

Afghanistan 2014: Shadows over Central Asia?

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Abstract

How will the withdrawal of ISAF forces from Afghanistan in 2014 affect the states of Central Asia and other parties with interests in the region? What will the effect be on economic interests (the “New Silk Road”) and will risks such as drug trafficking and cross-border terrorism increase? This paper considers these questions with specific reference to the Afghanistan policies of the Central Asian states.

Keywords

Afghanistan; Central Asian States of the former Soviet Union; perceptions of threat (security policy); militant Islam; human rights; transport routes/networks; Russian Federation

The governments of the five Central Asian states look at the withdrawal of international troops from Afghanistan with mixed feelings. While they agree that Afghanistan’s problems cannot be solved by military means, they also look with unease at a withdrawal that will leave Afghanistan without effective security structures of its own, thus creating a long-term trouble spot on the southern borders of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). In Russia, a degree of satisfaction at the difficulties NATO is having with its highest-profile deployment worldwide is also overshadowed by such concerns. High-ranking representatives of Russia’s security elites have warned of instability if Afghanistan is left to its own devices. Boris Gromov, commander of the Soviet Army that withdrew from the Hindu Kush in 1988–1989, and Dmitry Rogozin, then Russia’s ambassador to NATO, insisted

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in 2010 that NATO troops needed to stay in the country until local security forces were capable of exercising control over the state's territory. Until that point, they said, Moscow would be willing to provide international forces with logistical support and to contribute to the training of Afghan security forces, particularly in relation to anti-drug measures.¹ Kazakhstan's foreign minister made a similar statement shortly before the May 2012 NATO summit, arguing that NATO should not ignore the ongoing fragility of Afghanistan and the dangers that may spread from it to the neighbouring regions.²

Afghanistan has become an area around which Western, Russian, Central Asian and Chinese security interests are converging. Nonetheless, there are divergences regarding how risks stemming from the country, such as the illegal drug trade, should be combated.³ One restriction on the type of cooperation on offer is the unwillingness of Russia and the Central Asian states to send troops to the crisis area, which distinguishes their Afghanistan policy from those of other post-Soviet states.⁴

Northern Distribution Network, New Silk Road, Drug Routes

Among Afghanistan's neighbours, Pakistan has been particularly important. It is the key to resupplying the forces deployed in Afghanistan, as the shortest supply routes cross Pakistani territory from the port of Karachi. Pakistan itself has also been drawn into the war. Some of the country's frontier regions that lie outside the control of the central government have been used as refuges by underground fighters, who have also carried out attacks on supply lines. As uncertainty regarding Pakistan has grown, Afghanistan's northern neighbourhood, which lies within the CIS region, has come into prominence. This area stretches from the immediate vicinity of Afghanistan in Central Asia to Russia and, with regard to supply logistics and the impending withdrawal from Afghanistan, is known as the Northern

¹ Cf. Boris Gromov/Dmitry Rogozin, Russian Advice on Afghanistan, in: *New York Times*, 11 January 2010, at: www.nytimes.com/2010/01/12/opinion/12iht-edrogozin.html.

² Cited by Richard Weitz, *Kazakhstan Expands Security and Economic Cooperation with Afghanistan*, Eurasia Daily Monitor, 19 April 2013.

³ For further details of this conflict, see Uwe Halbach: *Afghanistan in der Politik Russlands und Zentralasiens* [Afghanistan in the Policy of Russia and Central Asian], SWP-Studie S 31, Berlin, November 2011.

⁴ Georgia stands out particularly in this regard. Although it is not a member of NATO, its 1,600 ISAF troops represent the largest per capita deployment of any country involved in Afghanistan.

Distribution Network (NDN). The NDN has two main routes: One starts in Riga and the Baltic ferry terminal of Klaipeda and is linked by rail through Russia and Kazakhstan to Uzbekistan, where it reaches the Afghan frontier at Termez. The southern NDN route traverses the South Caucasus and the Caspian Sea to the port of Aktau in Kazakhstan, and then on to Termez. In the Central Asian portion of the NDN, Uzbekistan is the key country, as we shall see in detail below.

