fore, e.g. if Karimov were to die suddenly, and consequently also reduce the chances of political change in the country.

However, the succession issue might also come to the fore under more dramatic circumstances. There is increasing speculation on the likelihood of a palace coup scenario in Uzbekistan. One likely contender could be the chief of the Uzbek National Security Service, Rustam Inoyatov, portrayed as the grey cardinal of Uzbek politics.²⁷ Analysts believe he would be able to remove President Karimov, had it not been for the Russian support for Karimov.²⁸

Some observers see the president's daughter, Gulnora Karimova, as one relevant actor in a possible future power struggle, while others opine that she is satisfied with the exten-

²³ *Uzbekistan: The Andijon uprising*. ICG Asia Briefing No 38, 25 May 2005, page 1. Uzbek government sources claim only 169 fatalities, and have labelled the protesters 'terrorists'. In addition to the large number of deaths, several hundred people fled to Kyrgyzstan.

²⁴ *Uzbekistan: The Andijon uprising*, page 1.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, page 11.

²⁶ *Uzbekistan: Europe's sanctions matter*. ICG Asia Briefing No 54, 6 November 2006.

²⁷ 'Khlopok bez edinogo vystrela', *Novaya gazeta*, 11 August 2005.

²⁸ 'Analyst says Uzbek security chief best alternative to President Karimov', *BBC Monitoring Former Soviet Union*. 5 April 2007.

sive economic powers she already holds. Karimova has secured near-monopoly control of the telecommunications sector, the entertainment industry, tourism and natural resources.²⁹ This might simply be a stepping stone to gain political powers in her father's absence. Karimova, however, seems unpopular both with the general public and the political and economic elite. The Moscow-based Uzbek oligarch Alisher Usmonov could be an important ally for her.³⁰ Usmonov is the director of Gazprominvestholding, a subsidiary of Gazprom, and as such plays an important role in the Russian gas company's relations with former Soviet states. In late 2005 there were rumours of Moscow encouraging President Karimov to install Usmonov as his successor, but such rumours have thus far failed to materialise.

3.3 Economic developments

Uzbekistan's economy is highly dependent on its three main export commodities: cotton, gas and gold, as well as some industrial products. Increasingly, however, export income is thought to go directly to regime actors and not to the state budget. More than anything Uzbekistan depends on its cotton production, but this is reported to be stagnating as a result of a combination of low state-imposed procurement prices, official interference and insufficient reform.³¹ This sector of the economy employs large numbers of the workforce, but results in scant income for the farmers. The careers of local administrators depend on meeting production targets, and they resort to a range of harsh measures to fill their quotas. The security forces are believed to reap the lion's share of the profits from cotton production.³²

Official figures on economic development and inflation from Uzbekistan are not to be trusted. According to international financial institutions, the official GDP growth rates are inflated, and inflation figures grossly underestimated. In any case GDP growth is driven by favourable prices on the international markets for its main export commodities of gas, cotton and gold. These sectors remain under strict government control, and revenues vanish into off-budget accounts.³³ The cotton sector is thought to be under tight control of the security structures, while the gas sector is under the control of the president's daughter Gulnora Karimova. About the gold industry little is known, but with the world gold prices at an all-time high in 2006, there has been a tightening of the regime's control over this sector as well.

The ruinous economic policies of the Karimov regime have increased dissatisfaction, leading to unrest in the past. The big question is if this could happen again. Poverty, a sense of injustice and growing anti-Karimov sentiments could well serve as sparks to ignite new social upheaval. Moreover, the economic hardship of the people may make them increasingly receptive to the message of social justice and anti-corruption preached by radical Islamic groups.

²⁹ *Uzbekistan: Europe's sanctions matter*. ICG Asia Briefing No 54, 6 November 2006.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, page 12.

³¹ *The Economist Intelligence Unit: Uzbekistan 2007-2008*.

³² *The curse of cotton: Central Asia's destructive monoculture*. ICG Asia Report No 93, 28 February 2005.

³³ *Uzbekistan: Europe's sanctions matter*, page 9.

3.4 Islamic forces

The authorities have banned what they term ‘extremist organisations’, including the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), Hezb-ut-Tahrir and the Pakistani group Tablighi Jamaat. The IMU is believed to have been behind a series of bomb explosions in Tashkent in early 1999, as well as leading insurgencies into Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan in 1999 and 2000. Members of the movement moved to Afghanistan and Pakistan, and the movement was largely destroyed while fighting alongside Taliban against the coalition forces in Operation Enduring Freedom in 2001. The remaining fighters were dispersed, but there is a group operating from Waziristan in Pakistan.³⁴

The IMU is weaker now than before the declaration of the international war on terror.³⁵ The authorities in Uzbekistan have also over-emphasised the ‘Islamic threat’ in order to justify actions against opposition. Labelling organisations as ‘extremist’ and a ‘threat to national security’ has been used as a justification for political clampdowns.³⁶ In reality, radical Islamic groups are not as widespread as the moderate self-help organisations that provide social welfare where government security nets are insufficient. On the other hand, there is reason to fear a growing radicalisation of the society in Uzbekistan if Karimov maintains his hardline policies and continues the repression of dissent. Government crackdowns on Islamic forces have proven largely counterproductive, resulting in increased alienation from the regime.

