Post-2014: The Spectre of a New Arms Race in Central Asia?

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Post-2014 poses a number of daunting questions. What will be the impact of the anticipated pull-out of U.S. troops from Afghanistan on regional security? How will the hardware surplus that U.S. forces plan to grant to some Central Asian governments affect a fragile power balance in the region? Will it unleash a costly armaments race, especially between belligerent Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, or countries vying for regional supremacy, namely, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan? How will the anticipated termination in 2014 of the Manas airbase in Kyrgyzstan, currently leased by the United States, impact regional security, and will it result in an increasing role played by Russia and China in the region? Could a U.S.-backed armament of authoritarian Uzbekistan and Tajikistan be used by their ruling elites as a means for crushing dissent at home? These are all questions that have yet to be answered.

The specter of post-2014 has also placed Central Asian ruling elites in a serious dilemma—whether to maintain the old ties of military cooperation with Russia, a traditional supplier of military hardware to Central Asian regimes, or to foster closer rapprochement with NATO members, and, especially, U.S. forces, in the hope it leaves behind a substantial amount of sophisticated weaponry. This proves a conundrum for Central Asian rulers that they will have to resolve.

Currently, the Central Asian arms market consists of advanced weapons, mostly from the United Kingdom, France, Israel, Turkey, and South Korea.
This adds to stiff competition in the region, where Russia still enjoys an important role; though the Kremlin is no longer seen as a hegemonic player. According to the London-based International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), energy-rich Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan are presently topping the list of military spenders in the region spending $1.4 billion per annum, which is as much as twenty times more than the military budget of Tajikistan and forty-five times that of Kyrgyzstan.

The new Kyrgyz leadership has proposed annual spending of 13 percent ($223 million) out of all its budget expenditures on defense and security for 2013. Given its uncertain political situation and bloody clashes between governmental and opposition forces in 2010-12 in Kаратейгин Valley and Khorog, Tajikistan has increased its military spending by 25 percent. Turkmenistan, which officially pursues a neutral foreign policy, only spends about 1.5% of its budget on its defense. 1

**Chasing U.S. Military Aid**

During a high-level Tashkent meeting with a top U.S. Congress delegation in February 2013, Uzbek President Islam Karimov demonstrated his willingness to deepen military cooperation with the Washington as well as expressed his grave concern over radical Islamic threats stemming from Afghanistan. In response, American congressmen declared that the Uzbek government's curtailment of human rights in the country might be justifiable due to the existing threat of Islamic extremism. According to Eurasianet, Dana Rohrabacher, chairman of the Europe, Eurasia, and Emerging Threats Subcommittee, is reported to have said that "[Tashkent] made it clear to us that they would prefer replacing all of their former Soviet equipment ... with American equipment." 2 In early March 2013, Robert O. Blake Jr., U.S. Assistant Secretary for South and Central Asian Affairs, confirmed that Washington will supply "non-deadly weapons including drones to Uzbekistan" but declined to provide any details. 3

According to regional media outlets such as Avesta, Asia Plus, and Meridian, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan will be provided with virtual reconnaissance equipment, digital radio sets, GPS-equipped personal military ammunition, armored vehicles, air defense systems, tanks, missiles, artillery systems, and night-vision rifles. This has provoked a good deal of speculation in the Russian press that, as a result, Uzbekistan will be reluctant to purchase Russian-supplied arms. Tashkent started to modernize and re-equip its army with Western arms already in the late 1990s when it had become obvious that obsolete Soviet equipment and military training methods were failing to meet the needs of contemporary challenges. At the same time, the Uzbek government has never declined the opportunity to purchase certain types of modern weaponry from Russia, taking advantage of cheaper costs as a CSTO (Collective Security Treaty Organization) member. It plans to renew its Soviet-era air defense system with Russian supplies precisely due to the low prices charged by Moscow in its dealings with Central Asian allies. While it may be apparent that Tashkent’s “multi-vector” foreign policy seeks to diversify its arms supplies and minimize its dependence on Russia, real or exaggerated, it is hard to believe that this can be done by completely bypassing Russia.