In the Afghanistan and Central Asia policy of the USA, a link is made between the NDN and future trade and transport routes between Central Asia, Afghanistan and South Asia – as in the New Silk Road Strategy announced by then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in 2011. At a conference held by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in Washington in July 2012, Robert Blake, the Secretary within the US State Department with responsibility for the region, stressed the importance of the Central Asian states for the stabilization of Afghanistan, and praised these countries for having already undertaken a variety of projects to this end.⁵ The New Silk Road Strategy links Central Asia to Afghanistan not only in terms of security policy, but also with regard to trade, the energy sector and transport. The concept of Greater Central Asia had previously been proposed by Frederick Starr, a US expert on the region, who argued that Central Asia should be linked to South Asia via new transport and trade routes and energy networks through Afghanistan.⁶ A number of trade routes that pass through Afghanistan to larger economic, energy and trade areas have already been established. Yet Afghanistan, which is supposed to play a key bridging function in Greater Central Asia, remains the weakest link in this context for the moment, thanks to its desperate security situation and war-damaged infrastructure. If anything is currently being transported from the Hindu Kush via a “new silk road”, it is likely to be drugs. Almost 90 per cent of the global heroin supply is made from Afghan opium. Russia claims that there are 30,000 Russian victims of the “heroin

⁵ “The Central Asian states have been involved in a wide range of projects to assist in Afghanistan’s development and strengthen bilateral and regional ties. These range from Uzbekistan’s and Turkmenistan’s supply of electricity to Afghanistan, to ongoing rail projects throughout most of the region, the progress on the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India gas pipeline, Kazakhstan’s long-term university education program for Afghan students, and the Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation east-west highway as well as other transport corridors.” Assistant Secretary, Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs, Washington DC, 12 July 2012.

⁶ Cf. S. Frederick Starr, *In Defense of Greater Central Asia*, Silk Road Studies Program, Policy Paper, Washington, DC/Stockholm, September 2008.

attack from Afghanistan” each year. The opium and heroin trade follows three main routes, with at least a quarter of the traffic taking the northern route through Central Asia.⁷

The Islamist Threat

How and via what channels is the security situation in Central Asia linked to circumstances in Afghanistan? Alongside drug trafficking, the most frequently cited cross-border risk is militant Islamism, and close ties have been proposed between the drug trade and terrorism. Afghanistan’s role as a base for the regional expansion of militant Islamism has long dominated the security discourse in Central Asia. The Taliban’s assumption of power in Afghanistan in September 1996 raised the spectre of a regional jihad – the Talibanization of Central Asia – although radicalization that occurred in the course of Islamic “revival” in post-Soviet societies could hardly be compared to events in the Taliban’s “theocracy”. It was never clear whether the Taliban should be considered a transnational actor whose reach extended beyond Afghanistan and might thus be expected to carry out operations in Central Asia. However, people in Central Asia remember threats from Taliban-ruled Afghanistan from before 2001, directed at “holy sites” such as Samarkand and Bukhara. What is certain is that Afghanistan does provide a safe haven for Islamist forces from neighbouring countries. For instance, the political turbulence that rocked Tajikistan following independence and the 1992–97 civil war was linked to northern Afghanistan, where armed opposition groups sought refuge.

A confrontation between the authoritarian post-Soviet state and politicized forces of Islamic “revival” developed in Uzbekistan, the country at the heart of Central Asia, as early as 1992. The secular opposition was driven into exile or thrown into prison. Political conditions under the rule of President Islam Karimov gave those calling for “Islamic justice” something to work with. The most prominent manifestation of this was *Hizb ut-Tahrir al-Islami* (the Islamic Party of Liberation), which was founded in Palestine in 1953 and found particularly fertile soil for growth in Central Asia in the early 1990s. *Hizb ut-Tahrir’s* intensive propaganda campaign and the simplicity of its message made it the key actor in the region’s Islamist

⁷ Cf. Lars-Erik Lundin/Kirsten van Kaathoven, *Perils of the Drug Trade: Implications and Challenges of Central Asia’s “Northern Route”*, Institute for Security and Development Policy, Policy Brief No.125, 29 May 2013.

opposition, and the state's counter-measures strengthened it in this role.⁸ Another group that is closely associated with Islamism in Afghanistan and border regions of Pakistan, yet, unlike *Hizb ut-Tahrir*, is clearly militant and responsible for terrorist violence, is the *Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan* (IMU). Ideologically focused on a Caliphate which could emerge from a religiously conservative area such as the Fergana Valley, the IMU preached the overthrow of the Karimov regime. It soon extended its reach beyond Uzbekistan. Armed IMU operations in the Kyrgyz region of Batken, in parts of Tajikistan not under government control and in the Fergana Valley strengthened the perception, in 1999 and 2000, that militant Islamism posed a threat. In Uzbekistan, security forces acted brutally to counter this threat. Since 2004, the IMU has been barely capable of carrying out armed operations in its country of origin and has largely withdrawn to safe havens across the Uzbek-Afghan border.