3.5 Foreign relations of Uzbekistan

Uzbekistan has had strained relations with several of its neighbour states, particularly Tajikistan, as well as with the West, not least after the Andijan events in 2005. For the West, the main challenge has been to strike a balance between pursuing a strict policy on human rights violations and keeping good working relations in order to draw on Uzbekistan’s support for ISAF and Operation Enduring Freedom. US armed forces were evicted from an airbase in southern Afghanistan after pushing for democratic and economic reforms and showing a strong reaction to the Andijan events.³⁷ Uzbek–Russia relations were strained in the 1990s but since Uzbekistan’s break with the USA in 2005, Russia has become an important political and economic ally of Uzbekistan.³⁸ Afghanistan and Uzbekistan maintain relatively good relations although Uzbekistan has failed to support the full regional integration of Afghanistan, limiting the use of the key border crossing at the Termez bridge over the Amu Darya.³⁹ The two countries have,

³⁴ ‘Pakistan’s tribals – Who is killing who?’ M. Ilyas Kahn, www.bbc.com 5 April 2007.

³⁵ ‘South/Central Asia: Is talk of IMU aimed at courting outsiders?’ www.eurasianet.org 7/03/07.

³⁶ ‘Islamic radicals in Central Asia ’not all that significant’ – expert’. www.eurasianet.org 25 April 2007.

³⁷ ‘Outside view: ISAF isolated in Afghanistan’. Pyotr Goncharov, UPI, 27 December 2005.

³⁸ Uzbek–Tajik relations have been poor since 1998 when, Tajik leaders still hold, Tashkent played an influential role in stoking a failed uprising in northern Tajikistan. Tajikistan’s border regions with Uzbekistan are home to a considerable Uzbek diaspora. Relations have also been strained due to Uzbekistan’s laying minefields along the Tajik–Uzbek border. ‘Karimov contributing to his own demise in Uzbekistan’. www.eurasianet.org, 20 December 2004. Uzbek isolationist policies have meant the severance of relations with both Kyrgyzstan and Afghanistan. The closing of the bridge crossing the border river Shakhrikhan-Say with Kyrgyzstan has hurt commerce on both sides. ‘Uzbekistan’s strict border regime separates Uzbek from Uzbek’. US Fed News, 29 August 2007.

³⁹ ‘Karimov contributing to his own demise in Uzbekistan’. www.eurasianet.org, 20 December 2004.

however, maintained a working relationship in the energy sphere. Uzbekistan provides Afghanistan with electricity, and plans exist to construct a new line to increase electricity supplies.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ ‘Afghan minister holds energy cooperation talks in Uzbekistan.’ BBC Monitoring Central Asia Unit, 26 June 2007.

4. Turkmenistan

The death of former president Saparmurat Niyazov in December 2006 kindled hopes for positive change in this internationally isolated country. The power consolidation under President Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov has brought new reform and stability, in the short and medium term at least.

Nevertheless, Turkmenistan remains a highly authoritarian state with a strong personality cult around its leader. This is not an immediately pressing problem for Afghanistan and regional stability. However, political developments in authoritarian states are often highly unpredictable, so in that sense Turkmenistan is far from an ideal neighbour for Afghanistan.

Relations with Afghanistan seem important for Turkmenistan's new leadership. President Berdymukhammedov has written off a USD 3.7 million Afghan water debt⁴¹ as well as pledging his intent to further the co-operation in energy, water and education.⁴² Afghanistan is the main customer for Turkmen liquefied gas from the Nayyp processing plant.⁴³

Below we assess regime stability in Turkmenistan by analysing developments in three spheres: the success of Berdymukhammedov's consolidation of power; the clan factor; the economic influence and political leverage of various foreign actors and the general foreign policy environment for the country, including the issue of trans-border drugs-related crime.

4.1 Power consolidation under Berdymukhammedov

The manner in which Berdymukhammedov came to power gave a hint as to what kind of regime could be expected. While the exiled and dispersed opposition spent time trying to get international support for their own return to Turkmenistan to move forward with contested election under international observation, Berdymukhammedov moved swiftly to grasp power. The 1992 constitution stipulates that the speaker of parliament is to serve as acting president in the president's absence. However, almost as soon as the news of Niyazov's death came out, the speaker Öwezgeldi Atayev was fired, arrested and replaced by Gurbanguly Berdymukhammedov, who was deputy chairperson of the Council of Ministers (as well as head of the funeral committee). He had been in his position (equivalent to that of a deputy prime minister) since 2001, and was one of Turkmenistan's longest serving ministers, surviving Niyazov's frequent purges of the cabinet, the power apparatus and the bureaucracy. In the course of his many years in office Berdymukhammedov is believed to have built up a powerful client network.

As head of the interim government Berdymukhammedov moved to shape the election code to his own benefit, lowering the minimum age for presidential candidates from 50 to 40 (he himself was 49 at the time). On the other hand, the requirements that candidates

⁴¹ 'New Turkmen president writes off Afghanistan's 3.7 m-dollar debt'. *BBC Monitoring Central Asia*, 21 February 2007.

⁴² 'Afghan, Turkmen presidents issue joint statement'. *BBC Monitoring Central Asia*. 07/08/07.

⁴³ 'Turkmen liquefied gas deliveries to Afghanistan to continue'. *BBC Monitoring Central Asia*. 07/11/07.

speaking fluent Turkmen and should have lived in the country for fifteen years were kept, thereby precluding Niyazov's children and the exiled oppositional candidates from running.

