

Central Asia and Afghanistan

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There can be no doubt now that the ISAF forces will leave an unstable country behind them in 2014, one in which the government cannot secure fundamental aspects of statehood – a legitimate monopoly on the use of force, economic reproduction, and a coherent symbolic order. Power struggles are therefore likely to continue to be played out violently after 2014.

Although social scientists have begun to pay more attention to Central Asia in the last two decades, the consequences of developments in Afghanistan for Central Asia and the roles played by the Central Asian states there were under-researched at first. In the last two years, a number of institutions have started to scrutinize the significance of the Afghanistan conflict for Central Asia.¹

At first glance, the interdependencies between Afghanistan and Central Asia appear overwhelming. Afghanistan has more than 2,000 km of joint borders with the three neighbouring states of Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. All three are kin states of large minorities living in Afghanistan, though only Uzbekistan and Tajikistan maintained close relations to “their” minorities prior to the war. The shared history also has other facets. For instance, it was mainly Tajik engineers who attempted to industrialize the Afghan economy in line with Soviet plans. Tajiks also fled to Afghanistan during the Tajik civil war. Contemporary issues that link the countries include negative phenomena such as the drug trade, but also the Istanbul Process, which Kazakhstan actively supports.

But which of these numerous interdependencies are currently relevant to questions of security and conflict? This question can of course only be answered in relation to specific conflicts. And when talking of security, we must ask “security for whom?” States generally play a very ambivalent role here: On the one hand, they are the potential guarantors of security. They can create domestic peace by making an effective claim to the sole legitimate use of force, while also acting peacefully on the international stage. Yet they can also represent a major threat to the peace and security of people both within and outside their territory. The Central Asian states occupy both sides of this ambivalent role, albeit to differing degrees. As the authors in this edition of *Security and Human Rights* show, Central Asia is for the most part a region of (negative) peace. However, the precarious legitimacy of governance (aka “bad governance”) in Central Asia also provokes power struggles between state and society, in which the state threatens the security of the people more than it protects it (see the articles by Alessandro Frigerio/Nargis Kassenova and Vera Axyonova).


The problem of security appears less ambivalent if one considers only regime security. In the strongly Western-influenced mainstream tradition of security research, states are primarily at risk from external intervention. However, experts have pointed out that the most significant threats to postcolonial states and their rulers do not come from outside, but from within their societies. Where state institutions are (or remain) unconsolidated and lack legitimacy in the eyes of the people, there is a risk that challengers will mobilize disaffected sections of the population to oppose the regime. Regimes of this kind therefore always tend to generate a modicum of legitimacy, while also using repressive policies to curb potential revolts and revolutions. Acting in a repressive manner towards its own population means, of course, that such a regime will inevitably violate civil and human rights. Western states and international organizations have therefore repeatedly drawn attention to such abuses. International organizations, whether “Eastern” or “Western” in origin, have so far been unable to find any coherent answers to this security dilemma (Anna Kreikemeyer; on UN conflict prevention efforts, see the article by Miroslav Jenča).

¹ These include the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI); the Institute for European, Russian, and Eurasian Studies (IERES) at George Washington University; and NGOs such as Germany’s Friedrich Ebert Foundation.

What does the conflict in Afghanistan mean in light of these structural problems of governance in Central Asia? “Contagion”, where a conflict spreads to infect an entire region, is unlikely to affect Central Asia for now. Drug trafficking represents a serious problem for the security of the Central Asian states. This is clear in the case of Tajikistan, where elements of organized crime are opposed to the regime and have infiltrated parts of the state. Islamist extremism poses a real, albeit limited, threat to the regimes, but also allows the latter to justify repression and the restriction of religious freedom and other civil rights.

Aside from these dangers, however, it seems rather that the regimes have found many ways of profiting from the conflict in Afghanistan. Although the West is constantly calling on the Central Asian states to observe human rights and carry out reforms to strengthen the rule of law, the weight of Western claims depends mainly on the shifting balance of power and the pressure to act.² For instance, Uzbekistan has fended off calls for reform, taking advantage of the key role it, and particularly the logistics hub of Termez, plays in ISAF’s Northern Distribution Network for resupplying the forces deployed in Afghanistan (Uwe Halbach). At the same time, their neighbour’s chaos enables the Central Asian states to present themselves as havens of stability. Tajikistan, one of the region’s weakest states, took advantage of the conflict in Afghanistan not only to generate substantial rent income through development co-operation, but was also able to enhance its international reputation by co-operating in the field of border management and is now no longer merely a recipient of advice but is asked to provide it (Jafar Usmanov). The frequently voiced criticism that this co-operation was poorly implemented should not lead us to completely exclude the possibility of long-term successes arising from the internationalization and professionalization that have been achieved.

² Following the colour revolutions and the failure of the subsequent experiments in democracy, Western states will probably also be cautious in calling for democratization in the future.



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