THE NON-TRADITIONAL SECURITY THREATS TO
CENTRAL ASIA

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Abstract

The Cold War ending with the collapse of Soviet Empire disintegrated into three parts i.e., Russia, Central Asia and the Caucasus region. The scars of disintegration could not be erased till yet as the Central Asian States (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan) are still facing a dilemma of security. The region is overwhelmed by the non-traditional security threats such as drug and human trafficking, insurgency, terrorism, organised crime, financial corruption, waste and mismanagement by ruling elite, illegal migration, communicable diseases such as HIV and AIDS which are cumulatively undermining the CAR’s quest towards stability and prosperity. These societal hazards are also causing environmental degeneration at an alarming pace on land, water and resource pollution which is threatening survival in downstream region as it carries transnational implications. The fractured security in the region needs to be addressed by strengthening the infra-politico-economic structures and by sincere joint international cooperation to eradicate the termites corroding non-traditional security. Unless addressed, these threats could pose dire consequences for the region thus creating shockwaves of instability in its neighbourhood.
Key words: Central Asian Republics, Non-traditional security threats, Drug & human trafficking, Terrorism & Organised crimes, Illegal migration, Communicable diseases, Environmental degeneration

Introduction

The Central Asian region carries historical significance as it has been a ‘Cradle of Civilization’. The region is particularly important because its history embraces extremes of historical phases starting from pre-Islamic to Islamic era to the Russia Empire and the former Soviet Union. With the disintegration of USSR and emergence of essentially five Central Asian Republics, security concerns naturally appear on the show. The region being nascent and backward is subjected to different challenges of economic growth, development and stability which hampered the security and thus decelerated the phenomenon of development in the region. With the developmental activities being unable to cope up with technological advancement and increased criminal activities, the inept traditional security i.e., domestic, economic and military security is further threatened by the emerging burden from non-traditional security threats, where narcotics and human trafficking, illegal labour immigration, organised crime, insurgency, financial corruption along with health and environmental hazards such as communicable diseases as HIV/AIDS and environmental pollution and degradation took roots thus posing a dire threat.
Traditional and non-traditional security concerns are intricately interlinked and security cannot be maintained unless both are addressed. Conventional security cannot be achieved unless non-traditional security is guaranteed. Consequently, any misbalance in conventional security opens gateways for non-traditional security threats. The region unfortunate in development despite being a resource hub is already facing conventional security threats but the mounting non-traditional security threats leave no stone unturned in aggravating the agony of the region. With all these exertion, the region is subjected to serious threats that have transnational implications. Narcotics trade, terrorism, insurgency, health and environmental hazards are now expanding beyond borders which are an alarming stage. Non-traditional security threats are corroding the basis of growth and development and undermine any further efforts on account of its aggravated and ever-increasing effects. In order to maintain a strategic balance and security in the region, the origin of these threats need to be identified and addressed unless the threat escalates thus endangering global security.

Origin of Instability

Afghanistan has emerged as the single largest producer of heroin in the world. This basic reality has had a tremendous negative impact on the Greater Central Asian region. In fact, much of the traditional and non-traditional security threats can be directly derived from this unfortunate situation or has reinforced other security threats. Criminal co-option of the
state and military instability can in simple terms be calculated from the epicentre that Afghanistan has become. The greater the distance from this hub, the less instability and criminal cooption. The situation can, of course, not be only calculated by geographical proximity as the underlying factors are more complicated than this but the heroin trade has had an undeniably negative impact on the stability of the region.

The arch of instability is primarily derived from a few states in the vicinity of Afghanistan, but there is serious spill over to other neighbouring states. The weakness of the Afghan, Tajik and Kyrgyz economies and political systems make them easy targets for the criminal networks, and have emerged as three of the most corrupt states according to Transparency International. In fact, all states within the Greater Central Asian region receive a dismal score. For example, Kazakhstan (on the high end) receives the score 2.2 (of 10) which indicates rampant corruption and Afghanistan receives 1.5, which is the fifth lowest score in the world.³