A powerful person during the Niyazov regime, and one believed to be unswervingly loyal to the old president, Akmurat Rejepov, head of the Presidential Guard, sided with Berdymukhammedov in his seizure of power. Like Berdymukhammedov, Rejepov had remained in place for years despite Niyazov's many purges, and is by some thought to have had power well beyond his official position. It is widely believed that Berdymukhammedov's rise to power would not have been possible without Rejepov's support, as the Presidential Guard is often seen as the 'real power behind the throne',⁴⁴ as well as being the most important tool of power and repression in the hands of the president.

Then, in May 2007 Rejepov was removed from his powerful position and arrested on charges of corruption. He was sentenced to 20 years in prison. His arrest seems to confirm the suspicion that Berdymukhammedov is working to consolidate his power base by removing perceived threats and replacing Niyazov's associates with people who owe their allegiance solely to him. This strongly resembles the governance style of the former president, who frequently replaced ministers and rotated officials in order not to allow anyone to build up a stronghold in one sector. Rejepov thus fell victim to the system he was himself partly responsible for building.⁴⁵ Berdymukhammedov's move to oust Rejepov shows his confidence in his new position as president. It has also been linked to clan affiliation. Both Niyazov and Berdymukhammedov belong to the Tekke tribe, while Rejepov does not. Although it is true that Tekke members were favoured under Niyazov and that Rejepov seemed to favour his clan members of the Chardzhouztsy or Erasari group, this is probably not the most explanation for Berdymukhammedov's move. It seems to be of greater importance that Rejepov held on to Niyazov's foreign policy line while Berdymukhammedov was seeking to open up Turkmenistan's energy sector and abandoned Niyazov's neutralist stance in favour of renewed ties with Moscow.⁴⁶

4.2 Domestic policy: Continued repression

Berdymukhammedov was elected president with 89.2 percent of the vote on 11 February 2007 in elections deemed absolutely neither free nor fair by an OSCE delegation.⁴⁷ According to official figures, voter turnout was 95%. In the limited sense that there was more than one candidate, the election was the first-ever competitive presidential election in Turkmenistan. However, the five colourless, mid-level bureaucrats and politicians who ran were false opposition candidates. The outcome was predetermined and the voting was merely for the sake of appearances, according to an OSCE delegation member.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ Svante Cornell, quoted in 'Turkmenistan: New president sacks long-serving security chief.' www.eurasianet.org, 16 May 2007.

⁴⁵ 'Turkmenia: Akmurat Rejepov pal zhertvoy rezhima, kotoryy on sam i postroil', www.fergana.ru, 31 July 2007.

⁴⁶ John C.K. Daly: 'Berdimukhamedov moves to eliminate rivals after foreign policy victors', www.jamestown.org, 18 May 2007.

⁴⁷ The OSCE sent an Election Support Team to Turkmenistan before the election on invitation from Turkmen authorities. OSCE did not, however, deploy election observers to this election.

⁴⁸ 'Turkmenistan rejoining the Central Asian fold?' www.eurasianet.org, 17 February 2007.

During the brief election campaign, Berdymukhammedov stated his intent to stay true to Niyazov's course, while also promising various socio-economic changes aimed at repairing some of the mistakes made during Niyazov's reign. Despite some positive changes in the health and education systems (such as reinstating the ten-year course of study at secondary schools), serious problems still remain in these sectors. The Ruhnama, the spiritual guidebook of all Turkmen, allegedly written by Niyazov and forcibly implemented as the most important part of the curriculum, still has the role of all-pervasive ideological guide and takes up much of the curriculum. Observers hold that the generation now being brought up on the banal moral teachings of the Ruhnama will be unable to contribute to the development of a flourishing society and economy, and will be easily susceptible to extremist ideas. Both the school system and health care are in shambles, lacking funding and qualified personnel, and it will take more than a few careful steps from Berdymukhammedov to make proper amends. Likewise, the carefully supervised opening of cyber-cafes in Ashgabat with soldiers posted at the entrances and accompanied by reports that the regime had taken Chinese advice on how to monitor Internet activity, scarcely makes this the civil society initiative one might have wished.

Despite international hopes for a thaw in Turkmenistan following the death of Niyazov, continuity is still the dominant trend in domestic policies. Several factors point to this, not least the Niyazov-style purges of government that Berdymukhammedov has undertaken, and the limited scope of his proposed reforms. Despite reports that some golden statues have been tacitly removed, and the image of Niyazov on the TV screen has been replaced with that of Berdymukhammedov, the continued personality cult surrounding the image of Niyazov as the 'father of all Turkmen' points to recognition of the country's need for a unifying ideology in the absence of a common national identity across clan lines.

4.3 Popular response to Berdymukhammedov

Strange as it may seem, Berdymukhammedov's swift and unconstitutional move after Niyazov's death seems to have given him a positive image in the eyes of some Turkmen residents. The simple fact that he had managed to remain in position for so long, through all of Niyazov's purges, provides him with respect and contributes to the popular belief that he possesses the survival instincts and political savvy needed to keep the state apparatus functioning at least.⁴⁹ Still, in a land with no country-based opposition and practically no civil society organisations, what the regime fears, according to some observers, is not the opposition based abroad, but domestic protests.⁵⁰ This is shown by the few and careful reforms Berdymukhammedov has instigated after taking office – the (re-)extension of secondary school and university education, reviewing pension payments, heightened attention to the agriculture sector – all aimed at reversing the most onerous of the deceased president's initiatives and reducing social tensions.