From 2001, Islamist insurgents from Central Asia and other parts of the CIS area, such as the northern Caucasus, started to appear in Afghanistan and the border areas of Pakistan, which had become a target for “Jihadi tourists” from around the world. Following the announcement that most international troops are to leave Afghanistan, there is much discussion at present of whether the foreign fighters will also return home in the coming years. The interlinking of jihadi networks along the 2,400 km border between Afghanistan and its neighbours Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan is seen as a challenge for security policy in Central Asia, despite the fact that the majority of the population certainly do not subscribe to militant Islamism.

It is believed that several thousand underground fighters from Central Asia currently remain in Afghanistan, and their return is a matter of ongoing speculation. The end of the Soviet Afghan war had similar effects. Large numbers of foreign fighters returned to their homelands, including South-East Asia, and used their Afghanistan experience and connections in the formation of terrorist groups. Of the various groups active in Afghanistan with a Central Asian background, the IMU is the most prominent. According to security experts close to the government of Uzbekistan, the return of armed IMU fighters poses a serious threat to the Fergana Valley, where the borders of Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan meet.⁹ A similar spillover is feared for Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, even though neither of those

⁸ Cf. Emmanuel Karagiannis, *Political Islam in Central Asia: The Challenge of Hizb ut-Tahrir*, London 2011.

⁹ Cf. *Islamist group trying to gain foothold in Ferghana-Valley – Uzbek experts*, BBC Monitoring Central Asia, 12 March 2013.

countries shares a border with Afghanistan. In Kyrgyzstan, in November 2012, the chair of the Parliamentary Committee on Defense and Security warned of such dangers for the next two years.¹⁰ In July 2012, Usman Ghazi, the IMU's new leader, declared the unstable situation in Kyrgyzstan's southern border regions to be the gateway for jihadi activities in the area. Even in Kazakhstan, which is some distance from Afghanistan, a member of the National Security Committee has called this influx of fighters a "real threat" to a country that was, until recently, rarely associated with Islamist activity.¹¹ Recent developments call into question the picture of a secular country in which religious extremism has no foothold, since in late 2011, a previously unheard-of group known as *Jund al-Khilafah* (Soldiers of the Caliphate) carried out attacks in Almaty, Atyrau and Taraz. They are said to have support in areas outside government control in Afghanistan, Pakistan and the northern Caucasus.¹² Links between local Islamist cells and jihadi networks with roots in Central Asia and Afghanistan/Pakistan have also been discussed in Germany. The reason for this lay in the *Islamic Jihad Union* (IJU), which is considered to be an offshoot of the IMU and runs training camps in Afghanistan and Pakistan. It had connections to the cell known as the Sauerland Group, which was the subject of Germany's then largest anti-terrorism prosecution in 2009.

All figures given in relation to this area are provisional. For instance, in July 2011, a member of the National Security Service of Uzbekistan spoke of 5,000 Uzbeks, Kyrgyz, Tajiks, Tatars, Chechens and individuals belonging to other nationalities from the CIS area attending terrorist training camps linked to the IMU in Afghanistan and Pakistan.¹³

The basic problem in making such estimates is that the power and security elites in the Central Asian states tend to ascribe security challenges to "evil external forces", ignoring domestic causes of instability in their countries for which they hold some responsibility. One example of this is the official explanations given in Uzbekistan for the "Andijan uprising" and its brutal suppression in May 2005. In a speech to his cabinet in January 2013, the Uzbek president, Islam Karimov, urgently evoked the danger that some

¹⁰ Cf. Statement of Tokon Mamytov, chairman of the Parliamentary Committee on Defense and Security of Kyrgyzstan, cited in: Jacob Zenn, *Militants Threaten to Return to Central Asia after NATO's Withdrawal from Afghanistan*, Eurasia Daily Monitor, 14 January 2013.

¹¹ Kabdulkarim Abdikazymov, deputy chairman of Kazakhstan's National Security Committee, cited in: *ibid.*

¹² Cf. *ibid.*

¹³ Cf. *Uzbek Security Officer Says 5000 Members of Islamic Group Trained in Pakistan*, BBC Monitoring, Global Newline, Central Asia Political File, 24 July 2011.

unspecified external forces posed for the states of Central Asia. In this context, he called for regional solidarity, something that Uzbekistan, in particular, had previously resisted.¹⁴ Afghanistan could become the central point of reference for this externalization reflex. In reality, stability and security in the region depend on a wide range of factors, of which external risks such as the return of Islamist fighters from Afghanistan are merely one part.

