Central Asia: Issues of Geo-Politics and Instability

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Central Asia has gained vital prominence in recent years, not only for its geopolitical importance in the areas of energy and mineral exploration, but also for its status of being the predominant link between Asia and Europe, and also due to its strategic importance in the war on terror. Touted the ‘Great Game’ in the nineteenth century in the war between the Russians and the British for dominance in the region, observers are once again referring to contemporary Central Asia as the ‘new Great Game’, with regional and international powers vying for control and authority in an increasingly influential region. The growing threat of Islamic radicalism within the region, its close proximity to the extremist hotbed of Afghanistan a major concern, has brought renewed interest to the region. Due to Central Asia’s immense importance for the major regional and international powers of Russia, China, India as well as the European Union and US, ensuring its internal stability remains of paramount interest to these nations.

The five Central Asian republics cover an area of over 4 million sq. km, more than the area occupied by India, Pakistan and Bangladesh combined. The largest of the five countries is Kazakhstan at over 2 million sq. km in size, while the smallest is Tajikistan at a little over 143,000 sq. km. Mountains, valleys, deserts, glaciers and rivers adorn the complex landscape of the expansive region. Central Asia is also rich in essential natural resources including oil, gas, minerals such as uranium and plutonium, and metals such as gold, aluminium, iron and copper, and the exports of these have brought economic prosperity to each of the countries in the region.

The Central Asian republics are home to approximately 60 million people, with significant numbers of them employed in Russia and elsewhere as migrant labourers. The peoples of the Central Asian region belong to the wider Turkic ethnic group. Members of this group speak languages belonging to the Turkic family of languages, which includes Turkish proper (spoken in Turkey and surrounding areas), Azerbaijani, each of the native languages of the Central Asian republics (barring Tajikistan), Uyghur, etc. The history of the Turkic peoples dates back to the 6th century when nomadic communities established an empire stretching from what is now Mongolia and the northern frontier of China to the Black Sea. While Central Asians share this common ethnic and linguistic identity, the particular sub-ethnicities of each of these population groups serves as the primary identity for these groups. Uzbek, Turkmen, Kyrgyz and Kazakh peoples view themselves as distinct from one another, despite sharing a common heritage. Tajikistan is the only Central Asian nation that does not come under the Turkic umbrella, primarily because the Tajik language comes under the Persian language group. Tajiks thus share an ancestral linkage to the Persians, and not the Turkic groups. The Central Asian region thus is a mosaic of ethnic groups, languages, cultures and peoples.

Since rather unexpectedly attaining independence from the former Soviet Union in 1991, the five Central Asian Republics of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan have had, and continue to face, immense challenges in the process of state building. An initial push to move away from being under an imposing Soviet legacy led the
Central Asian republics to dismantle and discontinue several Soviet-era state policies and institutions. In this move to reinstate a strong national identity however, these nations failed to replace the outgoing institutions and policies with newer and stronger ones of their own. The subsequent creation of institutional and infrastructural vacuums served to delay the process of development and nation-building significantly. Certain key Soviet legacies were however retained by these countries, including centralized and authoritarian political structures, a command economy, a strong secret service, and the tendency to repress religious activities and civil society initiatives. In spite of these Soviet inheritances, the Central Asian republics attempted to pull away from under Russian influence, with countries like Uzbekistan entering into strategic partnerships with the U.S. in the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. However, with Russia contributing substantial amounts of funding and resources to the CARs, it still wields considerable influence in each of these countries.

State authoritarianism, lack of economic growth, systemic corruption, rights violations, highly centralized government structures and government interference are some of the many challenges that continue to afflict the still nascent, post-independence Central Asian nations. In addition to the internal issues prevalent in each of the five countries, there are also a multitude of inter-state and regional challenges plaguing the entire region, including border demarcation issues, ethnic tensions, water and energy sharing issues, and issues of regional integration. The problems of border delimitation and demarcation, along with ethnic tensions, are products of a hastily executed Soviet decision to delineate the region into easier-to-administer republics, without taking into consideration the ethnic compositions of the border regions and other enclaves that have today become sources of disputes between countries like Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, particularly with regard to the fertile and deeply contested Fergana valley. The division of the valley, ordered by Stalin in the 1930s, was done in a haphazard manner, with no regard for the fact that the multi-ethnic composition of the valley is difficult to incorporate into distinct national republics. In the immediate aftermath of the Soviet collapse, the newly independent Central Asian republics began vehemently asserting their national identities, including in those parts (border villages and enclaves) of their countries that had mixed ethnic compositions. The consequent discrimination and alienation felt by the minority ethnic communities in each of these countries further intensified the simmering ethnic tensions. Ethnic violence in Osh, Kyrgyzstan’s second-largest city, in June 2010 between native Kyrgyz youths and ethnic Uzbeks resulted in the deaths of 423 people, 312 of whom were ethnic Uzbeks, according to figures published by the Bishkek-based non-governmental organization Kylym Shamy. The ensuing violence against Uzbek communities and businesses led to the exodus of hundreds of thousands of ethnic Uzbeks from Kyrgyzstan to neighbouring Uzbekistan. Similar violence against minority Uzbek communities in Tajikistan has also taken place in the past.

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Another major problem confronting the growing populations of Central Asian Republics is energy and water scarcity. More than frequent instances of power cuts and water shortages, particularly in the rural and remote regions of each of the five countries, have troubled the local populous. Severe energy scarcity during the winter months of 2008 and 2009 in Tajikistan and parts of Turkmenistan affected hundreds and thousands of people across both countries. The crumbling and inadequate energy infrastructures within the two countries were unable to support the increased demand during an intense winter season in both years, and the problem was exacerbated by the actions of gas-supplying Uzbekistan which stopped gas deliveries to Tajikistan over non-payment of dues. Energy shortages continue to afflict the populations of these countries, with depleting water resources also becoming a major concern. During the Soviet years, cotton production in the fertile lands of the Fergana valley increased tremendously, almost bordering on overproduction. The vast quantities of water required in this practice substantially depleted supplies of the Aral Sea, major parts of which have now dried up. The production of cotton continues to remain a major priority for cotton-exporting Uzbekistan, with a significant proportion of agricultural production in the country pertaining to different forms of cotton.  

Years of intense cotton agriculture and over-irrigation have rendered much of the land infertile, with high levels of soil salinisation having taken place. Uzbekistan has also been ostracized by the international community on multiple occasions for its widely-reported use of child labour in the production of cotton. The continued use of outdated irrigation and agricultural practices has also resulted in tremendous water wastage, with researchers suggesting that 50 to 80 per cent of water used for agricultural irrigation is lost while only 25 to 35 per cent of the water that makes it to crops is used efficiently. Apart from the Aral Sea, the Amu Darya and the Syr Darya rivers, which account for ninety per cent of the region’s river water, form the other main sources of water in the region. Even though Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan form just twenty per cent of the Aral Sea basin, eighty per cent of the area’s water resources flow from their territory. The Kyrgyz control the downstream Syr Darya flow at the Toktogul dam and reservoir, while Tajikistan has access to upstream flows of Amu Darya and its tributaries. The latter is in the process of building the Rogun dam on the Vaksh, a major tributary of the Amu Darya.

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3 Salinisation is the process through which water-soluble salts accumulate in soil over time. It can occur naturally, but also from over-irrigation and insufficient drainage. It hinders crop growth by limiting the ability to absorb water and nutrients. It also degrades shallow ground water and surface water. [“Soil Quality Resource Concerns: Salinization”, U.S. Department of Agriculture, January 1998.] The UN Food and Agriculture Organization has deemed soil salinization as one of the major environmental concerns facing Uzbekistan. [“Land Resources – Uzbekistan”, FAO, www.fao.org/nr/land/projects-programmes/cacilm-initiative/cacilm-project/uzbekistan/en.]


they earlier relied on Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan for their energy and electricity needs, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are gradually improving their own energy infrastructure in order to reduce their dependence on the others. As a result, the two countries are increasingly tapping into their vast water resources in pursuit of hydroelectricity generation. This has upset their water deficient neighbours, particularly downstream Uzbekistan which views the construction of the Rogun dam in Tajikistan as an overt misuse of water resources meant to be shared by all countries in the region. The Uzbeks fear that the Tajiks will use the dam to control the supply of water to the former, water it needs for its all-important cotton industry. Tajikistan contests that it has the sovereign right to construct the dam to generate much needed hydroelectricity in order to cure its chronic energy shortages. The Tajik-Uzbek dispute over water sharing is representative of the larger energy sharing problem facing the region. The Soviets constructed a unified common energy network running across the Central Asian republics, but following their independence, each of the five countries have attempted to nationalize portions of this unified network. The periodic instances of one country cutting off energy supply to another country in the region have prompted these countries to reduce their dependence on the common energy system by developing domestic energy infrastructure. Despite this, however, traditionally gas and energy sufficient countries like Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan will have more advantage in comparison to the others in the field of energy generation, while countries like Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan hold an advantage in the field of hydro power. As a result, the five countries invariably have to depend on one another for one or more of their energy needs. In such a scenario, energy sharing issues can become a source of major conflict between the concerned parties. The Presidents of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, Presidents Karimov and Rahmon respectively, have recognized the magnitude of the problem, with the former warning about the potential of water wars being fought in the region due to water scarcity. The Tajik leader, while concurring with his Uzbek counterpart, has advocated the need for an integrated regional approach to tackle the issue, the irony not being lost anyone. The fact that these remarks are being made by the leaders of the very two countries that are embroiled in a bitter water dispute is emblematic of the larger problem in the region – words are never reflected into actions, especially when it deals with the issue of concerted regional action. Climate change has also significantly diminished existing water levels in the region, with increasing desertification and decreasing humidity levels negatively impacting the water reserves in the region. Geological factors such as the occurrence of landslides in the upper reaches of the Amu Darya have also affected the direction of the river and served to reduce water flows.6