⁴⁹ 'Turkmen citizens use presidential election as opportunity to speak out'. www.eurasianet.org 13 February 2007.

⁵⁰ 'Turkmenistan: Presidential campaign reflects latent social tensions.' www.rferl.org, 19 January 2007.

The omnipotent personality cult and state-imposed ideology of the *Ruhnama*, combined with an education system in shambles, is said to contribute to the people's vulnerability to manipulation by extremist ideas and utopian religious groups offering radical alternatives to present realities.⁵¹ With all these factors seemingly leaving the country wide-open to religious extremism, analysts seek to explain the lack of religious extremism in Turkmenistan.⁵² One explanation is that the Turkmen identify more with their culture than with religion or nationality, so that tribal or clan loyalties have softened the impact of religion. The forced social conscription is also said to be a factor. With a large number of youth engaged in non-religious activities to benefit their community, there is little of the idleness among young impoverished men in despair that could create the fertile ground that groupings like IMU (the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan) and Hezb-ut-tahrir have found in, for example, Uzbekistan.

Although poverty is widespread in rural areas, state subsidies of basic goods such as gas, electricity, water, salt and flour (by most believed to be intended to buy society's approval of the personality cult), at least to some extent alleviate the public grievances of a population hit by high inflation and unemployment rates.⁵³

4.4 Sources of discontent along clan lines

Views on the importance of clans in Turkmen society and politics vary widely. Some commentators perceive them to be of great relevance, particularly when it comes to recruitment to state structures and the security agencies.⁵⁴ For this reason it is important for the authorities to take into account the existence of the clan system by demonstrating a willingness to employ people of different clans. Berdymukhammedov is himself from the Tekke group, which formed the dominant power base also under Niyazov. This could in theory result in the continued favouring of Tekke members for work opportunities and in various sectors of business. The one clan said to be coherent enough to challenge the position of Tekke, is the Charzhou or Ersaryn group, to which former head of the Presidential Guard, Akmurad Rejepov, belonged,⁵⁵ but which now stands without a patron in the higher echelons of power.

The Tekke clan may be most prominent simply because it is the largest clan in the country, and is centred in the area around Ashgabad. Although both Berdymukhammedov and Niyazov technically belong to the Tekke, and did employ quite a lot of Tekke to prominent positions, this also means that it is the Tekke who have suffered most in the frequent purges and arrests carried out by the two presidents.

It is difficult to assess public sentiment in a country which is almost closed to international observers. Various media reports, however, allow for a cautious assessment. De-

⁵¹ *Cracks in the marble: Turkmenistan's failing dictatorship*. ICG Asia Report No 44, 17 January 2003, page 27.

⁵² Parashar, Swati: 'Turkmenistan: A Central Asian state without religious extremism'. South Asia Analysis Group, Paper No 1130, 30 September 2004.

⁵³ *Cracks in the marble*, page 19.

⁵⁴ 'Chto takoe turkmenskie klany segodnya i kak oni boryutsya za vlast'', www.fergana.ru 30 December 2006.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

spite the widespread economic hardships, extensive use of forced labour and lack of political freedoms, reports of protest among Turkmenistan's citizens are extremely rare. Repressive policies have largely deprived the population of all opportunities to voice discontent. Clans are therefore a factor to take into account in Turkmenistan, but one should also be careful not to exaggerate their importance.

The current policy of favouring the Tekke clan may lead to discontent among other groups, which may in turn have serious consequences, given the people's lack of identification with the state. Of particular interest to this study is the issue of the province of Mary, bordering Afghanistan. This province hosts an air base that may prove important for both domestic and international security; it is also a region that has been hit hard by food-supply shortages. President Berdymukhammedov was nominated for the presidential elections from this particular province, in a move designated to deprive a hypothetical leader of the chances of creating a regional clan-based problem for the authorities linked with the Afghanistan factor.⁵⁶ Containment of discontent in Mary province therefore seems to be of great importance to Turkmen stability.

4.5 Economic development

According to official figures, the economy grew by 20.4% in real terms in January–May 2007. However statistics from Turkmen authorities are not to be trusted as they mainly serve propaganda purposes. The Economist Intelligence Unit estimates real growth at 7% in 2007 and 7.5% for 2008 and 2009.⁵⁷ The state retains a dominant role in all sectors of the economy. The disastrous performance of agriculture and stagnation in the hydrocarbons industry could necessitate significant policy changes in the years to come.⁵⁸ As noted, hydrocarbons (mainly gas) and cotton are the mainstays of the economy. The current president seems to recognise the self-destructive path the country was on during the former regime, whose president had maintained that Turkmenistan had no need of foreign assistance in developing the hydrocarbons sector. By contrast, Berdymukhammedov has indicated that foreign capital will be welcome – although it remains to be seen if he can manage to attract foreign investment while still preventing political liberalisation. Steps have already been taken to open up the petroleum sector for foreign investments, and Norway's StatoilHydro, among others, has expressed interest.

The new president has vowed to accelerate economic reform, but it is very unclear whether this is at all possible within the current political system. For one thing, many of the current political elite have benefited from the system as it is, and thus have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo. Attracting foreign investments, particularly in the hydrocarbons sector, would be the main focus of reforms, and Western energy corporations have shown increased interest in Turkmenistan after the death of Niyazov.

As in other autocratic states, the revenues from hydrocarbon resources are accompanied by corruption, high inflation and rural poverty. In stark contrast to the gold and marble

⁵⁶ 'Chto takoe turkmenskie klany segodnya i kak oni boryutsya za vlast'', www.fergana.ru, 30 December 2006.

