

Afghanistan's Spillover

EU, Central Asia deal with new Taliban threat



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People cross a bridge into Kabul, Afghanistan. The country's rugged borders are difficult to patrol, and Taliban insurgents are fleeing into neighboring countries in the wake of increased International Security Assistance Force operations against them.

The success of military operations in Afghanistan and Pakistan against al-Qaida and the Taliban is helping drive a wedge between the two insurgent groups. That's a good thing, counterterrorism officials say.

But there is a downside. Some insurgents packed up and moved elsewhere to continue their militant actions. The Taliban expansion into the once relatively calm northern Afghanistan is the main example.

European Union and Central Asian nations worry the exodus of militants will cause prob-

lems in areas where extremists have had little or no major influence in the past. That probability is reason for EU concern, but even more so in Russia and Central Asia.

"If the conflict against the Taliban ... deepens in Afghanistan, then toward which direction would they escape? God save us, but they would



[move] toward Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan,” Kyrgyz President Kurmanbek Bakiyev said in a June 2009 Radio Free Europe report.

Adding to the concern is the possibility the Taliban could move to attack U.S. and NATO forces along the Northern Distribution Network. The supply line stretches from Europe to the Caucasus, into Central Asia and into Afghanistan. Container carriers using the long route are susceptible to attack.

Therefore, it is “absolutely possible” Afghan militants will target the nations through which the supply line flows, independent military analyst Leonid Bondarets said in a September 2009 story on EurasiaNet.org. “The Taliban is fighting coalition forces and they will do all they can to destroy them,” he said. NATO troops and local police have already come under attack in Tajikistan. And Uzbekistan tightened border security after militant-related incidents in the eastern part of the country in May 2009, the story pointed out.

There are also long-established concerns that could lead to more instability in the area. One is the opium trade. Drug dealers in Afghanistan, the world’s largest opium producer, are using Tajikistan as a major supply route to smuggle narcotics into Russia and Europe, Erik Brattberg and Mark Rhinard wrote in a September 2009 report on EuropeanVoice.com. Authorities presume a considerable share of Afghan heroin also passes through Tajikistan, as well as bordering Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, they said.

Brattberg and Rhinard, researchers at the Swedish Institute of International Affairs in Stockholm, said the EU “should help by building effective capacity among local authorities by sharing expertise in law enforcement and criminal justice

and, secondly, by setting up grass-roots counter-radicalization capabilities in order to build an early warning network beyond the merely operational intelligence capabilities already in use.” They said the EU also should focus on improving border security in regions that separate Afghanistan from Pakistan and from Tajikistan. And they want the union to redouble efforts to strengthen institutional capacities in Tajikistan for fighting drug production and drug-related crime.

Because of the re-emerging Taliban threat in Afghanistan, Central Asian nations are working to tighten controls along their porous borders and to improve avenues of cross-border communication to better counter the threat of extremists and cross-border crime. Uzbekistan, for example, is digging trenches and putting up fences along its borders with Kyrgyzstan to stem the influx of religious extremists. Kyrgyzstan stationed more troops along its boundary with Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. And the Russian-dominated Collective Security Treaty Organization is talking about creating a rapid-reaction force to counter the threat of militants entering the region from Afghanistan, the researchers said.

The Taliban threat has also led to a surge of regional cooperation. In September 2009, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Russia took part in a joint operation to shore up security along Central Asia’s southern frontier. Border troops from the five nations worked together to stem the infiltration of weapons, ammunition, narcotics and illegal migrants into the region, a Kyrgyz Border Service news release stated. They also worked to detect and suppress the illegal activities of criminal groups.

“I think the reason why this operation attracted so many

countries is that they have to coordinate their actions and cooperate in the fight against terrorism and outside threats. It's especially vital for Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan," political analyst Mars Sariev, based in Kyrgyzstan, said in a September 2009 story on EurasiaNet.

"The situation on the southern front, especially at the intersection of Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan is potentially very dangerous," Sariev said. "The position of law enforcement agencies in these countries, in that region particularly, is not that strong."

So the "potential for negative processes" to emerge is very real, Sariev said. The joint operation addressed such issues. Additionally, various organizations are stepping up to support the Central Asian neighborhood.

Members from the U.N. Development Program's offices in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan met in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, in mid-September 2009 to discuss future cross-border cooperation. This was the first such joint meeting involving senior country office management, program office and project staff members. They pledged strong support for the initiative, a development program news release stated.

Attendees "jointly identified key cross-border issues, shared their best practices in managing ongoing cross-border projects and agreed on ways forward for further cooperation and collaboration," the release stated. The group agreed to break down ongoing and future efforts into local-border-community or national-, bilateral- or regional-level collaboration.

In another cross-border collaboration step, the U.N. agency's Border Management in Central Asia assistance program provided the Kyrgyz border service equipment donated by Hungary. The binoculars and document verification equipment will help border guards check vehicles crossing the border, as well as passports and identification documents.

The EU is also trying to step up its support to the region as it tries to keep on track its strategy for Central Asia, adopted in June 2007.

"There is now a shared understanding of the benefits of greater cooperation on security matters, border management and controls ... The strategy is succeeding in forging a new kind of partnership with the five Central Asia republics," Benita Ferrero-Waldner, EU commissioner for external relations and European Neighborhood policy, stated in an EU news release in September 2009.

Tajikistan shares a nearly 870-mile border with Afghanistan and is close to Pakistan's Swat Valley. That makes it susceptible to "spillover from these conflict areas and to infiltration of Islamic militants," Ferrero-Waldner said. "Tajikistan is also key to efforts to stem the flow of illegal drugs to Europe from Afghanistan. Greater cooperation with the EU can play a part in helping to prevent the spread of instability."

The EU, which has its own problems with militant groups, cannot afford to ignore the spillover problem in Central Asia, Brattberg and Rhinard said. "It is clear that tackling these problems 'at home' also means tackling problems in the neighborhood of Central Asia."

Tackling the Taliban in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Central Asia is a key EU priority — though it means dealing with "formidable challenges," Brattberg and Rhinard said.

But the EU cannot waver: The Taliban and al-Qaida have vowed to target European nations. Because Germany supports operations in Afghanistan, extremists threatened to disrupt German elections and caused the country to implement massive security measures during its world-famous Oktoberfest celebrations. The Heritage Foundation reported in October 2009 that "the terrorism pipeline between Pakistan and Britain poses the most important terrorist threat to Britain today."

European governments also worry they cannot stop terrorist groups from recruiting some of their citizens. Recruits travel to Central Asia for training and return to their countries to carry out attacks. German officials said at least 30 recruits traveled to Pakistan for training in 2009, the *Washington Post* newspaper reported in October 2009. The story also said that in 2009, Belgium and France put people on trial for going to Pakistan for training by terrorist groups.

Now is the time for the union to "muster the political will necessary if the 27 member states are to increase the effectiveness and impact of the existing EU Strategy for Central Asia," Brattberg and Rhinard said.

"It is not only Central Asia's future that, to a large degree, depends on this," they said. "Increasingly, Europe's does, too." □

Soldiers with Kyrgyzstan's State National Security Committee take part in anti-terrorism exercises outside Bishkek. The Kyrgyz president fears the conflict in Afghanistan may push the Taliban into Kyrgyzstan.



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