As a result, security threats of different kinds have emerged in the region to an unprecedented level in the worst affected states, but the impact is felt to some degree in all regional states. Due to the fact that the states are weak and have very little impact on the security situation, there are huge domestic security problems. This is especially evident in the areas outside of the major cities that the central government has lost control of, or lost interest in, especially if minorities or opposition controls the area.⁴
Weapon Culture (The security risk: past use and threat of use of small arms)

Stockpile leakages were one of the main sources of weapons in the Tajik civil war 1992–1997. The war was fought between the United Tajik Opposition, comprised of Islamic and democratic opposition groups, and supporters of the secular regime who sought continuity with the Soviet period. The two factions fought each other largely through regionally-based militias and acquired their weapons through local community leaders. The militias supporting former Communist Party First Secretary Rakhmon Nabiyev’s election to the presidency had particular access to national law enforcement structures for supplies, and also received weapons from the governments of the Russian Federation and Uzbekistan.5

Ten years after the end of the war in Tajikistan, leakages from government stockpiles continue in Central Asia. Thefts from stockpiles have been reported in Kyrgyzstan. For the period 1993–2002 the Military Prosecutor's Office in Kyrgyzstan assessed a total of 1,100 cases of theft, and more than 30 officers and 500 soldiers were charged with criminal offences. Between 2000 and 2002, seven incidents of large-scale firearms theft by military personnel were registered.6

The management of government stockpiles is a matter of concern in Kazakhstan too. According to International Alert, there has been no official inventory carried out in Kazakhstan since independence. Attempts to undertake any effort to address the issue met resistance from the military. It has been
alleged that arson has even taken place in order to cover up the loss of weapons from stockpiles.7

**Drug Trafficking/Narcotics trade**

After the collapse of the Soviet Union the security of Central Asia’s new sovereign states was threatened by the danger of drug expansion.8 The Iron Curtain fell and the countries of Central Asia were given new opportunities to integrate with the global economy and political community. The geopolitical position of these countries is convenient for the development of trade and political ties with Europe, Southeast Asia and China. Existing communication structures inherited from the Soviet Union are well developed, while trade links southward are being recreated. In some ways, it is possible to talk of a renaissance of the Great Silk Road.9 During the last decade the governments of the Central Asian states have been working to determine priorities for cooperation, even as drug traffickers in the region grasped that porous regional borders, corruptible law enforcement bodies, intra-regional commodity trade, common languages, cultural affinity and ethnic diasporas created a favourable environment for the establishment and development of a “great heroin road” or “Northern route” for Afghan drugs.10 Afghan and Tajik drug clans, interested in establishing channels for heroin delivery to Europe, began to test them. They started to exploit the northern route after some disruption in traditional drug routes through Pakistan and Iran and in the midst of a rapid increase in heroin demand in Central Asia and Russia. Factors
influencing the development of the drug situation in Central Asia since the 1990s are:

- A steady growth of drug production in Afghanistan and increase in the volume of smuggling;
- Increase in demand for drugs in the CIS countries and Europe;
- The establishment of a new “Northern route” via the countries of the former USSR, the importance of which is increasing due to the strengthening of controls along the Iranian border;
- A worsening social and economic situation in the region, which has encouraged the involvement of some layers of society in the drug trade;
- Poor condition of drug abuse prevention systems and a lack of medical clinics and rehabilitation centres;
- Changes in the use of narcotic substances, which have been a crucial factor in the spread of HIV/AIDS, Hepatitis, tuberculosis and other infectious diseases;
- The emergence of new synthetic drugs (such as ecstasy), as well as an increase in the number of users of these drugs;
- Availability of raw material drug base in the form of wild-growing hemp and ephedrine, as well as the persistence of illicit poppy cultivation in some regions.

The drug problem is not a new phenomenon in the Central Asian region. Nevertheless, levels of drug abuse and drug-related crime rates have been much lower than in the West.
During the last five years, the situation has worsened dramatically. Aside from being transit zones for drug trafficking, the region has also become an active consumer of the most dangerous drug of modernity – heroin. The data suggests that around one third of drugs transiting Central Asia are consumed there\(^{14}\). From the spill over of trafficking routes, drug addiction, especially of heroin, has skyrocketed. In 1990 there were more than 5,000 registered drug users out of 50 million people in the region. Since then, Central Asia has experienced the fastest growth in drug addiction of any region of the world. In the period up to 2002, there was an 18-fold increase, with users rising to over one percent of the population of the region. The drug business generates enormous profits and the temptation to grab a cut creates favourable conditions for corruption in law enforcement agencies.