⁵⁷ 'Turkmenistan Country Report'. EIU, October 2007.

⁵⁸ 'Turkmenistan Country Report'. EIU, July 2007, p 7.

glitz of Ashgabat, rural areas are virtually demonetised and plagued by poverty.⁵⁹ Cotton farming and industry employs more than half the workforce; to meet the unrealistically high quotas set by the state, this sector is characterised by low wages and extensive use of forced labour, which contributes to the exploitative nature of the cotton economy.⁶⁰

4.6 Foreign policy: Opening up Turkmenistan

In contrast to the continuity of domestic policies, there has been notable change in foreign policy since the death of Niyazov. Turkmenistan under Niyazov was internationally isolated. The late president seldom travelled abroad, allegedly for fear of a palace coup in his absence. Berdymukhammedov has taken steps to end this isolation.

The major determinant of Turkmenistan's international importance are oil and gas exports, and the thaw after Niyazov's death has provided a new impetus for efforts to get the country's resources to new markets. The new president has travelled to Saudi Arabia, Russia, Iran, China and Kazakhstan, and discussions have focused on co-operation in the energy sector. Russia has ever since independence been Turkmenistan's main trading partner, with a near monopoly on the purchase of Turkmen gas (which is then re-exported to Ukraine). Already under Niyazov there were signs that Ashgabat sought to diversify its energy customers. These efforts have been heightened by Berdymukhammedov, and preliminary deals with China and stepped-up talks about a trans-Caspian pipeline connecting Turkmenistan with European markets have provided Turkmenistan with leverage in gas price negotiations with Russia. However, the May 2007 trilateral agreement between Russia, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan on upgrading a pipeline connecting Turkmenistan with Russia through Kazakhstan and building a new pipeline next to the existing one was perceived as a sign of willingness on the part of Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan to reaffirm their close energy links with Russia. Thus far, Turkmenistan has given priority to energy ties with Russia, over EU hopes of diversifying its supplies, thereby helping Putin to achieve his important foreign policy goal of reasserting Russian influence over Central Asian gas reserves. Turkmen gas is increasingly important for Russia's efforts to offset the decline at its big fields in western Siberia in order to be able to meet its long-term export commitments to Europe.⁶¹ The big issue is export routes and whether the Turkmen gas will pass through Russia or not.

One serious problem for all the proposed pipeline projects is the probably well-founded fear that Turkmenistan is promising more than it can deliver. So far the known resources in Turkmenistan are not enough to cover all the delivery deals that its leadership has been concluding. Still Berdymukhammedov keeps pledging his intent to adhere by the initiatives on the construction of Turkmenistan–China, Turkmenistan–Afghanistan–Pakistan–India gas pipelines, as well as a Turkmenistan–Europe gas pipeline across the Caspian Sea.⁶² The viability of these pipelines remains unclear, but Berdymukhammedov's message seems to be clear: Russia is not the only option for Turkmenistan's gas export. The

⁵⁹ 'Turkmenistan Country Report'. EIU, July 2007, p 10.

⁶⁰ 'The curse of cotton. Central Asia's destructive monoculture.' ICG report, 28 February 2005, page 12.

⁶¹ 'A new broom'. *Petroleum Economist*. 08/03/07.

⁶² 'Turkmenistan committed to multiple gas export routes – president'. *BBC Monitoring Central Asia*. 06/05/07.

pipeline projects may well be a bargaining chip in the hands of Berdymukhammedov, employed to play gas costumers off against each other so as to leverage the highest price from buyers.⁶³

Investments and trade connections go largely hand in hand with political leverage, at least in the minds of zero-sum players like Russia and China. The possibility of Turkmenistan opening up for foreign investment in the hydrocarbons sector therefore is seen as a new stage in the geopolitical game for influence in Central Asia. Turkmenistan has thus far been stable in its leaning towards Russia and Iran in foreign policy. However, in recent years, China has emerged as a powerful actor in the region, and is among the countries making a bid for influence in Turkmenistan after the death of Niyazov. China and Chinese companies are known to be a completely different kind of actor in the international field than their Western counterparts. As a state with democratic deficits itself, China is not compromised by working with dubious autocratic regimes like Turkmenistan. International observers point to the West's lack of leverage in a situation where the West is pushing for political concessions in order to make investments, while a country like Turkmenistan can turn to Russia and China, which do not demand liberalisation, human rights improvements or political freedoms as preconditions for making investments. Western actors can choose between the boycott strategy and a containment strategy aimed at increasing Western influence through the presence of Western actors.

⁶³ 'China's Turkmen gas deal opens up region'. *Financial Times London*, 19 July 2007.

5. Water

Afghanistan's northern neighbours have a lengthy history of water disputes. If Afghanistan in the medium or long term decides to claim its legitimate share of the region's water resources – as it may well do in order to further its economic development – then water-sharing in the region will become even more difficult. Bilateral and multilateral relations among the Central Asian states have been severely strained at times, although fully fledged 'water wars' have always remained a remote prospect. Nevertheless, in attempting to grasp Afghanistan's regional challenges, one should bear in mind the complicated and conflict-ridden water relations of the region.