The growth of Islamic extremism in the region, particularly in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, has also become a source of major concern for the countries of the region. A recent resurgence in extremist activity has raised renewed concerns in the run up to the anticipated NATO troop withdrawal in 2016. The Islamic State (IS) wave has gripped the region, much like it has gripped

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other parts of the world. Reports of thousands of young men and women from the region, a substantial proportion of them from Uzbekistan, joining IS or IS affiliated groups have emerged in recent months. If and when significant portions of these radicalized migrants return, they will pose a substantial risk to the internal security and stability of the region. The threat posed to Uzbekistan by Islamic terrorism is greater than the others, many speculate, in light of the presence of the radical outfit Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) in the country. Though rather dormant in the last few years following an increase in NATO and ISAF activity against the group and its members, many of whom were pushed across the border into northern Afghanistan after strong Uzbek military operations against the group in the early 2000s, the IMU has seen a resurgence in the recent months. Many IMU militants have already slipped back across the Uzbek border into the tense Fergana Valley. Regional commentators expect a surge in the number of IMU militants who are able to reenter the Central Asian space, into Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, from their bases in Afghanistan. The threat of homegrown militancy or terrorism also remains pertinent. International observers, particularly those from the West, have cautioned in the past that rampant human rights abuses in the countries of Central Asia, high levels of unemployment and socio-economic discontent, a history of curbing of religious freedom, discrimination against minority communities, and government corruption, could trigger and speed up the process of radicalization, especially among the younger populations. While there is insufficient evidence in support of this theory, there is no evidence to the contrary either. The reasons may be varied, but the issue has raised concerns not only among the Central Asian countries themselves, but among the major powers of Russia, China, India, US and EU as well. While the latter two, embroiled in an international campaign against IS in Iraq and Syria, are concerned about the potential rise and spread of IS and its affiliates throughout the Central Asian region, Russia, China and India are worried about the spillover effects of such a scenario. Increased extremist activity in its Central Asian neighbourhood has China worried about the possibility of further radicalization in its restive Uyghur majority province of Xinjiang. Russia is concerned about the potential such activity has to influence events in the already destabilized North Caucasus region of Russia. India has obvious concerns about the possible spillovers from such activity into Afghanistan, Pakistan and subsequently India, the disputed region of Kashmir in particular.

These issues and more have caused international observers to periodically foretell/forewarn of a region in decline, the overwhelming signs of internal instability predating a slow yet inevitable descent into chaos. However, despite these ominous forecasts, none of the five CARs, let alone the whole region, has met this predicted ‘end’ or ‘collapse’. While the presence of repressive and closed regimes in each of these countries has led many to believe that the region is on the brink of upheaval, it is perhaps this very systematic and quiet repression that has sustained these regimes thus far, despite the extraordinary ousters of two Kyrgyz leaders in a

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<http://www.idsa.in/idsacomm/TotalCentreofGravityofmilitancy_vmahalingam_270515.html>
span of five years (2005-10). The prevailing trend in the region appears to be that of stagnation, with no substantial change in government structures or practices having taken place in the intervening decades after the Soviet collapse. A writer for the *Foreign Policy* went so far as to remark that, “for Central Asia, consistency is the crisis.”

The reasons for lack of systemic change through public agitations and protests in the countries of the region may be fear of the regimes and government reprisals, or what long-time observers of the region say is a desire among the local populations for peace and stability. The people of these countries witnessed a period of economic turmoil and political uncertainty in the aftermath of the Soviet collapse, and are therefore wary of serious political change and the instability that such change may bring with it. In Tajikistan, where a brutal five year civil war raged from 1992 to 1997, the desire for stability is even greater. However, analysts also note that as the new generation takes hold in each of these countries, the younger members of the different populations who did not witness the events of their countries’ unstable past may increasingly begin to agitate against their governments’ repressive actions. For the time being, the five Central Asian republics continue to maintain the status quo and are managing to survive, despite being perennially adjudged to be on the ‘brink of collapse’.

While the leaders of the five countries draw comfort, however uneasy that may be, in maintaining the status quo, there are real and serious challenges facing each of these governments, some of which have been listed above. The threat posed by each of the issues discussed is of varying degree, but each problem has the potential to escalate into an unmanageable conundrum the longer it remains unresolved. A quickly diminishing water supply in the region threatens to not only escalate inter-state water disputes but also risks the possibility of initiating humanitarian crises across the region. The other challenge of Islamic radicalism has grown infinitely more pertinent in light of the rapid rise and spread of IS and its radical doctrine. Central Asian governments, and their influential neighbours, have thus recognized the need for concerted regional action to tackle some of these immediate challenges. However, coordinated action or regional integration of any sort remains an unrealized ideal. Ethnic tensions, adoption of nationalist policies by each state, and increasing competition among the Central Asian republics for regional dominance are some of the barriers to effective and real regional integration. While multiple regional bodies and forums have been created in recent years, perhaps a disadvantage in itself since there exists no single, uniform forum for regional action, the Central Asian regional integration experience has been rather timid so far. The Chinese-led Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) which has included in its scope both economic and security issues, and an expanding Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) may offer positive indicators, but given the rather disappointing record of regional cohesion in the region, specifically on core issues, one must view these developments with cautious optimism. These

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two organizations have various drawbacks, with Turkmenistan yet to become a member of the SCO and only two of the five Central Asian republics (Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan) participating in the EEU at the moment. The absence of a strong and multifaceted regional organization composed solely of the five Central Asian republics, one that is not merely symbolic in nature, is representative of the failed regional integration experience in the region.

The absence of comprehensive regional cooperation has not prevented Central Asian nations from engaging in bilateral relations with one another. Although all five nations engage in bilateral relations with one another, some ties are stronger than the others. Turkmenistan and Tajikistan have enjoyed good relations for some time now. During the former President of Turkmenistan Niyazov's time as head of the Turkmen government, relations between the two countries grew warmer, in large part due to their mutual dislike of neighbouring Uzbekistan. Niyazov's dislike for the latter arose due to his suspicions of Uzbek involvement in a 2002 assassination attempt on his life. Emomali Rahmon, the longstanding and only leader Tajikistan has witnessed in its two-decade long history as an independent nation, has never enjoyed good relations with his Uzbek counterpart Karimov. Post Niyazov's death in 2006, the new Turkmen government headed by his successor Berdimuhamedov gave reduced attention to the Turkmen-Tajik relationship, focusing instead on expanding his historically reclusive country's ties with the rest of the world. In recent years however, the Turkmen-Tajik friendship has seen a resurgence. Strong bilateral ties and mutual cooperation in the areas of trade, energy and security formed the basis of the renewed relationship between the two countries. Turkmenistan is constructing a network of natural-gas pipelines from Turkmenistan to China in order to transport gas to the latter. One of these pipeline networks will pass through the territories of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan before proceeding on to Chinese territory. Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan will not receive any gas from the pipeline, but will receive transit fees. Another project initiated between the two countries is the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Tajikistan railway project, which Tajikistan is keenly interested in. All existing railway routes to Tajikistan pass through Uzbekistan. Over the years, Uzbekistan has periodically stalled railway traffic from other countries, particularly Russian and Iran, from entering Tajikistan. Iran has been supplying, or attempting to supply Tajikistan with materials required for the construction of hydropower plants across the country. Uzbekistan, which shares a contentious relationship with Tajikistan over water sharing issues, opposes the hydropower plants which it claims would reduce the flow of water to Uzbek fields downstream. Tajikistan thus seeks a railway route that does not transit Uzbekistan. This renewed friendship is hence also built in part on cooperation that seeks to avoid Uzbekistan. Turkmenistan is also interested in cultivating deeper ties with Tajikistan, particularly in relation to the developing situation in neighbouring Afghanistan. There is a large population of ethnic Tajiks in northern Afghanistan, and they enjoy considerable influence in the Afghan government. The Tajik government has traditionally had good relations with the Afghan government. Turkmenistan desires a stable and friendly Afghan neighbourhood, and Tajikistan offers a path to ensure the same.
Strong bilateral ties have also been cemented between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, and Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan respectively. However, the lack of consolidated regional integration continues to hamper real development in all of the region. A large part of this is due to the lack of a strong regional identity in the region. In the aftermath of the Soviet collapse, the newly independent Central Asian republics sought to establish, emphasize and glorify strong national identities in an attempt to assert and cultivate an identity for themselves that was independent of Russia. The search for a regional identity was never on the agenda. This lack of motivation to cultivate a regional identity continues till this day, visible in the countries' nonchalant attitudes towards regional integration. Even the few notable forums of regional integration in the region, including the SCO and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) were formed at the initiation of China and Russia respectively, with both wielding maximum power in each of the organizations.