**HIV/AIDS**

Drug abusers are prone to HIV. In 2000, HIV outbreaks were registered among intravenous drug users (IDU) in the cities of Temirtau (Kazakhstan), Osh (Kyrgyzstan) and Yangiul (Uzbekistan). According to statistics, 70% of HIV infections across Central Asia have been contracted through drug injection (the figure in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan is ca. 82 %). Intravenous drug administration is the main cause of the rapid spread of HIV/AIDS as well as other sexually or intravenously transmittable diseases. A sudden and drastic rise in HIV has been registered in the region since 1997, before
which HIV/AIDS was a very slight problem. In the period 1990-1996, HIV/AIDS cases hovered around 0.2 cases per 100,000 people per year, before jumping to 1.4 in 1997. It is not a coincidence that it was in that same year that large volumes of heroin trafficking began – from its beginning, the spread of HIV in Central Asia was directly related to intravenous drug use, above all of heroin.15

**Human Trafficking and Slavery**

“These women sell their underage daughters to local policemen. The girls sniff glue and see yellow Pokémon’s. They travel to Almaty and Tashkent sometimes too... without documents they cross the border by bribing the guards.”16

Human trafficking in Central Asia has both interstate and intrastate dimensions. As in other parts of the world, organized groups trafficking humans consist of three players: recruiters, dealers and brokers. The first player is responsible for persuading potential victims to accept a job offer. Recruiters are mostly represented by potential victim’s relatives, friends or neighbours, who they are likely to trust more. Dealers transfer victims across state borders, while brokers sell victims to specific employers. Mostly young men and women aged 19-29 are usually unaware that trafficking rings exist and fall victims of human trade. In Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan almost 50% of the total population is younger than 30.

Older generations are more informed and have access to mass media, although women have the least access to TV
media, making them more vulnerable. Usually men are trafficking en masse from one village by a recruiter and they are traded either as a group or individually. Women, by contrast, are often trafficked alone or in groups of no more than five. They are traded for higher prices than male slaves; with an average price of $300-$400 per woman. More desirable women might fetch up to $10,000. The age of male victims is turning younger in each sending country, with many 15-16 years olds trafficked.

Organized trafficking in human beings emerged during Tajikistan’s civil war. Along with trafficking in drugs and weapons, women became easy targets for illegal traders seeking easy funds. In the absence of law-enforcement, trafficking in women was easy and cheap. Young women were sold to Afghanistan and Uzbekistan as brides during the 1990s; after the war ended women were sold for prostitution in Russia, the United Arab Emirates, Turkey and the Gulf states. During that period roughly 1,000 human beings were trafficked every year. Since the early 2000, while trafficking for prostitution remain roughly the same, more people were trafficked for slavery, mostly to Russia and Kazakhstan.

Samarkand, Bukhara, and the Ferghana Valley have the highest rates of human trafficking. The recruiters and dealers are usually from Uzbekistan with women involved in the logistics trafficking as “boshi” (female bosses). Shelters in Bukhara and Tashkent provide psychological and medical help to over 3,000 victims registered to date. According to an IOM
representative, the largest group of trafficked women in the UAE is Uzbeks. Most of the women who depart from Osh, Kyrgyzstan, or Chimkent, Kazakhstan wind up in UAE or Turkey.

**Energy and Environmental Security**

Environmental hazards and disasters are a significant concern in the sub region, which includes some of the USSR’s principal nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons production and testing sites, and the desiccated Aral Sea, once the planet’s fourth largest lake with a thriving fishery. Most Central Asian states attained their independence with plans for environmental reforms high on their agendas, and with their citizenry highly supportive of such reforms. Yet both society and the political establishment did not anticipate the subsequent sharp economic decline which accompanied reform and which resulted in a decline in investment in urban and rural infrastructure, welfare systems, public education, and medical services. As a result, despite the wave of environmental interest and activism that initially emerged, environmental management reforms and initiatives have struggled to win support in recent years. Undoubtedly, one of the regions’ major environment concerns in the Aral Sea. In prioritizing the region’s shared environmental concerns, the most important are:

- **Water Degradation:** Central Asia has a substantial amount of water, however, scarcity problems stem from poor management distribution and
pollution (particularly during the Soviet era). Water supply and sanitation systems are also in poor repair in many areas. Virtually all major urban/industrial centres throughout the sub region suffer from significant water pollution with tests indicating that approximately 12.5 per cent of household water contains biological contaminates and over 3.5 per cent is chemically polluted beyond WHO standards.