The basic dilemma related to water in Central Asia concerns the balance between using water for irrigation and for generating hydropower. The upstream and hydropower-producing countries want to release water from their reservoirs in the winter when electricity needs are high, whereas the downstream countries want water to be released from the reservoirs (which are controlled by the upstream countries) in the summer for irrigation. In Soviet times, summer irrigation was prioritised over hydropower in water allocation and the upstream countries received compensation. Since 1991, however, when the Central Asian states became independent, more water has been released in the winter by the upstream countries, thereby making irrigation and agriculture difficult. This has created conflict between Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan (downstream countries) on the one hand and Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan (upstream) on the other. There have been numerous attempts to create a multilateral mechanism for water-sharing and compensation, but so far a system that all of the countries in the region can fully commit to has not been agreed on.

Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are planning to expand their capacity for electricity generation and export. This could turn them into large-scale exporters of electricity to China, Iran, Pakistan and Afghanistan, among other countries. Cheap electricity from Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan would benefit economic development in Afghanistan enormously. At the same time, expanding hydropower-generating capacity, might make summer irrigation more difficult for Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan, depending on how the installations are constructed.

Similarly, if Afghanistan initiates its own large-scale irrigation projects, that would mean less water available for Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Water for summer irrigation is already limited, but Afghanistan has, according to international law, the right to draw more water from the trans-boundary rivers in the region than it does today.

Thus, water may represent important opportunity and resources for Afghanistan. At the same time, however, if the issues are not handled carefully and diplomatically, regional tensions could become seriously exacerbated.

Below we provide a more detailed overview of the situation related to water-sharing in the region, in order to further illustrate the possible challenges facing Afghanistan.

5.1 Overview

The river Amu Darya originates in Tajikistan. It forms the entire border between Tajikistan and Afghanistan and later between Uzbekistan and Afghanistan, then turns north into Turkmenistan and ends in the northwestern parts of Uzbekistan. The Syr Darya originates in Kyrgyzstan. It runs through the Fergana Valley in Uzbekistan, crosses into northern Tajikistan, enters the central areas of Uzbekistan and ends by flowing into southwestern Kazakhstan and eventually the Aral Sea further north.

The major consumers of water in Central Asia are the downstream countries: Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan. Tajikistan withdraws approximately 0.7 km³ from the Syr Darya and 10.54 km³ from the Amu Darya, while the corresponding figures for Kyrgyzstan are 4.92 km³ and 0.42 km³.

Table 1: Renewable surface water resources of the Aral Sea basin

Country or zone	Area			Renewable surface water resources					
				Amu Darya		Syr Darya		Aral Sea basin	
	km ² (in '000)	% of basin	% of country area	km ³ per year	% of basin	km ³ per year	% of basin	km ³ per year	% of basin
South Kazakhstan	540	28	20	–	0.0	4.50	12.1	4.50	3.9
Turkmenistan	466	24	96	0.98	1.2	–	0.0	0.98	0.8
Uzbekistan	447.4	23	100	4.70	6.0	4.84	13.0	9.54	8.3
North Afghanistan	234	12	36	6.18	7.9	–	0.0	6.18	5.3
Tajikistan	141.67	7	99	62.90	80.2	0.40	1.1	63.30	54.8
Kyrgyzstan	117.5	6	59	1.93	2.5	27.25	73.4	29.18	25.2

Source: Aquastat, 'General summary for the countries of the former Soviet Union', FAO.

Central Asia as a whole is not a particularly water-scarce region. Technically, a country is considered 'water-scarce' if annual water supplies drop below 1,000 cubic meters per person. Uzbekistan (704 cubic meters) and Turkmenistan (232 cubic meters) fall short of that figure, while Kazakhstan (4,484 cubic meters), Tajikistan (11,171 cubic meters) and Kyrgyzstan (10,394 cubic meters) are all comfortably above the 1,000m³ mark. The water problems of Central Asia are therefore more related to distribution and use than to overall quantities.⁶⁴

Water use in Central Asia is strikingly inefficient. Between 80 and 90% of the water used goes to irrigation. The World Bank estimates that the ratio of water use in agriculture in the region is 12,900 cubic meters per hectare, and that only 21% of this amount is employed effectively. The remaining 79% is lost, due to unlined on-farm and inter-farm ca-

⁶⁴ Allouche, 'A source of regional tension: the case of water', p. 95.

nals, decaying drainage systems, and lack of canal cleaning and maintenance. In contrast, the normal rate for inefficiency in water use in developing countries is 60%.⁶⁵

Some 90% of the withdrawals from the Amu Darya and the Syr Darya are used for irrigation. Agriculture occupies a vital position in the national economies of Central Asia. In Uzbekistan agriculture accounts for 33% of GDP, 60% of the country's foreign exchange receipts and 45% of all employment. In Kyrgyzstan agriculture contributes to 38% of GDP, and in Tajikistan 19%.⁶⁶ By contrast, agriculture is less crucial in Kazakhstan, where it represents only 11% of GDP and only 14% of employment.

Central Asia's best-known and most urgent water crisis is the shrinking of the Aral Sea. This disaster has a simple cause. The increase in use of water from the Syr Darya and the Amu Darya for irrigation in cotton production after 1960 caused drastic drops in inflows to this inland sea. In 1960 the Aral Sea stretched across 66,900 km², whereas by 2000 its surface had been reduced to 24,003 km² and it had split into two smaller seas.⁶⁷ Desiccation continued at the same relentless pace after 1991: the independence of the Central Asian states did not foster change and positive action on the Aral Sea crisis. The figure below presents satellite images of the Aral Sea showing the rapid advance of desiccation.