Marlene Laruelle and Sebastien Peyrouse postulate in their paper 'Regional Organisations in Central Asia: Patterns of Interaction, Dilemmas of Efficiency' that Turkmenistan has since independence been a fervent partisan in support of unilateralism or bilateralism, and has limited as much as possible attempts at both regionalism and multilateralism. Uzbekistan, they add, has endorsed regionalism when it thinks it is in a leadership position and unilateralism when it views its sovereign rights as being threatened. The country has preferred bilateralism to multilateralism. Kazakhstan on the other hand, has believed strongly in regionalism, and in multilateralism to a lesser extent. Kyrgyzstan pursued multilateralism quite early on, being the only Central Asian nation to accede to membership of the World Trade Organisation in 1998. Lastly, Tajikistan pursues various strategies depending on the situation and the actors involved. These differing positions on regional integration have presented more barriers to mutual cooperation and coordination in the region.
I. UZBEKISTAN

Introduction

Uzbekistan is located at the heart of the Central Asian region, flanked by Kazakhstan in the north, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan in the East and Turkmenistan in the south, and it also shares a small border with Afghanistan along its southern most boundary. It is one of only two doubly-landlocked countries in the world, the other being Liechtenstein. The country’s 447,400 sq. km area is largely desert land, but irrigation systems established during the Soviet era have enabled the agriculture of cotton and other produce in different parts of the country. Central Asia’s most populous nation with an estimated population of a little over 30 million, Uzbekistan views itself as the dominant and indisputable cultural leader of the region. This self-characterization of the country, and its quest to further consolidate its position as the leading power in the region, has often times led to disputes with its neighbours. Uzbekistan’s intermittent cutting of gas supplies to countries like Tajikistan, and closing of its borders has rendered it a reputation of being the ‘neighbourhood bully’ among regional and international observers. However, it was not just Uzbekistan but all of the five Central Asian republics that embarked on a path to strengthen and develop their domestic economies and national institutions, often times at the hands of regional integration.

The boundaries of modern day Uzbekistan were consolidated into a uniform state entity, namely the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic, in October 1924, following the creation of the Soviet Union in the aftermath of the Bolshevik Revolution. The artificial and rather dubious delineation of the five former Soviet republics, cutting across ethnic and linguistic lines, led to
the creation of ethnically heterogeneous states. The two Tajik cultural centres of Bukhara and Samarqand were included within the territory of Uzbekistan, along with major parts of the ethnically mixed Fergana valley. Conflicts between ethnic Uzbeks and ethnic Turks in Fergana valley in 1989, as well as more recent instances of ethnic conflict in the Kyrgyz held areas of the valley point to a still uneasy state of affairs in these ethnically diverse societies. The ethnic composition of Uzbekistan has changed substantially over the years. Its large Russian population shrank considerably in the post-Soviet years, with hundreds of thousands of ethnic Russians migrating to northern Kazakhstan and Russia in the face of growing Uzbek nationalism and assertiveness of indigenous Uzbek identity and language. Many ethnic Tajiks and Kazakhs also left the country, resettling in neighbouring Tajikistan and Kazakhstan respectively. Crimean Tartars, deported to Uzbekistan after World War II, began returning to their native Crimea following the collapse of the Soviet Union, although a significant number of Tartars continue to remain in Uzbekistan. More migrations in recent years, particularly the mass influx of ethnic Uzbeks from Kyrgyzstan into Uzbekistan, following ethnic violence in the Kyrgyz city of Osh in 2010, further affected the ethnic composition of the country.

Key population and demographic indicators for Uzbekistan are difficult to obtain owing to the fact that the last full census conducted in the country was the Soviet Census of 1989. According to early 2014 estimates by Uzbekistan’s official statistical agency, based on partial census figures obtained by sampling 10 per cent of the population, the population of Uzbekistan is approximately 30,492,800 according to figures published by the State Committee of the Republic of Uzbekistan on Statistics in 2014.9 The likely figure is higher given the large number of improperly registered and unaccounted for residents in cities including the national capital Tashkent.

Estimates from 1996, cited in the CIA Factbook profile on Uzbekistan, suggest that the ethnic composition of the country stands thus – Uzbek (80%), Russian (5.5%), Tajik (3%), Karakalpak10 (2.5%), Tartar (1.5%) and other (2.5%). This ‘other’ includes an estimated 20,000 ethnic Koreans who live in Uzbekistan, descendants of the Koreans who migrated to Russia in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and who were subsequently forced to resettle in the Central Asian republics under Stalin. These figures on the ethnic composition of the country are disputed, not least because of lack of official and current state data on the same, with many also claiming that the number of Tajiks in the country is considerably higher. The main religion in Uzbekistan is Islam, with U.S. State Department figures suggesting 88% of Uzbeks are Muslims while 9% are Orthodox Christians. The language question figures prominently among the people

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10 The Karakalpak ethnic group is a subset of the Turkic ethnic group. Karakalpaks are thus Turkic peoples but distinct from ethnic Uzbeks. This group resides in the autonomous region of Karakalpakstan in northwest Uzbekistan, and number a little over one million people.
of Uzbekistan. Although Uzbek is the official state language, Russian remains widely spoken and is a second language for many in the country. In the few years of nationalist euphoria that gripped the nation following independence, the tension between Russian language speakers and Uzbek language speakers came to the fore, with many Uzbek nationalists seeking to establish Uzbek as the sole language of the country. Apart from ethnic Russians who continue to use Russian, many Uzbeks are also choosing to learn Russian owing to the benefits doing so will provide in the field of business and trade (regional and with Russia). A significant number of Tajik language speakers also reside in Uzbekistan, in the primarily ethnic Tajik areas of Bukhara and Samarqand. CIA Factbook figures claim that 74.3% Uzbeks speak Uzbek, 14.2% speak Russian, 4.4% speak Tajik and 7.1% speak other languages.

Challenges facing Uzbekistan today, many of which international observers claim have the potential to destabilize the country and by extension the whole region, are similar to those facing its neighbours. Political uncertainty, economic decline, authoritarian and repressive state institutions, social discontent, energy and water shortages, and a growing Islamic extremist threat are some of the major issues confronting an aging Uzbek leader and his government.

**Political uncertainty: Post-Karimov future of Uzbekistan**

The 77-year old Islam Karimov, Uzbekistan’s incontrovertible leader and the only President the country has witnessed in its over two-decade old history as an independent nation, has thus far wielded a strong and unrelenting hold on power with the help of a small yet influential coterie of regime loyalists. However, rumours of declining health and fewer public appearances in recent years have fueled renewed speculation over a post-Karimov successor. The lack of a succession plan within the present administration has people worried about the political chaos that may ensue in the event of Karimov’s death or his unlikely resignation from the post of President. The fact that the country has had only one leader in all its independent history points to a post-Karimov future filled with uncertainty. There are those who argue that Uzbekistan can and will undergo a peaceful transition of power, much like Turkmenistan did following the unexpected death of their leader-since-independence Niyazov in 2006. Others however point to an apparent power struggle taking place between Karimov’s closest aides for the top job, and the potential this has to disrupt any hopes for a peaceful transition of power.

The leading contenders for the top job, as per international reports, are National Security Service (the Uzbek intelligence agency) chief Rustam Inoyatov, Prime Minister Shavkat Mirziyoyev, and Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance Rustam Azimov. Gulnara Karimova, the President’s estranged daughter, was seen as a leading challenger for her father’s post up until a few years ago. Beginning in late 2013, she suffered a spectacular fall from grace, which many allege was orchestrated by Inoyatov. Her corrupt business practices and vast financial wealth became talking points in a country where the personal and professional activities of political elites have traditionally been kept closely guarded secrets. The political exile imposed on Gulnara Karimova in light of the allegations was followed by reports that she had
been placed under house arrest. The controversy served to heighten rumours of an ongoing behind-the-scenes power struggle to determine a successor for Karimov. The battle for the top job in the absence of a concrete succession plan has regional and international observers concerned about the destabilizing effects of a potentially chaotic and dispute-ridden post-Karimov political environment.

While the political situation in the country may pose risks to the internal stability of the nation, the prevailing economic conditions in the nation are also causes for concern. Economic stagnation has been a major challenge for this Central Asian nation, with the country seeing little growth in its economic output over the past few years.