For its part, the U.S. is interested in extending its lease of the Manas air base in Kyrgyzstan as well as creating new military or paramilitary bases in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. Visiting Tashkent and Dushanbe in November 2011, Vincent Brooks, Chief Commander of the First U.S. Infantry Division, voiced the Pentagon’s suggestion of establishing in the two above countries long-term training facility networks, where Uzbek and Tajik armies would be trained to utilize U.S.-granted weaponry from Afghanistan. 4 Uzbek armed forces have also received night-vision devices and navigation systems from U.S. Coalition Forces. According to the U.S. Embassy in Tajikistan, local armed forces and commando groups have been granted 300 sets of personal military outfit and equipment, and trained by U.S. instructors in a training center located in Fakhrabat.

Growing levels of security cooperation between Uzbekistan and the U.S./NATO have also forced the EU and the U.S. to lift sanctions imposed on Tashkent in the aftermath of the Andijan massacre in 2005. The long-awaited lifting of sanctions has enabled Uzbekistan to launch military cooperation with some EU states, in particular Germany. Berlin is interested in protecting its business-
es operating in the Uzbek energy market, its military base in Termez, and it has also offered the Tashkent leadership an option to purchase its Alpha Jet training planes.5

Managing the Costly Soviet Legacy of Military Equipment

The Central Asian region inherited a surplus amount of hardware and arms accumulated and stored in depots of the then Middle Asian Military District, where a significant number of weapons originated from Soviet troops based in Afghanistan and Eastern Europe. In the early days of independence, the new Central Asian states made bold claims for the acquisition of this ex-Soviet weaponry and infrastructure stationed on their territories, blindly guided by a “grab-and-stash” approach. Ironically, however, this “inheritance” put the states in a quandary—they had not reckoned with the costs of technical maintenance. Moreover, the arsenals at their disposal sometimes exceeded the real needs of their newly-born armies and became costly to maintain and guarantee their safety and security.

The poor management of weapons and explosives has seen numerous cases of leakages of toxic missile fuel; sporadic fires and explosions in depots have even cost lives.6 Faced with unexpected problems, the political leaderships of the Central Asian states started to make a comprehensive inventory of their armaments, writing off outdated and hazardous equipment so as to lessen the costs of servicing and maintaining them. A large part of the armaments have been dismantled and cannibalized. Utilizable hardware surplus and Soviet-built military jets have been sold to other countries and to some criminal gangs.

The growing need for the repair, technical upgrade, and, budget permitting, purchasing of costly Western arms has given an impetus for modernizing the region’s armed forces, their organizational and personnel structures, improving military training, as well as supply and logistics systems. Notwithstanding, Russia has remained an undisputed leader in the manufacture and supplying of arms to the states of the region—this in spite of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan making significant efforts to keep their domestic arms-making capacities functioning to cover their own needs in military equipment. As members of the CSTO, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan enjoy market preferences for fuel, spare parts, and new military commodities provided by Moscow. The latter also lends assistance in the training of Central Asian army personnel in Russian military academies; Russian is still widely spoken in bilateral interactions. All these factors show that Central Asian political elites are willing to preserve their military ties with Russia and, at the same time, maximize benefits from their membership in the CSTO.

Growing U.S.-Russia Competition over the Central Asian Arms Market

In spite of the continuing dominance of Russia, the region has witnessed a gradual yet clear diversification of arms supplies and deepening ties with other Western arms markets and manufacturers. Post-2014 may only accelerate this trend given the plan of the U.S. to bequeath military supplies to the Central Asian states. On the other hand, there is a significant potential risk of these arms being sold, for profit, to local guerrillas, especially when lavishly paid for by petroleum or opium dollars. The question is also posed of what will happen to the obsolete Soviet-era weaponry, currently in the hands of the Uzbek and Tajik armies, if replaced by modern U.S. arms? Is there any guarantee that this military arsenal will not find its way into the hands of regional criminal networks? These questions should be a cause for considerable concern.