⁶⁵ World Bank, *Irrigation in Central Asia* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2003), p. 9.

⁶⁶ World Bank, *Water and energy nexus in Central Asia: improving regional cooperation in the Syr Darya basin* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2004), p. 3.

⁶⁷ M. Spoor and A. Krutov, 'The 'power of water' in a divided Central Asia', *Perspectives on Global Development and Technology*, vol. 2, no. 3–4, 2003, pp. 26–27.

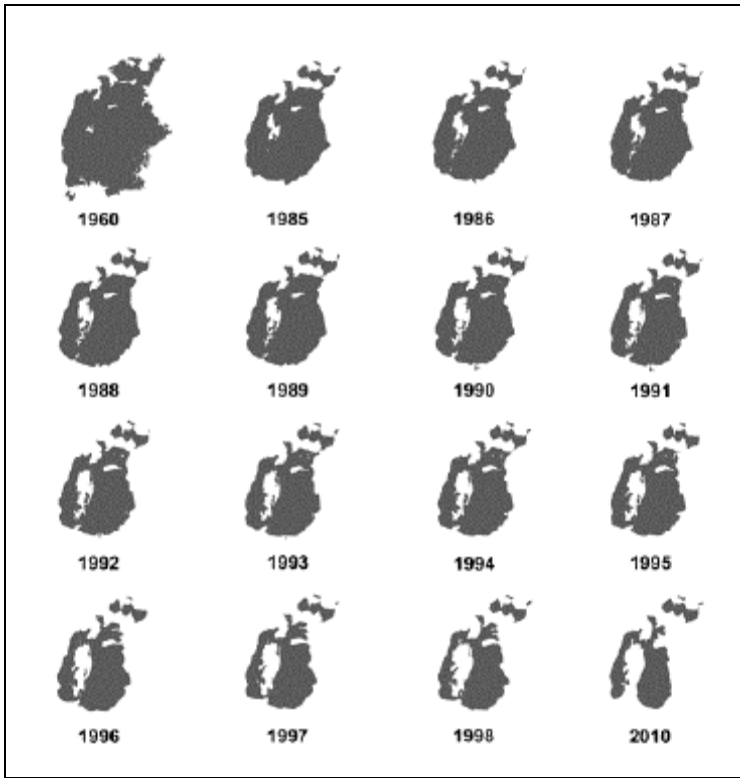


Figure 1: Desiccation of the Aral Sea

Source: Spoor and Krutov 'The 'power of water' in a divided Central Asia', p. 26

5.2 Electricity

The other aspect of water and irrigation in Central Asia concerns the generation of hydroelectric power. Most reservoirs and dams in Central Asia were constructed primarily in order to regulate water for agricultural production. The reservoirs enabled the Central Asian republics to increase production and ensured more controlled and predictable access to water – which in turn helped them reach the agricultural production targets set by the political leadership in Moscow. Many of the dams and reservoirs were, however, also equipped with installations for generating hydroelectric power.

Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have the greatest relative installed capacity for generating hydropower. Of the 3.6 GW and 4.4 GW of total installed capacity for electricity generation, 80 and 90% (respectively) are hydropower. Importantly, both countries have planned or have launched ongoing, large-scale projects to enhance their hydro-generation capacity. Tajikistan has initiated work on the Sangtuda 1 project, while Sangtuda 2 and Rogun are in the advanced stages of planning.⁶⁸ These three projects will draw investment from both Iran and Russia, and possibly Kazakhstan as well.⁶⁹

⁶⁸ Interview, Advisor to the President of the Republic of Tajikistan, Dushanbe, 12 April 2005.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

Kyrgyzstan has negotiated with Russia's Unified Energy System for investments in the Kambarata 1 project, which would enhance hydro-generation at the Toktogul reservoir.⁷⁰ The realisation of these projects would further enhance Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan's control of the timing and quantity of water releases. Depending on their design, the projects might also ensure better technical capacity to generate power, while avoiding distortion of irrigation schedules through the construction of several successive water chambers and reservoirs.⁷¹

⁷⁰ 'Russia offers Kyrgyzstan a hand', *Institute for War and Peace Reporting*, 17 September 2005.

⁷¹ Interview, Representative Ministry of Water Management Kyrgyzstan, Bishkek, 11 February 2005.

6. Drugs

Drugs production and trafficking constitute one of Afghanistan's central domestic challenges.⁷² Drug trafficking is also a *regional* challenge for Afghanistan. The large-scale criminal activities and incomes associated with regional drug flows act to undermine the states in the region: in this way Afghanistan's neighbours – Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan in particular – are becoming weaker, more criminalised, more unstable and less able to function as constructive partners in Afghanistan's process of stabilisation.

Drugs trafficking from Afghanistan through Central Asia to Russia and Europe increased dramatically in the 1990s. The share of total production of Afghan opiates trafficked through Central Asia is estimated to be around 20 per cent.⁷³ The total value of these shipments was estimated at USD 2.2 billion – with a likely profit of 1.8 billion going to traffickers spread across Central Asia.⁷⁴ Drugs from Afghanistan transit along various routes, including through Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan.⁷⁵

Afghanistan in 2007 accounted for 93% of the global opiates market.⁷⁶ About 70 % of the production takes places in the southern regions bordering on Pakistan. Production in these areas has been increasing, whereas in central-northern Afghanistan (the regions bordering on Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan), opium cultivation has diminished since 2005.⁷⁷

For the Central Asian states, and particularly for the weakest among them, the impact of the drug trade has been significant. In the absence of a strong legal economy, the high profit margins of drug trafficking have a serious impact on the state and society. There seems reason to believe that government officials are involved in the trafficking of drugs – not just in the form of passive bribe-taking, but a kind of direct involvement that raises the question of state complicity.⁷⁸ At this level it is appropriate to enquire whether some of these states are infiltrated by criminal interests to an extent that would justify the use of the term 'narco-state'.