Despite concerns of economic stagnation, a consistent growth rate of close to 8% in recent years has boded well for the country, especially in lieu of the still recovering global economy. However, recent economic troubles in Russia have raised concerns about a possible economic decline in Uzbekistan, a country whose economy is significantly tied to that of Russia. While Uzbekistan witnessed a growth rate of 8.1% in 2014, it has seen a reduced growth rate of 7.5% in the first quarter of 2015.11 The Asian Development Bank forecasts a lower GDP growth rate of 7.0% in 2015 and 7.2% in 2016 for Uzbekistan, while the World Bank forecasts (7.6% in 2015 and 7.8% in 2016) also predict a decline in the Uzbek economy. The historically low prices for international commodities like gas, gold and cotton, goods that form major components of Uzbek exports, as well as a weakening Russian economy are leading to economic degradation in Uzbekistan as well as the other Central Asian republics.

Uzbekistan, much like its Central Asian neighbours, has a large migrant population working in Russia, with some reports claiming that there are close to four million Uzbek

migrants in Russia. According to Russia’s Federal Migration Service, as of March 2014, there were 2.3 million Uzbek migrants in country, although the real number is thought to be much higher owing to the large number of migrants who remain undocumented and unaccounted for. The Russian Ambassador to Uzbekistan recently claimed there were close to 3 million Uzbek migrants in his country, the most from any Central Asian nation. Widespread poverty and high unemployment in Uzbekistan have forced more and more Uzbeks to seek work abroad. These migrants send a substantial proportion of their earnings back home to Uzbekistan; the Russian Central Bank stated that in the year 2013, money transfers to Uzbekistan totaled approximately $6.63bn, a majority of which is believed to be money sent by migrants as remittances to Uzbekistan (the Central Bank does not specifically calculate volume of migrant remittances sent to Uzbekistan). This figure only accounts for the money sent through wire transfers, not the money migrants take back home with them in cash.

Hundreds of thousands of Uzbek families depend on remittances, with one or more members of their families working abroad. A drop in remittances will not only severely affect these families, but the resultant reduced levels of consumption (due to reduced purchasing power) will affect the Uzbek economy. A weakening Russian economy, due in large part to falling global oil prices as well as in part due to Western sanctions against Russia over its purported actions in the Ukrainian conflict, have resulted in the devaluation of the ruble. A falling ruble has served to reduce the value and quantity of remittances being sent back to Uzbekistan. Migrants convert the money they earn from rubles to dollars before sending it back home. However, with the ruble losing nearly fifty per cent against the dollar, the real wages of the migrants has fallen considerably. The volume of remittances sent from Russia to Uzbekistan also fell considerably year-on-year from 2013 to 2014. According to the Russian Central Bank, US $5.581bn worth of remittances was sent from Russia to Uzbekistan in 2014, a decrease of 15.86% compared to 2013. Consequently, fewer dollars are entering Uzbekistan, causing the devaluation of the Uzbek sum. As of December, 2014, the sum fell fifteen per cent against the dollar on the black market (Uzbekistan, whose currency is not pegged to any other currency, has an official fixed exchange rate of 1 USD = 2,575.20 UZS which is tightly controlled, but a different market-determined exchange rate is used for currency conversion in the black market.)

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The worsening economic climate in Russia has also cost many migrants their jobs, forcing an unceremonious homecoming for thousands, while a substantial drop in earnings has others contemplating a return home as well. The recent tightening of Russian migration laws has posed another hurdle for Central Asian migrants in the country. Although these restrictions do not apply to members of the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Community, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan are yet to become members of the economic union and are therefore excluded from the benefits of the same. The expected return of thousands of migrants to their native Uzbekistan will undoubtedly pose an economic burden on a country still grappling with high levels of unemployment. The increased hardships for not only returning migrants but their families will serve to heighten social discontent and could be potentially destabilizing for the country. International observers have cited socio-economic issues and growing unhappiness with government policies as potential triggers for civil unrest and likely reasons for radicalization of a significant portion of the Uzbek population, many of whom are unemployed youngsters.

While remittances do not play as large a contributing factor to Uzbekistan’s economy like Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, they do play a substantial role. According to the Russian Central Bank, remittances sent from Russia to Uzbekistan in 2012 totaled $5.7bn, equivalent to 16.3% of the Uzbek GDP (or 12% of the GDP if one uses Tashkent’s official exchange rate).\(^\text{16}\) The drop in remittances will thus significantly affect state revenues. The rising prices due to a weakening domestic currency will also negatively affect the local population. Another crucial fact is that Uzbekistan’s economy relies heavily on revenue from cotton, gold and gas exports, rendering it vulnerable to global prices for the same. The reliance on exports has not only made the Uzbek economy vulnerable to global price falls, but also affected domestic supply of these goods. The problem of energy shortages afflicting Uzbeks, much like their Central Asian neighbours, is compounded by the high levels of gas exported while little is retained for domestic markets.

The other major problem plaguing the Uzbek economy is a lack of foreign investments. Restrictive domestic policies which limit foreign direct investments in key Uzbek sectors of oil and gas production, and the telecom sector has put off potential investors. High levels of government interference and incidents of government appropriations of foreign firms and their interests in the nation have further contributed to a poor business climate in the country. Lack of transparency about policy implementation and enforcement mechanisms has firms and companies confused about the rules and laws. Corruption and bureaucratic delays have further exacerbated the problem. Uzbekistan is ranked 141, in a list of 189 countries, on World Bank's Ease of Doing Business Index in 2015, and although the rank is up from 149 last year, it still is very poor. In the last few years, a slew of foreign companies in Uzbekistan have been forced to exit the country after being threatened with prosecution over charges of bribery and tax evasion, which these companies claim were fabricated. Other companies with stakes in Uzbekistan witnessed unprecedented takeovers of their business interests by local Uzbek companies and

government authorities. Foreign investors Oxus Gold, Spentex Toshkent Toytepa and Wimm Bill Dann, and the Turkish shopping centres Demir and Turkuaz are among many who lost their local interests in these takeovers. The case of Britain's Oxus Gold is particularly revealing. The company entered the Uzbek mining industry in the mid-nineties, but was eventually forced to quit the country in 2011 following a questionable government audit that led to the buyout of the company’s local interests by two Uzbek mining companies. Oxus claimed the audit was biased, and the company is currently fighting a $400 million legal battle against Uzbek authorities. Further, Oxus’s chief metallurgist, Said Ashurov, an Uzbek citizen, was sentenced to 12 years in prison in 2011 on charges of industrial espionage, in a move Oxus claimed was an intimidation tactic. In the recent scandal that broke out regarding the corrupt activities of the President's daughter, Gulnara Karimova, it was also revealed how Karimova illegally acquired payouts and substantial stakes in the local operations of Swedish-Finnish telecom operator TeliaSonera, the Russian-Norwegian telecom company VimpelCom and Russian telecom company MTS, in exchange for licenses to operate in Uzbekistan.

The recent economic downturn coupled with a poor business climate have slowed economic growth in the country. Unlike its neighbour Kazakhstan which has capitalized on its large reserves of natural resources by allowing foreign investors to invest in key energy sectors, Uzbekistan has been unable to exploit its abundant resources.

**Energy Issues**

Uzbekistan, like the other nations in the region, is rich in natural resources including oil, gas and mineral deposits of gold, uranium, copper and sulfur. The country has proven reserves of an estimated 1.8 trillion cubic meters of natural gas, 0.6 billion barrels of oil, and 1.9 billion tons of coal. Uzbekistan is the third largest natural gas producer in the former Soviet Union after Russia and Turkmenistan, and one of the top-fifteen natural gas producing countries in the world. There are close to 200 discovered oil and natural gas fields in the country, with most of the gas and oil reserves located in the south-western parts of the country. Natural gas is the primary resource in Uzbekistan's energy supply mix. It accounts for 82% of the country's total energy supply, followed by oil and coal.

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19 CIA World Factbook and International Energy Agency (IEA).

The natural resource sector strictly controlled by the Uzbek government, and accounts for 7 per cent of the country’s GDP. Although foreign investment is limited in this sector, the government does invite foreign firms to provide funds, equipment and expertise to help extract and export its resources. Uzbekneftegaz, a state-controlled national holding company, has responsibility for managing the sector, including supervising tender offers and other proposals for oil and gas concessions. The total undiscovered resources are estimated to be quite large, but outdated extraction and production processes have delayed their discovery. During the period between 2001 and 2010, gas production increased by 13 per cent, reaching 59 billion cubic meters (bcm) in 2010. Gas exports, the largest source of export revenue, reached 14 bcm in 2010, a six-fold increase from 2001. These increases were driven by substantial investments made in the sector by the state. The energy sector accounts for almost $34 billion, or 72 per cent of the government's investment program.