➢ **Soil Erosion and Land Degradation:** Several factors cause land degradation in the region including: loss of vegetative cover (i.e. from over-grazing, expanding human populations, and pollution); erosion (both wind and water); depletion of soil resources (i.e. from no rotation of crops); and salinization (from poor irrigation practices).

➢ **Loss of Biodiversity:** Central Asia contains a well developed network of nature reserves inherited from the USSR; roughly three per cent of the region was designated under some form of conservation regime in the late Soviet era, equivalent to about 100,000 km² (Sievers et al 1995).

➢ **Pollution of the Caspian Sea:** The Caspian Sea, covering more than 370,000 km², is the planet’s largest inland body of water. Its littoral states are Azerbaijan, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Kazakhstan, the Russian Federation, and Turkmenistan. Today, the sea is severely polluted from a concentration of the 100 or so
rivers which enter it, and the uncontrolled oil and gas extraction from it (Zonn 1999). While the Caspian still yields 90 per cent of the world’s Sturgeon, the annual yield of sturgeon has fallen from tens of thousands of tonnes per year to under ten thousand tonnes.

- **Air Pollution:** While hydropower meets an appreciable amount of the region’s energy needs, reliance on coal, inefficient power plants, industrial practices, and private transport have all led to high levels of both local and trans-boundary air pollution.

- **Radiation:** Hundreds of nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons tests were conducted at the Semipalatinsk (Kazakhstan) nuclear test area, the Naryn (Kazakhstan) testing area, and on Resurrection Island (Kazakhstan/Uzbekistan) in the Aral Sea. The incidence of ill-health and death which has been caused by radioactive contamination at many or all of these sites is significant, and remains a major environmental and health concern for the sub region. (Appendix-1).

**Recommendations**

Following recommendations are suggested to counter non-traditional security threats in Central Asian Republics:

- A joint cooperation among Central Asian states is required to collectively counter the non-traditional security threats.

- Overcoming ethnic differences are essentially important in order to bring about immediate changes and reforms.
Settling the issues of water management between up-stream countries and down-stream countries needs to be addressed.

Increased securitization on borders to check against drug and human trafficking.

There is a need for planned agriculture and industrialization to protect the environment from environmental degradation.

Increased socio-economic interdependence on regional and extra-regional cooperation level to attain regional stability and make the region even more lucrative for investment by offering skilled manpower that would open new horizons for employment and development.

Regional cooperation for effective utilization of land as well as labour of Central Asia.

**Analysis**

Being subjected to different intra-regional challenges, along with the *New Great Game* going on; the region is facing threats of multi-dimensional nature which are hampering its security, stability and peace. Besides, the socio-economic structure is being pushed back towards decline on account of these mounting non-traditional security threats. Research makes it evident that instability, terrorism as well as drug culture in Afghanistan is paving way and therefore, providing fertile grounds to promote the illicit activities of drug trafficking, illegal labour immigration, human trafficking, organised crimes terrorism etc in Central Asia. Increased drug
trafficking in CA is predominantly via Afghanistan. The effect is that already frustrated youth is increasingly victimized by drug addiction and drug trafficking because due to increased unemployment, drug trafficking is the only source of earning money. HIV/AIDS is rapidly increasing in CA and a major cause of this outspread is said to be drugs usage. Around 17 to 25% of intense drug addiction is likely to be the cause of AIDS as well as a drug addict can do anything to get intoxicated. Such desperate people are further more exploited that they are forced to sell off their children for the matter of human trafficking where they are smuggled to be exploited by being targeted as child labour, women trafficking etc. This frustration is also ending up in rebel against authorities such as the arms culture in CA is gradually attaining its grip in the region where they have been quite successful in Uzbekistan where weapon culture has spread notoriously.