The threat posed by Islamists commuting between Afghanistan and Central Asia has so far only been manifest in small ways. Groups like the IMU, IJU and *Jund al-Khilafah* are far from having the military means to threaten states such as Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, though together with other destabilizing factors in Central Asia's political and socio-economic landscape they need to be taken seriously.¹⁵

Afghanistan in the Policies of Central Asian States

The project of a Greater Central Asia including Afghanistan is counteracted by the failure of regional co-operation to take off in Central Asia proper in the post-Soviet period. The interaction of the five independent Central Asian states after 1991 did not lead to the emergence of a consolidated and self-confident region, despite the urgent need for interstate co-operation in key areas in this part of the CIS – including environmental policy, water management and joint efforts to combat drug trafficking and other cross-border risks.¹⁶ The position occupied by Afghanistan in the foreign and security policies of the five states varies, though governments in all five capitals are currently concerned with developments in the country. Three of the Central Asian states share borders with Afghanistan. In ethnic terms,

¹⁴ Cf. *Uzbek Leader Says Some External Forces against strong Central Asia*, BBC Monitoring, Global Newline, Central Asia Political File, 19 January 2013.

¹⁵ At a hearing of the Committee on Foreign Affairs of the US House of Representatives on "Islamist Threats in Eurasia" in February 2013, Robert Blake concluded that "we do not assess that there is an imminent Islamist militant threat to Central Asian states [...] The limited threat currently posed by Islamist militants to Central Asia, however, is no reason for complacency or retreat. The Central Asian states face a broad range of challenges that [...] could fuel radicalism in the long run [...]" *Testimony by Robert O. Blake, Jr., Assistant Secretary of State, Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs, U.S. Department of State, before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs*, Washington, DC, 27 February 2013.

¹⁶ Cf. Uwe Halbach, Regionalorganisationen in Zentralasien zwischen Integrationstheorie und realer Kooperation [Regional Organizations in Central Asia: Between Theatre of Integration and Real Cooperation], in: *Zentralasien Analysen* 1/2008, pp. 3-6.

there is a degree of interpenetration between the countries, as there are large Turkmen, Uzbek and Tajik minorities in Afghanistan. The challenge of Afghanistan 2014 could become a starting point for more bi- and multi-lateral co-operation in the region. An indication that this may be the case is the recent warming up of relations between Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. Both states have been seen as rivals for leadership in a post-Soviet Central Asia. Currently they are eager to present themselves as “strategic partners”.¹⁷

Tajikistan, in particular, is considered to be a “front-line state”. It has the longest border of all the Central Asian states with Afghanistan. This 1,344 km-long frontier is the most troublesome line of contact between Afghanistan and the post-Soviet space. It runs through areas that are hard for governments to control, and through which a large proportion of the drugs smuggled out of Afghanistan passes via Central Asia to Russia. Tajikistan is also a classic case of a state where state security forces were involved in cross-border criminality. Until 2005, this border was secured by Russia, though there were already complaints then about the involvement of border forces in the drug trade. A report by the International Crisis Group in May 2011 described the country as deeply vulnerable in social, economic, political and military terms. The actions of individual warlords or limited infiltration of fighters from Afghanistan could in themselves be enough to overwhelm the Tajik security forces.¹⁸ Notwithstanding these security challenges to the “weak state” of Tajikistan, the country is presenting itself as a factor for stabilizing the regional environment around Afghanistan. In terms of regional economic relations, the poorest country in the entire CIS played its one trump card: its hydroelectric potential, which, according to the US Greater Central Asia concept, could contribute to the supply of energy to Afghanistan, Pakistan and India. Thanks to its location at the upper reaches of the Amu Darya, Tajikistan has the eighth largest potential for hydroelectric generation worldwide, and the second largest potential in the CIS area behind Russia. However, the exploitation of these resources is a source of friction between Tajikistan and its more powerful neighbour, Uzbekistan, with which it currently finds itself in a conflict over a major dam project.

The key link between Turkmenistan and Afghanistan is the TAPI pipeline project. TAPI is intended to transport gas from Turkmenistan via

¹⁷ Cf. Roger McDermott, *Karimov-Nazarbayev Summit Signals Shift in Central Asian Security*, Eurasia Daily Monitor, 18 June 2013.