In an attempt to retain a stronger military footing in the region and limit the growing military ties between the U.S./NATO and the Central Asian states, Russia has tried to help modernize the Kyrgyz and Tajik armies by supplying them with weaponry, seeing this as a way of increasing their potential dependency on Russian arms manufacturers in the long run. In late 2012, the Kremlin pledged a sizeable military aid package to Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, which are already hosts to Russian military bases.7 Russia’s military assistance to Kyrgyzstan is estimated to total $1.1 billion whereas Tajikistan will receive $200 million.

An important rationale for this generous aid lies in Moscow’s mounting concern with the attempts
of the U.S. leadership to re-orient key Central Asian states away from Russian military standards to those of NATO, the uncertain regional situation post-2014, and U.S. plans on retaining military presence in the area after pull-out from Afghanistan. The Kremlin also appears to be increasingly suspicious that the U.S. wants to torpedo Russian-dominated integration and security mega-projects in the region through "buying out" some of the regimes by showering them with weapons and economic dividends. In light of the ongoing intrigue around the fate of U.S. coalition weaponry, Moscow perceives Washington as enticing Central Asian regimes into accepting free arms in return for gradually involving them in closer military and business transactions. Over time the military weaponry slated for the regional regimes would require updating and maintenance from the providers, which may not come for free.

Russia is particularly interested in creating a unified air defense system with Central Asian states. However, this may be thwarted by the fact that U.S. air defense weaponry is seen by the local regimes as a unique opportunity to replace their aged Soviet systems with more sophisticated models. This is a cause of significant consternation for Moscow, which is taking strident measures to upset U.S. objectives in the region. In 2013, Russia and Kazakhstan signed an agreement on creating a Unified Regional Air Defense System (URADS), with it being Moscow's intention to also involve Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan. URADS is designed to advance air security in Eurasia and forge closer cooperation in air defense under Russian dominance. The first plans on setting up regional air defense systems appeared in 2007 but have since been modified in favor of the gradual involvement of Central Asian states, not least due to Uzbekistan's refusal to join.

Implications

It is rather premature at this point to claim that the Central Asian states are drifting away from Russian arms suppliers toward the U.S./NATO. What is obvious, however, is that although Russia is still seen as an important regional player with the capacity of supplying traditional military hardware at reasonable cost, it is incapable of enticing its regional allies with state-of-the-art technological weaponry. Moscow is therefore losing out in the battle with Western arms manufacturers and is no longer seen as having a monopoly over arms supplies to the Central Asian market.

The Central Asian regimes are attempting to leverage maximum gains by maneuvering between U.S./NATO and Russian arms manufacturers, diversifying their sources of arms supplies, keeping a balance of interests between these poles of power, and trying to maintain a modicum of stability and predictability in what is a fragile regional situation—both now and especially post-2014. At the same time, Central Asian elites are suspicious of the U.S.'s anti-Iran politics in the region and prefer to abstain from being closely involved in explicit U.S.-backed projects designed to isolate Iran from wider Central Asia, and are against any potential military action being taken against Tehran.

There is a clear understanding in the region that humanitarian and economic consequences will be grave for regional stability should Iran be attacked from one of the U.S. bases in the area. The "Arab Spring" and its repercussions for the leaders of several Arab countries are still fresh in the memories of Central Asian rulers. Many of them have deep-seated fears that they may be requested to do something about their undemocratic credentials by the U.S. and other Western powers. Long-serving ex-Communist regional presidents, who cling to power and do their utmost to keep it at any cost, will always be welcome by Russia and China, two Asian giants that put economic and political interests at the expense of human rights and democracy. Indeed, conditionality for generous economic or military aid packages of Moscow and Beijing to Central Asian regimes is not, and has never been, principally linked with demands for improving governance or their respective human rights situations.