The inheritance of environmentally inefficient policies, including over exploitation of natural resources and lack of appropriate industrial controls, have left a severe development burden on the sub region. The sharp economic decline, poverty, and the lack of investment in infrastructure following independence also pose some serious issues, both currently and in terms of the pent-up potential in the expansion of Central Asia’s industrial base.17

Energy sector is another dimension of the non-traditional security threats that is causing environmental degradation at a rapid pace which is threatening human survival. All life forms,
whether human, wild life or plants are affected by these biological and chemical hazards. The region being resource rich in minerals is having massive sites of nuclear material such as uranium deposits. Inadequate extraction of these resources, unplanned irrigation and industrialization adversely affects the environment and other seismic phenomenon which carry fatal consequences.

Appendix-1

End Notes

The Non-Traditional Security Threats to Central Asia

5 Torjesen, Wille and MacFarlane, 2005, op. cit., pp. 9 and 57.
8 The Central Asian region is formed of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Northward the region borders Russian Federation, in the South Iran and Afghanistan; it spans from China in the East and up to the Caspian Sea in the West. Hereafter, according to Alexander Zelitchenko's definition, drug-expansion implies an intensive increase in illegal drug trafficking as well as broadening of the areas of other states where the drugs are trafficked to, often accompanied by arms trafficking on state borders. Alexander Zelitchenko, Afghan Narcoexpansion of the 1990s and Kyrgyzstan National Security Problems, Bishkek: Kyrgyz-Russian Slavonic University, 2003, pp. 5-6.
9 The so-called "silk routes" represent numerous side roads which branched off, then joined together again, skirting round mountains and deserts, and linking oases and market towns. The term "silk route" itself, however, dates only from the 19th century. Long after, therefore, the caravan trails were interrupted by the Mongolian invasions of the 13th century and the Eurasian trade route was abandoned in favour of maritime trade in the 15th century. Summary data from International conference “Drug Routes from Central Asia to Europe”, Paris, 2003.
10 Opium has probably been one of the many products transported along Great Silk Route. The development of the production of and international trade in opium in Asia dates principally from the 18th century, and more particularly from the 19th century when the European colonial empires shared a large part of the Asian continent between them. However, the opium trade could not use the routes in Central Asia, apart from those in Chinese Turkistan, as Lower Central Asia was suddenly closed off after Russia took over the khanate of Khiva in 1873. The movements of illicit
The 1998 survey found extensive growth of ephedra, which can be used to produce ephedrine (used in the form of ephedrone in the region), the main precursor for the manufacture of methamphetamine or methcathinone. Some 88,200 ha of ephedra were identified in Kazakhstan, 46,400 ha in Kyrgyzstan and 3,500 ha in Tajikistan. UNODC, *Illicit Drugs Situation in the Regions Neighbouring Afghanistan and the response of ODCCP*, October 2002, p. 3.

Climatic conditions in all five Central Asian countries are, in principle, favourable for the growth of opium poppy and cannabis which are illicitly cultivated on small individual plots in villages, or in remote mountainous regions. UNODC Report *Illicit Drugs Situation in the Regions Neighbouring Afghanistan and the response of ODCCP*, October 2002, p. 3.

Kyrgyzstan, for example, cultivated opium poppy legally up to 1974, meeting 86% of the USSR pharmaceutical industry demand, which equated to 16% of world legal opium poppy cultivation. Up to the 1990s, USSR Lekarsprom association made up to 500 tons of ephedra in Kyrgyzstan. Not far away, in the city of Shymkent, Kazakhstan, there used to be a pharmaceutical plant producing narcotic and psychotropic medicines.

In recent years the countries of the Central Asia have been likely turning into a kind of “sump” for drug traffic. Simultaneously this affects a general increase in drug crime and addiction. In December 1999 a cache of unprecedented size was found in the village of Tuleikan, Osh province, Kyrgyzstan, which contained 831 kg of opium, 2, 6 kg of heroin.


A comment by a sex worker in central Bishkek, January 2009.