Oil production, on the other hand, has seen a decrease in recent years. The production of oil in 2010, at 87,000 barrels of oil per day, witnessed a 50 per cent decrease from 2001. This was due to the depletion of existing oil fields, and inefficient and outdated discovery and extraction procedures has hampered the discovery and use of new oil fields. Consequently, Uzbekistan has become a net crude oil importer since 2009. Gasoline price increases in the last few years (prior to the recent price falls) caused domestic fuel shortages. However, the Uzbek government recently began a program to develop shale oil at the Sangruntau field in northern Navoi district of Uzbekistan. Funded by the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), the project will serve as a test of the viability of shale oil in not only Uzbekistan, but all of Central Asia.

Uzbekistan is also immensely rich in minerals such as coal and metal resources such as gold, uranium, copper, zinc and lead. The first three are the country's chief metal resources. As with the oil sector, the country's mining sector also witnessed a decline in recent years, with insufficient foreign investments, inadequate infrastructure and remoteness of resource location some of the main reasons for the same.

Uzbekistan thus needs to attract substantial foreign investment in its key energy sector, and remove government restrictions, in order to rapidly enhance the sector. Extraction and production processes require the latest equipments and techniques, and foreign expertise on the same is increasingly needed.

Furthermore, as the countries of Western Europe seek to reduce their dependence on Russian gas, they are increasingly looking towards the Central Asia and the Caucuses to fulfill

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21 Ibid.
22 Ibid.
23 Ibid.
the region's need for gas. Uzbekistan recently declared its intention to enter into the race to supply gas to Western Europe, joining regional pipeline networks by 2017, which further enhanced the need to expand and improve the country's aging energy infrastructure.

**Water Crisis - Potential for Conflict**

The desiccation and rapid decline of the Aral Sea, one of the most important water bodies in the region, has been one of the biggest ecological disasters to have taken place in the region. Intensive cotton agriculture in the Central Asian nations during the Soviet era, and continued cotton agriculture in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan in the post-Soviet period, has led to the depletion of the Aral Sea. The Sea is traditionally replenished by the two main rivers in the region, the Amu Darya and the Syr Darya. The latter originates from the glaciers in the Tien Shan mountains in upstream Kyrgyzstan, while the former originates from the Pamir mountain range in upstream Tajikistan. However, rerouting of water from these rivers, which is channeled into irrigation networks in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, has deprived the Aral Sea of the water it needs to be replenished.

Uzbekistan's continuing water needs for irrigation has caused rapid decline in the southern portion of the Aral Sea (which falls in Uzbek territory). The northern part of the Aral Sea falls in Kazakhstan, and the construction of the Kokaral dam and a 13 km dike at the southern edge of the Northern Aral, effectively splitting it from the southern portion of the Sea, has helped conserve the waters of the Syr Darya (which primarily passes through Kazakhstan and culminates in the Northern Aral) and replenish the Northern Aral. However, it has also served to further isolate the southern half of the Sea lying in Uzbekistan.

The dire state of the Southern Aral, and the rapidly growing need for water in Uzbekistan has exacerbated the water situation in the country. However, the recent activities of water-rich Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan to dam rivers for hydroelectricity generation has ticked off downstream Uzbekistan which relies on the water from the rivers flowing from the two countries. The former two need hydro energy, particularly in light of the fact that Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are mountainous countries and lack the deep resource wealth of Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. In recent years, Uzbekistan has been increasingly vocal of its objections to the slated hydroelectricity generation projects in two water abundant countries. Uzbekistan has also tried using tactics such as cutting gas supplies to both Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan over contract technicalities during the critical winter months in order to influence the latter two to stop pursuing hydropower projects. Relations between Tajikistan and Uzbekistan are particularly strained in light of the former's latest plans to build the Roghun hydroelectric power plant. The Tajiks hope the dam will help cure the frequent electricity shortages that afflict several parts of the country, particularly during the winter months. Authorities in Uzbekistan feel that Tajikistan will use the dam as a means of leverage to pressure Uzbekistan in the many political disputes between the two countries.
The tensions over water use and resultant water shortage in the region has reached intense levels, so much so that the Uzbekistan's President Karimov even warned of potential water wars in the region. Climate change, with its corresponding effects on glaciers and melting snow caps, has further worsened the crisis in the region with less water flowing in the rivers. The water issue is a pertinent and growing challenge in the region, and has the potential to destabilize the countries of the region.

**Human rights abuses and lack of democratic freedoms**

Uzbekistan has come under immense scrutiny for its poor human rights record as well as lack of democratic freedoms assigned to its citizens. The Andijon incident of 2005, where hundreds of protestors, who witnesses allege were peaceful, were gunned down by state police while protesting the arrests of local businessmen on terrorism charges. The lack of government attrition for the incident and non-willingness to conduct an inquiry into the same drew sharp criticisms from both US and the EU member countries, with EU going as far as to impose sanctions on the country. These sanctions included visa bans on top Uzbek officials and an arms embargo, both of which were eventually lifted in 2009 as part of the EU's efforts to boost relations with Uzbekistan, a potentially important energy supplier and critical transit route for supplies for the Western military mission in Afghanistan.

Human rights campaigners and activists have often derided international donors and organizations that continue to give funds and aid to Uzbekistan despite widespread allegations of human rights abuses and corruption. One major problem donors face with not only Uzbekistan but other Central Asian countries is lack of oversight or transparency regarding how the recipient states use these funds. Many allege that these unregulated funds abet and fuel rampant corruption among the political elites in each of these countries, with very little reaching the local populous.

Democracy has also remained an unrealized ideal in the former Soviet nation. Much like its neighbours, democracy has been established in name only. Multiparty elections are held regularly, but no real political choice is offered. Islam Karimov is guaranteed to win the heavily-rigged elections, much like he won the election held earlier this year. Political opposition is not tolerated in the least, with multiple political opponents having been jailed on fraudulent charges or forced into exile. Civil society in Uzbekistan is non-existent, largely due to public fear of government reproach for any displays of discontent against the ruling government.

A resurgence of the demand for independence by activists in the Karakalpakstan Autonomous Region of Uzbekistan has also raised concerns in Tashkent. Although home to just 1.7 million of Uzbekistan's 30 million population, Karakalpakstan covers over a third of the country's territory. The region derives its name from the Karakalp ethnic group, made up of a collection of tribes who were rechristened Karakalpaks by the Soviet administration. In 1925, the Karakalpak Autonomous Oblast (what is today Karakalpakstan) was formed within the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic. The region later came under direct Russian control, followed by its
subsequent inclusion within the Uzbek SSR in 1936. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Karakalpaks were unable to declare independence from Uzbekistan because of divisions within the political elite of the region. As a result, Uzbekistan managed to retain Karakalpakstan as a semi-autonomous part of the country. One of the most neglected areas in the region, much of Karakalpakstan is a toxic salt desert that was left behind as the Aral Sea dried up. Desert winds spread these harmful elements through the air, causing respiratory problems among many of the province's residents. International organizations, including the United Nations and the IMF, have contributed large sums of money for environmental programmes led by the Uzbek government to try to save the inland Aral Sea and improve the condition of the region's 1.7 million people. However, very little of the intended money has gone towards the desired plan. Misappropriation of funds and other forms of corruption by state and local authorities has done nothing to improve the condition of the residents of Karakalpakstan, with the Aral Sea having largely dried up. Karakalpakstan’s natural resources have also been extensively tapped, with oil and gas extractions taking place across the region. However, the income from these projects goes through Tashkent, not Nukus, the capital of Karakalpakstan.

Many regional and international observers suggest that the lack of democratic freedoms and mounting human rights abuses in Central Asian countries, and particularly Uzbekistan which has one of the more repressive regimes in the region, will lead to growing discontent among the masses and result in public dissent. Public anger against the government for its role in curbing democratic freedoms, as well as mounting unhappiness at the state of the Uzbek economy, with rising unemployment and poverty levels, will become a cause of instability in the country, predict observers. However, others argue that despite widespread human rights abuses and lack of democracy, the Uzbek government will avert possible instability by coming down strongly against any form of dissent, like it has done in the past. Soviet-era mechanisms such as the state secret service and the state-controlled media are employed in order to monitor and control Uzbek citizens. The repressive and unyielding regime has kept dissent in check through these tools, and many argue that there is little to suggest that this will not continue to take place in the future.