¹⁸ Cf. *Tajikistan: The Changing Insurgent Threats*, International Crisis Group, Asia Report No. 205, Bishkek/Brussels, 24 May 2011.

Afghanistan to Pakistan and India. This project was long considered the most ambitious pipeline undertaking in the entire CIS area, perhaps too ambitious, though negotiations have intensified since 2010. Afghanistan stands to generate significant income from transit fees related to this project. The major sticking point remains the security of the route – particularly, although not exclusively, the section that passes through Afghan territory (740 of 1,700 km). A rival project to US-backed TAPI, put forward by Beijing, proposes a gas pipeline from Turkmenistan, via northern Afghanistan, to China. Turkmenistan, Tajikistan and Afghanistan have recently agreed to build a railway line linking the three countries. Work is intended to begin in July 2013.¹⁹ In view of these ambitious infrastructure projects, security issues related to Afghanistan are being relegated down the agenda.

Kyrgyzstan is separated from Afghanistan by Tajikistan. As in the case of Tajikistan, the central government's control of state territory is not unqualified, which could make the country a target for cross-border armed underground fighters. The shock of Batken (see above) made clear in 1999 just how incapable the national security forces were of opposing non-state violent actors. Since 2005, Kyrgyzstan, the only Central Asian state to be certified as “partly free” by Freedom House, has witnessed domestic political turbulence in the form of two irregular changes of government. The most recent *coup d'état*, in April 2010, was followed by ethnic violence in the southern provinces of Osh and Jalal-Abad, in which 470 people died, according to official sources, mostly members of the Uzbek minority. In May 2011, interim President Roza Otunbayeva announced a strengthening of anti-terrorism measures to target forces that were seeking to provoke conflicts in Central Asia, mentioning the situation in Afghanistan and Pakistan in this connection.²⁰ Yet this too reveals the above-mentioned tendency towards externalization, as it was more likely for security forces to be involved in the bloody chaos in the south of the country than external actors. Nonetheless, there is no doubt that the smallest of the Central Asian countries is also affected by the situation in Afghanistan. Two regions near the border to Tajikistan, the province of Batken and the Alai Mountains, are key segments of the Afghan drug route. The US airbase at Manas, near the capital Bishkek, plays a vital role in the resupply of forces currently in Afghanistan and will also do so in the forthcoming withdrawal. The Kyrgyz

¹⁹ Cf. *Turkmen, Tajik, Afghan Presidents Sign Railroad Agreement*, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 20 March 2013.

²⁰ Cf. *Kyrgyz Leader Says Terrorists Trying to Provoke Conflicts in Central Asia*, BBC Monitoring, Global Newswire, Central Asia Political File, 5 May 2011.

government, however, announced it would not prolong the current contract on the deployment of US troops at Manas after it ends in June 2014.

Kazakhstan is the Central Asian state that lies furthest from Afghanistan, and there is no significant Kazakh minority in the country. Nonetheless, as a regional power with an abundance of raw materials, it plays too large a role in Eurasia not to have a political interest in Afghanistan. Kazakhstan increasingly acts as a mediator on the international and regional stage – for instance, between the international community and Iran and in Central Asia between Uzbekistan and Tajikistan with regard to their water-policy dispute.²¹ President Nursultan Nazarbayev addressed the topic of Afghanistan most prominently at the OSCE Summit held in Astana in December 2010 under Kazakh Chairmanship. Referring to the fact that many OSCE States are participating in the international operation in Afghanistan, he called for a comprehensive effort to stabilize the country. Kazakhstan is engaged in the so called *Istanbul Process*, an international initiative for reconstructing and stabilizing Afghanistan in view of ISAF's departure from this country, and supports projects that seek to transform the routes currently used to supply troops in Afghanistan into new trade routes. Speaking recently in Brussels, Kazakh Foreign Minister Erlan Idrissov noted that it would be a shame not to use the well-established military routes for civilian trade.²² For a long time, the topic of Afghanistan and the threat posed to Central Asia by Islamist actors was of little interest to the Kazakh public. This changed in 2011, when attacks began to be carried out by groups such as *Jund al Khilafah*, as mentioned above. Furthermore, this enormous country, with a 7,000 km border to Russia, not only represents a huge transfer zone for the Afghan drug trade, but also plays a part in NDN logistics. As the leading economy in the region, Kazakhstan's largest role is in international efforts for the development of Afghanistan: via deliveries of food aid (70 per cent of wheat supplied), the education of Afghan citizens at Kazakh teaching institutes and, in the area of security policy, by means of military aid, if not the deployment of troops.