Seemingly, an armaments race is only likely to gather pace in Central Asia—prompted by free weaponry from the U.S.-led coalition in Afghanistan being handed over to competing regional players, many of whom have unresolved border disputes and land grievances. The militarization of sluggish Central Asian economies will put a
major strain on weak domestic budgets. In fact, rising military expenditures at a time of shrinking budgets may compound mounting domestic infrastructure-related risks including gas explosions, accidental releases of toxic chemicals or oil substances, epidemic diseases, and water contamination. This in a context where basic physical and public service infrastructure in all of the regional states has deteriorated rapidly in recent years and is in need of massive modernization and investments. Central Asian states are extremely vulnerable and poorly-prepared to deal with sudden price fluctuations for basic commodities, and risk of food insecurity remains very high throughout the region. Additionally, the presence of increasingly marginalized—but large—minority groups in all countries of the region aligned with persistent social disparities can be seen as potentially fueling Islamic fundamentalism.

Conclusion

The withdrawal of U.S. Coalition Forces from Afghanistan in 2014 poses serious security challenges to the region with yet unpredictable outcomes. Direct threats to Central Asian states will stem from acts of terrorism and organized criminal groups from Afghanistan linked to drugs and arms trafficking. One of the most imminent risk factors that may destabilize the fragile security situation is rampant narcotics-related crime. According to UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) estimates, 95 tonnes of Afghan heroin are trafficked annually via the Central Asian states to Russia and the West. UNODC reports further indicate that the Pamir Highway between Osh in Kyrgyzstan and Khorog in Tajikistan is a “regional hub of drug trafficking activity.”

Domestic socio-political and economic conditions in the region, in particular the border areas between Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan, are extremely volatile with a high probability of low-intensity confrontation, exacerbated by rising unemployment, lax security, and the traumas left by the ethnic violence of 2010. Against this gloomy backdrop, an arms race and militarization will hamstring regional economies and instigate growing social resistance domestically.

Post-2014 will probably see a growing role of China, Pakistan, and Iran in Afghanistan, as well as Russia, Turkey, and India in Central Asia. Particularly, Sino-Afghan bilateral relations have been developing apace with Hamid Karzai’s government building active ties with Beijing, both sides being involved in regular exchange visits. Energy-starved China is striving to make Afghanistan part of its resource base and an ally alongside Pakistan, Sri-Lanka, and Bangladesh against India. This will help China gain direct access to energy-rich Iran and the Middle-East and gain still more economic influence in Central Asia. Russia will continue to maintain its presence in the region mainly in the hydroenergy sector by projecting its long term military presence in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.

Faced with what are seen as expansionist Russian policies, Central Asian regimes are aspiring to reap every award from cooperation with the U.S./NATO in equipping their armies with modern weapons and thereby trying preserve a balance of power between competing Western and Russian arms suppliers. Moreover, Central Asian elites show a strong interest in U.S.-backed sub-regional projects such as the ‘New Silk Road Initiative,’ agreeing to rent their port or airport facilities to U.S.-led Coalition troops as well as supply routes. Aside from Kyrgyzstan’s U.S. Manas air base, Kazakhstan has agreed to rent its Aktau port in the Caspian Sea to NATO forces for military transportations from Afghanistan.

Geopolitically, now and post 2014, the U.S. is striving to provide secure transits of oil and gas resources from the region via the South Caucasus, create a safer zone for its limited troops in Afghanistan, curtail Chinese and Russian expansion, and block Iran from increasing its presence in Central Asia. These ambitious objectives will probably urge the U.S. to strengthen its military presence in Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, or Kazakhstan, and attempt extend its air base lease in Kyrgyzstan beyond 2014. Whether this comes to fruition or not is to be seen as 2014 looms large.

The opinions expressed here are those of the author only and do not represent the Central Asia Program.
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