**Islamic extremism: IMU and IS threat**

Islamic extremism has been a prominent concern for the country which was the birthplace of the radical Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU). The group emerged in the immediate aftermath of the Soviet Union, following decades of Soviet suppression of religion in the predominantly Muslim region. This environment was conducive for the growth of hardline Islamist groups in the region who sought to counter state suppression of their religion. The Fergana Valley emerged as the center of Islamic opposition with the rise of a number of religious schools and underground madrassas. In 1991, the radical group Adolat (Justice) emerged in the Uzbek city of Namangan. The group modeled itself on the Iranian Revolutionary Guards, taking
control of the city and persecuting those they judged to be breaking the law.\textsuperscript{25} Adolat was founded by Tohir Yuldashev, an imam, and Juma Namangani, a former paratrooper in the Soviet army during the Afghan campaign. The group demanded the overthrow of Uzbek President Islam Karimov and the adoption of Sharia law in the country. As Adolat and other groups began increasingly challenging Karimov's presidency, the government retaliated by promptly expelling these groups from the country in 1992. Yuldashev and Namangani fled to Tajikistan, where they aligned with the United Tajik Opposition in that country's years-long civil war. While Namangani fought with the Tajik opposition in their civil war, Yuldashev travelled and met militant Islamists in Afghanistan and Pakistan. He was alleged to have received funds and sanctuary from Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence, and was based in Peshawar from 1995 to 1998.\textsuperscript{26} He also allegedly met Osama bin Laden and other pan-Islamist militants in the region.\textsuperscript{27} In 1998, Yuldashev and Namangani relocated to Afghanistan and founded the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) in Kabul, with the organization's stated objective that of overthrowing Karimov and establishing an Islamic state. The IMU subsequently established training camps in Afghanistan and strengthened ties with both the Taliban and al-Qaeda. The IMU wasted little time in launching attacks against the Uzbek regime. In 1998, a series of bombs were set off in Tashkent, evidently in an attempt to assassinate the President whose convoy passed some of these bomb locations. Instead of killing the President, the bombs resulted in the deaths of 16 civilians. Although conspiracies abounded that the government actually staged these bombings, IMU was blamed for the attacks, and the confrontation between the group and the Uzbek government rapidly escalated. The IMU even invaded Kyrgyz territory briefly in 1999 and 2000. During this time, IMU also increased ties with the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, but post-9/11, this tie up proved disastrous as IMU leader Namangani was killed in battle during the U.S.-led war in the country. In the aftermath of its main leader's death, the IMU became scattered throughout the region. The war in Afghanistan, and continuing pressure from Uzbek forces pushed IMU militants into the less controlled northern regions Pakistan. After enjoying considerable success in these regions, including coordinated attacks on airports in the Pakistani cities of Peshawar (2012) and Karachi (2014), the group's members were forced out of the country following strong Pakistan military action in North Waziristan and other areas in the north of the country. The scattered members of the IMU went back to Afghanistan, where they are believed to be currently. In recent months, Afghan government officials and military sources have reported an uptick in violence in the country's northern regions, fuelled by the influx of a large number of foreign fighters.\textsuperscript{28} The population in the northern region of Afghanistan consists

\textsuperscript{25} Pories, Lesley. 'Legitimate Threat or Excuse for Repression? The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and Central Asian Stability Post-2014.' Spring 2013. \textit{Al Nakhlah}.

\textsuperscript{26} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{27} Ibid.

of a lot of ethnic Tajiks, Uzbeks and Turkmens, and can form a natural abode for IMU. Increased militant activity by suspected IMU members in Afghanistan, as well as growing linkages between IMU and the Afghan and Pakistani Taliban, has some concerned over the potential threat this alliance may pose to not only Afghanistan but neighbouring Central Asia in a post-NATO security environment. The Central Asian governments have themselves warned of the threat posed by these groups to the region's stability in the absence of NATO and other Western forces. There are those who allege that the region's repressive regimes are using this claim to justify its strong suppression of internal political opposition.

Despite the uncertainty regarding the threat posed by the IMU and its allies in the region, what is certain is that a growing number of Uzbek nationals are leaving Uzbekistan to travel to Syria, and are joining the Islamic State's campaign to establish a caliphate in Iraq and Syria. Experts allege that growing discontent among the Uzbek youth over rising unemployment, poverty and poor economic growth in the country has prompted many of these individuals to join the attractive and seemingly prosperous life of an IS jihad. There are also concerns about the threats these individuals may pose to Uzbekistan on their return home.

29 Critics of the Central Asian regimes and their poor human rights records, including many Western observers.

II. TAJIKISTAN

Introduction

Tajikistan lies at the crossroads of South and Central Asia, bordering Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan in the north, China in the east and Afghanistan in the south. Despite being the smallest of the Central Asian republics with an area of 143,100 sq. km., Tajikistan occupies a key geo-strategic position in the region owing to its location. Although Tajikistan and its leader-since-independence Emomali Rahmon have claimed that the country can and will act as a bulwark against the spread of radicalism, narcotics and illegal arms-trafficking in the vulnerable region, emanating in particular through its 1,206 km southern border with Afghanistan, internal problems and instability have prevented the country from accomplishing the same. Tajikistan remains the poorest country in the region, and years of rampant corruption, incompetent governance, energy shortages and rising prices have further exacerbated the problem.

The landlocked nation has a mixed terrain composed of mountains, plains, valleys and rivers. One of two Central Asian republics with substantial fresh water reserves, the other being Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan is home to thousands of rivers and other water sources. Multiple glacier-fed streams and rivers originate from the two principle mountain ranges, Pamir Mountains and

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31 Alternative spelling is ‘Rakhmon’. His original name was Emomali Rahmonov, but he omitted the Slavic suffix ‘-ov’ from his name in 2007, in a move many label as the de-Russification of his name. Whilst announcing the name change, Rahmon advocated that Tajiks should rediscover and return to their cultural roots.

32 Tajikistan was the poorest Soviet republic, with 40% of its budget coming from subsidies. (Crisis Group)
Alay Mountains, and water from these is used for irrigation and domestic purposes. Tajikistan has attempted to capitalize on the massive hydro energy potential of its water resources, building hydroelectric dams across some of its major rivers. The country recently initiated the construction of the multi-billion dollar Rogun dam which, if completed successfully, will be the tallest dam in the world. These efforts at hydroelectricity generation by upstream Tajikistan have irked its downstream neighbor Uzbekistan, which resents the former’s control over and use of trans-boundary river systems.

Although Tajikistan is the smallest Central Asian country in terms of area, it has the third largest population in the region with a population of close to 8.5 million people. Unlike most of the region’s population who are Turkic, Tajiks are of Persian ancestry, with the Tajik language belongs to Persian language group. Apart from ethnic Tajiks, ethnic Uzbeks, Russians and Kyrgyz also form part of the Tajik populous. 79.9% of the population is ethnically Tajik, 15.3% ethnically Uzbek, 1.1% ethnically Russian, 1.1% ethnically Kyrgyz, and 2.6% are composed of other ethnicities.

Tajik is the official language of the country, although Russian is widely used in government and business dealings. Tajikistan is a predominantly Muslim country. 85% of the population are Sunni Muslims, while 5% are Shiite Muslims. The remaining 10% follow other religions, including Orthodox Christianity.

The process of nation building in Tajikistan has been a rather complex one, having been undercut at various points in time by strong currents of factionalism and regionalism along ethnic lines. Tribalism is endemic to Tajikistan, as it is elsewhere in the region. The country is divided into four main ethnic regions – Sughd (formerly named Leninabad), Kulyob, Garm and Pamir. The Sughd province falls in Northern Tajikistan, which differs from Southern Tajikistan culturally. The Tien Shan mountain range (originating in neighbouring Kyrgyzstan) physically separates the North of the country from the South. The appearance of northern Tajiks differs from their southern counterparts, with the physical features of the former resembling ethnic Uzbeks. This is primarily due to the fact that many of the families in this part of Tajikistan are mixed Uzbek-Tajik families who suffered a history of uncertainty and disconnectedness in light of the arbitrary Soviet-era border demarcations in the ethnically heterogeneous region of Central Asia. During the Soviet era, Northern Tajikistan had closer economic relations with Uzbekistan than other parts of Tajikistan. The Tajiks in the North of the country were more assimilated into the Soviet Union due to the fact that the Soviets conquered the Fergana Valley earlier than the rest of Tajikistan. As a result, the Soviet leadership trusted Northern Tajiks more than their

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33 2014 World Bank figures. The most recent census figures published on Tajikistan’s official statistics agency website is from the year 2010. The population of Tajikistan, per the 2010 census, was 7,595,000, with 74 per cent of the population living in rural areas. Approximately 3,081,000 people, or 40.8 per cent, were under the age of 18.

34 CIA Factbook figures, based on Tajik census figures from the year 2000.

35 Rotar, Igor. 'Leader of Northern Tajikistan is arrested in Ukraine.' 14 February, 2013. The Jamestown Foundation. <http://www.jamestown.org/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=40459#.Vb-Pvmqqko>
southern counterparts, with political power consistently held by Northern Tajiks. As a result of this Soviet favouritism, the remaining tribal groups in Tajikistan were rendered disenfranchised and disadvantaged. These consisted of the mountain Tajiks, including the Garm (of the Karategin Valley) and the Gorno-Badakshans (natives of the Pamir mountain range). These historically ignored groups rose up in opposition to the ruling elites of the Sughd and Kulyob regions in what culminated in the brutal years-long Tajik civil war.