Drug trafficking affects the security of states and societies in various ways. Firstly, drug trade affects human and societal security through increasing levels of addiction, petty crime and drug-related epidemics. Secondly, drug trade exacerbates corruption in already weak states and infiltrates governments, thereby affecting the economic and political

⁷² 'Afghan drug trade closely linked to Taliban insurgency'. US Info 26 June 2007.

⁷³ Interpol – Drugs Sub-Directorate. *Heroin*. <http://www.interpol.int/Public/Drugs/heroin/default.asp>, 7 August 2007.

⁷⁴ V. Fenopetov, 'The drug crime threat to countries located on the 'silk road'', *China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2006.

⁷⁵ For a detailed overview of drugs routes in Central Asia see J. Townsend, 'The logistics of opiate trafficking in Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan', *China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly*, vol. 4, no. 1, 2006.

⁷⁶ *Afghanistan opium survey 2007*. United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, October 2007.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ Svante Cornell, 2005, 'Narcotics, radicalism, and armed conflict in Central Asia: The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan'. *Terrorism and political violence*, vol. 17, no. 4, p. 623.

functioning of these states. The result is an incapacitated state unable to protect and ensure the rights of its citizens, and a loss of legitimacy, which in turn leads the population to question the idea of the state, thus resulting in a higher risk of instability. Moreover, the drugs trade has become a growing threat to national, regional and international security in a military sense, through its linkages to violent non-state actors, including ideological and secessionist movements, and to terrorism.⁷⁹

⁷⁹ Cornell, 2005, pp. 620–21.

Policy recommendations

In light of the challenges highlighted in this report, the Norwegian government should consider the following points:

- The absence of dialogue by NATO countries with Russia, China and the SCO on Afghanistan creates a suboptimal regional context. Norway could usefully advocate for a more pro-active NATO engagement with Russia, China and the SCO.
- Norway and its allies must recognise the serious and understandable unease on the part of Russia and China over the NATO and OEF bases in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. These bases are located close to Russian and Chinese territories. China's and Russia's 2001 acceptance of these deployments came on the precondition that they would be temporary installations. These bases have been there for more than six years now and there are growing fears in Russia and China that they may become permanent. Norway needs to consider the strategic and military value of the bases in Central Asia in relation to the considerable diplomatic and political losses they represent. Scaling down bases and deployments in Central Asia would be a constructive first step aimed at encouraging dialogue on Afghanistan with China and Russia. Norway should therefore encourage its NATO allies to reassess their deployment strategies in Central Asia.
- Greater attention should be paid to the situation in Uzbekistan. Developments in the country need to be monitored closely; Norway should advocate a rethinking by the international community of how it relates to Uzbekistan. Contingency plans must be made for how Norway is to react in case of major political instability in Uzbekistan, as chaos in Uzbekistan is likely to affect political stability in areas where Norway has troops stationed. The German-run ISAF base at Termez in Uzbekistan would also be particularly vulnerable.
- Pakistan's stability and democratic consolidation is paramount for Afghanistan's recovery: thus, Norway should actively support any efforts by the international community that address the structural causes of Pakistan's current problems.
- From an Afghanistan perspective, Iran–US tensions are highly problematic. Norway should continue to support diplomatic negotiation on the nuclear issue and make every effort to defuse tensions and build trust between Iran and the outside world.
- Norway could play a leading and constructive role in relation to the region's water challenges. With top expertise in both conflict mitigation and hydropower, Norwegian technical assistance could contribute to a significant reduction in the risks associated with competition for scarce water resources among Afghanistan's neighbouring countries, as well as exploring and developing the potential for hydropower generation and irrigation that could spur economic growth in Afghani-

stan. The Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs has in the past channelled some aid to water issues in Central Asia for minor projects. A key problem, however, is that regional water initiatives often lack high-level political backing from the governments of Central Asian countries. A solution to the serious water problems facing the region requires both innovative technical solutions as well as effective diplomatic encouragement to the top leadership of the Central Asian states. Noteworthy in this context is Norsk Hydro's investment in Tajikistan's hydropowered aluminium processing plant, which gives Norway a further stake in ensuring optimal use of the region's water resources.

- Drugs continue to be a central regional challenge. Norway has supported drug control efforts in Afghanistan's neighbouring countries and should consider expanding this. However, policy-makers should be aware of the large-scale institutional malfunctioning of the Central Asian states, which undermines much of the technical assistance for drug control. New and innovative approaches are needed if drug trafficking is to be fought effectively. Strengthening independent media reporting on drugs trafficking is one of several approaches that could help to reduce institutional malfunctioning.
- Norway should use its diplomatic leverage to encourage the lifting of restrictions on trade between Afghanistan and its northern neighbours. Norway has provided large-scale financial support to a bridge between Afghanistan and Tajikistan, which connects Afghanistan to its Central Asian neighbours and strengthens road links to China. Norway needs to follow up its support for this bridge construction with efforts to ensure that the considerable potential for cross-border flow of goods is realised.

Map of Afghanistan



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