The Tension between Security Policy and Human Rights: Uzbekistan as a Strategic Partner

Of Afghanistan's three neighbours in Central Asia, Uzbekistan may have the shortest shared borders, but it holds a key position in the NDN. It can be

²¹ Cf. Richard Weitz, *Kazakhstani Foreign Minister Erlan Idrissov Conducts Shuttle Diplomacy in Central Asia*, Eurasia Daily Monitor, 5 April 2013.

²² Cf. Interfax-Kazakhstan news agency, Almaty, 30 January 2013.

considered the heart of the region, not only as a result of its geographical location, with borders to all four other Central Asian states as well as Afghanistan, but also because of its population of 30 million, which is nearly as many people as the other four Central Asian states put together. Furthermore, in contrast to structurally weak states such as Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan possesses a ubiquitous security apparatus. It is the only Central Asian state with a rail link to Afghanistan and, in the southern border town of Termez – which acts as the German armed forces' air transport base in Central Asia – possesses a key trans-shipment centre in the NDN. Individual NATO states are currently in the process of concluding bilateral agreements with Uzbekistan for the transport of military equipment for their withdrawal from the Hindu Kush. The agreements generally stipulate that a portion of the *matériel* will remain in Uzbekistan.

Uzbekistan thus stands out as a strategic partner in Western Central Asia and Afghanistan policy, although co-operation in this field is not without its problems. In a response to a request for information issued by the Pentagon in summer 2010, the Uzbek-Afghan corridor was described as “a morass of inefficiency, arbitrariness and ‘informal’ payments”.²³ This partnership also faces grave difficulties in view of the country's human-rights image. While Uzbekistan does share many problems in this regard with other countries in the region, and the CIS area as a whole, including strong restrictions on freedom of speech, limits on the activities of NGOs and deficits in the criminal justice system and with regard to prison conditions in general, Uzbekistan stands out as the problem child of international human-rights monitoring in the post-Soviet space. According to the United Nations Committee against Torture, mistreatment of prisoners in the country is systematic. The government has promised improvements and reform. For instance, habeas corpus was introduced in 2008, and the death penalty has been abolished. Yet reports by international organizations continue to identify a “culture of impunity” for abuses by law-enforcement and state-security organs. If anything, the situation has deteriorated, as Human Rights Watch documented in a report entitled “‘No One Left to Witness’: Torture, the Failure of Habeas Corpus, and the Silencing of Lawyers in Uzbekistan”, which was published in late 2011. Uzbekistan has the highest number of religious prisoners of conscience in the CIS area. These prisoners, categorized by the state as “religious extremists”, are particularly prone to maltreatment. By setting large numbers of children to work on the

²³ Deirdre Tynan, *Documents Highlight Problems with Uzbek Corridor of Afghan Supply Route*, Eurasianet.org, 28 June 2010.

cotton harvest, Uzbekistan is also guilty of infringing the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, of which it is a signatory.

In February 2013, commenting on human-rights-related concerns over an agreement his country had reached with Uzbekistan on the transport and transfer of military hardware withdrawn from Afghanistan, the British defence secretary stated: “We have a general principle that we don’t transfer equipment that might be used for internal repression, but the Uzbeks have a clear challenge in the post-2014 period around their long border with Afghanistan.”²⁴ The allegation that the Uzbek government has used heavy weaponry to quell internal dissent was provoked by the “Andijan massacre” of May 2005. According to local and international human-rights organizations, government troops in armoured vehicles opened fire on a crowd consisting partly of violent actors – armed men who had stormed a prison, occupied government buildings and taken hostages – but also civilian bystanders and peaceful demonstrators. The result was a bloodbath in which hundreds were killed. As a result, Uzbekistan’s relations with its Western partners broke down. The EU imposed sanctions, though they have since been relaxed, largely on German urging. Co-operation with Central Asia partners over Afghanistan played no small role in the restoration of relations with Uzbekistan on the part of Washington and Brussels. Opponents of this course criticize the West for making a deal with a view to co-operation on Afghanistan that is not imperative, since Tashkent should have sufficient self-interest in its neighbour’s stability.

²⁴ Cited by Roger McDermott, *NDN ‘Reverse Transit,’ Uzbekistan and the Failure of Western Grand Strategy (Part Two)*, Eurasia Daily Monitor, 2 April 2013.