Tajikistan’s short but eventful history as an independent nation mirrors the chaos and subsequent consolidation of power by one or few men seen in the other Central Asian nations. Prior to gaining independence, Tajikistan witnessed decades of Russian rule going back to the 1860s, which was followed by its eventual absorption into the Soviet Union in 1924. Present-day Tajikistan was first created as an autonomous republic within Uzbekistan (1924), but later became an independent Soviet republic in 1929. In the immediate aftermath of gaining independence in 1991, Tajikistan descended into a protracted civil war that ran from 1992 to 1997. The war had immense political, economic and social implications, and claimed between 60,000 to 100,000 lives. The bloody civil war was fought primarily between the communist, Russian-backed Popular Front (PF) and the Islamist-democratic coalition group called the United Tajik Opposition (UTO). The former consisted of an array of Soviet-era officials and leaders who wanted to retain structures and policies inherited under Soviet rule. The latter was a coalition of Islamist and democratic parties who wanted to break away from the authoritarian and highly centralized Soviet-era governing structures, and one of its key members was the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT). The political struggle between the two groups had deep regional, tribal and religious undertones. Underlying confrontations between different regions, clans and individuals, as well as confrontations between secularists and those who wanted to establish an Islamic state, coloured the events of the civil war. Following independence, the Supreme Soviet (the country’s highest political body whilst within the Soviet Union) was retained and the first set of multi-party elections were held in the country. Rahmon Nabiye was elected the first President of the country, but his election was contested by opposition groups. The opposition, which later coalesced into the UTO, came out strongly against the Nabiye government, and drew a majority of its support from ethnic groups in the Garm and Gorno-Badakshan regions which were traditionally under-represented in the ruling government. The war began in May 1992, when UTO fighters began an armed campaign against the government. Nabiye resigned a few months into the war in an effort to quell the violence. UTO members took control of the Tajik capital Dushanbe in the chaos that ensued. The region of Kulyob in the south-west and the northern region of Leninabad became the main centres of resistance for the PF, which sought to counter the non-communist, de facto government in the capital. While Leninabad housed the Communist Party politicians, Kulyob provided security officials and senior police officers that were instrumental in PF’s fight against the UTO.

37 Also known as the Islamic Revival Party.
Emomali Rahmon, the current President of Tajikistan, became a key leader of the PF resistance, and was elected chairman of the Supreme Soviet in November, 1992. (The UTO government in Dushanbe was a de facto government; the Supreme Soviet was still the highest political body in the country at the time.) Towards the end of 1992, PF forces were able to successfully push out UTO from the capital Dushanbe, and establish their own government. The war however continued on for another four years, with the UTO taking control of other regions in the country while PF sought to establish complete and absolute control over the entire country. The latter received generous military assistance from Russia and Uzbekistan, including weapons, air support, food supplies and ground forces, while the former received support from Afghanistan.

Tajikistan suffered grave socio-economic consequences during and post the four-and-a-half years long civil war. The Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of the country shrank by close to 60 per cent, with estimated losses of $7 billion to the economy. Tajiks suffered numerous economic hardships and many were internally displaced, with a substantial number of Tajiks also fleeing to neighbouring Afghanistan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan.

The war came to an end in 1997 after PF and UTO entered into a peace agreement (the Agreement on Peace and National Accord), brokering an uneasy truce between the two sides. Under the terms of the agreement, UTO political leaders were promised 30 per cent of posts at all levels of government and thousands of UTO fighters were absorbed into state police and military units, while PF retained its claim to legitimate authority. The IRPT was also formally recognized as a legal and legitimate political party in the country, thus earning the status of being the only legally registered Islamic political party in the region. In the eighteen years since the war ended, many of the promises and concessions agreed to in the peace accord have gradually been abandoned by the ruling government. Tajikistan President and former PF leader Rahmon has gradually consolidated his hold on power, retaining those loyal to him within government circles while eliminating those considered ‘threats’, including hundreds of former UTO members. Government officials who fell out of favour with Rahmon, and former UTO members whom he deeply distrusted were gradually sidelined with some ending up dead, others forced into exile and many imprisoned. The unscrupulous practices followed by the Rahmon administration have given rise to a political vacuum, with an absence of viable political challengers or opponents in the Tajik political sphere. Although the occasional rounds of elections are held in the country, they are more farcical than anything else due to their non-transparent and undemocratic nature.

The civil war also left behind a legacy of regionalism and factionalism in the country, with citizens displaying tremendous degrees of loyalty towards local factions rather than towards the national government. Despite UTO’s failure in consolidating power in the centre, former

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39 Ibid.
members of the now disbanded group enjoy considerable support in many areas, particularly in the eastern Rasht valley and the areas surrounding the Pamir mountain range in the southeast of the country. Local affiliations tend to far outweigh national affiliations in many parts of the country despite the Rahmon administration’s attempts at asserting state control in these areas. Regional and international observers point to these realities when predicting a possible backlash against Rahmon in the near future, one that can easily turn violent and engulf the nation in another bitter conflict, not unlike the brutal civil war of the 1990s.

In recent years, Tajikistan has faced numerous problems that have threatened the stability of the nation, including the devastating energy crises during the winters of 2008 and 2009, a declining economy that is heavily dependent on migrant remittances, and the growing threat of radicalism and insurgency within the country. Rahmon’s iron hold on power has observers concerned over a possible escalation of these problems, and in particular the threat of anti-government insurgency and increasing radicalism among the disenchanted Tajik youth.

Political Uncertainty: Tajikistan after Rahmon?

In a situation similar to that prevailing in other Central Asian countries, there is considerable uncertainty regarding the post-Rahmon political future of Tajikistan. Characteristic of most of the authoritarian regimes in the region, Rahmon too has consolidated immense power during his twenty-odd years of rule, minimizing or eliminating outside challenges while similarly neutralizing threats from within his administration. Many warlords who supported and participated in the PF’s fight against the UTO, some of whom also supported Rahmon’s election to the PF leadership, have been imprisoned or forced into exile as the President grew more and more distrustful of members of his inner circle. In a strong display of regionalism by the President, most of the key positions within the government have been assigned to individuals belonging to Rahmon’s home town of Dangara (80km from the regional capital Kulyob, the PF’s stronghold during the civil war). Despite his ties to the city of Kulyob as former leader of the PF resistance, Rahmon has not refrained from dismissing from government persons belonging to the city who were key allies during the civil war. While some have termed these recent moves the actions of an increasingly insecure leader, others cite the meticulous and timely orchestration of each of these dismissals as the machinations of a clever and shrewd leader.

The Tajik government’s alleged clamping down on opposition parties and candidates reached new levels in the run up to this year’s parliamentary election. In the election held in March of this year, the IRPT won only 1.5 per cent of the total votes, falling short of the five per cent threshold needed to enter the 63-seat lower house of the Tajik Parliament. Thus, for the first

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40 Rahmonov has gradually chosen more and more powerful targets -- increasingly, field commanders from the Kulyob region. In January 2002 he dismissed two such former PFT leaders, Saidsho Shamolov and Qurbon Cholov, from their posts on the border defence committee. In January 2003 Cholov's brother, Sulaymon, formerly deputy chairman of Dushanbe's Customs Committee, was convicted of extortion, kidnapping, marrying a minor, and polygamy, and sentenced to six years in prison.
time since the civil war ended, the IRPT (who many see as the only real political challenger to the ruling People’s Democratic Party) is not represented within the country’s parliament. The elections were marred by widespread claims of voter-fraud and election rigging, with observers from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) stating that the vote fell far short of democratic standards amid findings of widespread fraud, ballot-box stuffing, and intimidation of opposition candidates during the campaign.  

IRPT party members claim that the government’s targeted campaign against their party, conflating the party with Islamic terrorists, also affected their chances in the recent elections. Tajikistan, not unlike its Central Asian neighbours, advocates secularism, a Soviet legacy it has retained post-independence. Therefore, despite being a Muslim-majority country, the government’s anti-Islamist rhetoric in the months leading up to the elections did not surprise anyone, and was intended to hurt the IRPT’s chances in the election. Many members of the state-backed clergy used their sermons to preach support for Rahmon and his party, possibly further eroding the IRPT’s support base. This propaganda to use the fear of radical Islam to undercut and belie organizations like the IRPT has come under criticism from regional and international observers. It is widely opined that this state-crafted narrative has granted the Tajik government the license to regulate or ban these organizations under the guise of preventing terrorist activities. The latest development in the Tajik political sphere is the self-imposed exile of the IRPT party leader Muhiddin Kabiri. In June of this year, he left the country over fears of being arbitrarily prosecuted by the state.

The political vacuum in Tajikistan is so deep, claim some, that even if there were free and fair elections in the country, people would vote for Rahmon, because that is the only name they recognize. Therefore, Rahmon has so obliterated the opposition that there is hardly any mention of opposition challengers in the public sphere.

Amid this relentless push to curb any and all forms of opposition to Rahmon’s political rule, reports are emerging that Rahmon is priming his eldest son Rustam Emomali, 28, for the top job. Rustam is presently the head of the Custom Service, and he also heads the Tajik Football Federation. The veracity of these reports remains in question, and the relatively recent timing of these reports has done little to quell the notion of uncertainty regarding a post-Rahmon political scenario. The lack of a declared succession plan by the current administration, a pattern followed in most of the Central Asian republics, has only fueled these concerns.


43 Crisis Group.

While the news about Rahmon’s son Rustam remains a rumour at the present stage, nepotism within the Rahmon administration is not new. Rahmon, who has seven daughters and two sons, has appointed family members including his sons, daughters and their husbands to key positions within the government. Other relatives and close aides from his home village of Dangara, as mentioned earlier, occupy other key posts in the government. The political situation in the country is thus muddled in uncertainty, but unlike neighbouring Uzbekistan where there is an apparent behind-the-scenes power struggle going on for the top job, a similar power struggle is as yet unobserved in Tajikistan.

Economic decline

The Tajik economy has witnessed a steady decline over the past few years, seeing a sharp drop during the 2008-09 financial crises that the economy is still recovering from. After the country’s GDP growth rate fell to 3.4% in 2009 from an around 8% growth in the years prior, Tajikistan’s GDP has moderated to 7-7.5% in recent years. However, stagnant production has posed challenges for the sluggish economy. Recent economic troubles in Russia have further impacted Tajikistan, a country whose economy is heavily dependent on that of the former. Reports from 2013 suggested that remittances to Tajikistan totaled an equivalent of close to half of the country’s GDP, making it the most remittance-dependent country in the world. Recent figures released by the World Bank\(^45\) state that migrant transfers to Tajikistan totaled more than $4 billion in 2013, the equivalent of 52 per cent of the country’s GDP. Over 90% of these remittances originate from Russia, where over one million Tajik migrants reside. A slowdown in the Russian economy could thus negatively impact the Tajik economy.

The crisis in Ukraine and subsequent Western sanctions against Russia, coupled with a fall in global oil prices has weakened the Russian economy considerably. The Russian ruble depreciated by over 9 per cent against the U.S. dollar, and by more than 10 per cent against the European euro in the first quarter of 2014.\(^46\) The weaker ruble has lowered the value of remittances sent to Tajikistan by migrants. The economic decline in Russia has also cost many migrants their jobs, forcing them to return home to Tajikistan. This has caused a substantial fall in the volume of remittances transferred to Tajikistan as well. According to figures released by the Russian Central Bank, 3.016 billion U.S. dollars were sent to Tajikistan from Russia through

\(^{45}\) ‘Migration and Remittances: Recent Developments and Outlook.’ Migration and Development Brief. 2014. World Bank. \(<http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTPROSPECTS/Resources/3349341288990760745/MigrationandDevelopmentBrief22.pdf>\) These figures are partially based on figures released by the Russian Central Bank. The Tajik National Bank decided to stop reporting migrant remittance data in 2013, claiming the data could be ‘ politicized’. Over the years, state officials have attempted to downplay the number of Tajik migrants in Russia and their immense contribution to the Tajik economy in an effort to deny the country’s utter economic dependence on Russia. [Trilling, David. ‘Tajikistan: Migrant Remittances Now Exceed Half of GDP. 15 April, 2014. Eurasianet.org. <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/68272>]

\(^{46}\) Ibid.
wire transfers in the first nine months of 2014.\textsuperscript{47} This was 29 million U.S. dollars, or one per cent less than the amount transferred over the same period in 2013. Asian Development Bank figures suggest that remittance inflows fell by 8.3\% (in U.S. dollar terms) in 2014 from a year earlier. This has negatively affected hundreds of thousands of remittance-dependent Tajik families, and consequently affected the Tajik economy. The fall in remittances has resulted in lower domestic demand as families dependent on remittances now have lower disposable incomes. It has also resulted in slower growth in services and housing construction. This is owing to the fact that one of the only few assets in Tajikistan that can be invested in is property. When Tajik families have extra money, they buy houses. Over the years, as remittance inflows substantially increased, the housing and construction industry in Tajikistan witnessed a boom. Now however, with reduced remittance inflows, the purchasing power of many Tajik families will be reduced and as a result, they will make fewer investments or asset purchases. The return of thousands of newly unemployed Tajik migrants to the country will further burden an economy already grappling with high unemployment.\textsuperscript{48}

The other issue confronting Tajikistan’s economy is the fall in global prices of goods such as cotton and aluminium, key Tajik exports. The country’s economy is heavily dependent on exports, making it vulnerable to external shocks such as fall in global prices and demand of its exports. Despite being an export-driven economy, Tajikistan continues to export very few products, about 160 out of a possible 5,000, making it the second lowest among Central Asian nations after Turkmenistan.\textsuperscript{49} Lack of export market diversification is another problem confounding the Tajik economy; Tajik products reach only 45 per cent of the export markets in the region, with Russia, China and Kazakhstan accounting for over 57 per cent of Tajik exports.\textsuperscript{50} This has served to make Tajikistan extremely vulnerable to economic slowdowns in any of these countries. The recent crisis in the Russian economy has depressed Russian demand for Tajik aluminium and cotton. Aluminium exports plunged by almost 50 per cent and cotton exports by 46 per cent in 2014 from a year ago. A consequent contraction in the production output of the aluminium and textile industries brought down the industrial output growth from 6.6 per cent in 2013 to less than 3 per cent in 2014.\textsuperscript{51}


\textsuperscript{48} Although official estimates published by the state put unemployment at 2.4\%, estimates by the International Labour Organization (10.8\% in 2013) and the Labour Force Survey conducted in 2009 (11.3\%) place the unemployment figure much higher. This highlights the widening difference between registered unemployment and real unemployment, since state agencies base much of their calculations on registered information.


\textsuperscript{50} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{51} Ibid.
As a result of these economic challenges, the GDP growth rate of Tajikistan slowed from 7.4% in 2013 to 6.7% in 2014.\textsuperscript{52} Inflation worsened to 6.1%, with Tajikistan’s national currency, the Tajikistan Somoni (TJS), also depreciating in light of the weakening ruble. The TJS had depreciated 4.6 per cent against the U.S. dollar by mid-September of 2014.\textsuperscript{53} Tajikistan does not have a very diverse agricultural sector, a remnant from its Soviet past where cotton production was the dominant industry. Despite attempts at agricultural diversification in recent years, agro-food production is still insufficient to meet the needs of Tajikistan’s population. The country has been recognized as a food-deficit nation by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, and has suffered a history of food shortages. Droughts and energy crises in recent years have compounded the problem. Tajikistan is forced to import a substantial quantity of its food requirements from neighbouring countries and Russia, with imports of wheat flour and grains high on the list. A devalued TJS has driven up prices of imports and increased inflation.

The growth forecasts for this year and next year are bleak given the ongoing economic slowdown in Russia and the region. The Asian Development Bank has predicted a growth rate of 4.0% in 2015, expected to recover slightly to 4.8% in 2016 as the situation in Russia and elsewhere improves gradually.\textsuperscript{54}

Tajikistan also fares poorly when it comes to certain other macroeconomic indicators. The poorest of the Central Asian republics, the per capita GDP figure for Tajikistan is the lowest in the region at 1,036.58 U.S. dollars.\textsuperscript{55} The per capita income (GNI per capita) figure for the country is 1,060 U.S. dollars, having risen in the last two years thereby upgrading Tajikistan to the bracket of lower middle-income countries (with GNI per capita between $1,046 to $4,125).\textsuperscript{56}

High levels of corruption within the government and the bureaucracy has further affected the Tajik economy, with lack of foreign investments a key issue for the country. International aid and funds advanced by donor organizations have been misused and misappropriated on multiple occasions. In 2009, it was revealed that $370 million in IMF funds were misused to fund a small group of elite cotton producers and investors. IMF promptly stopped its funding program to the country. The majority of these cases came in the high levels of government at both the regional and national level.

\textsuperscript{52} World Bank.


\textsuperscript{55} World Bank.

Energy shortages

Mountainous Tajikistan is one of the least energy rich countries in the region. Unlike the prosperous Kazakhstan, and neighbouring Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, Tajikistan does not possess vast quantities of natural gas, oil and mineral reserves. Consequently, energy shortage has become a regular problem for the Central Asian nation. Inadequate infrastructure and production capabilities has also served to significantly hinder the process of energy generation using the few energy sources the country does possess. This has forced Tajikistan to rely on its neighbours to meet much of its energy requirements, including electricity and heating. However, in recent years, these imports have proved insufficient to meet the energy requirements of the country, particularly during the critical months of winter. Corruption and mishandling of the energy sector has also ensured that energy supply is maintained to the elite parts of Dushanbe, but remain inadequate in other parts of the country. The winter crises of 2008 and 2009 were the culmination of this poor state of affairs. During successive winters, many families and homes in Tajikistan were left without power or heating, with thousands having died from the cold. Long power cuts, often for 12 hours a day, affected Tajiks in remote and rural parts of the country. Power cuts in Dushanbe, however, did not exceed 5 hours a day. The situation worsened when Uzbekistan cut off gas supplies to the struggling country over non-payment of dues from previous years. The withdrawal of Uzbekistan from the Soviet-era common power grid that linked it to other Central Asian countries has further exacerbated the problem. Uzbekistan has spent over $1 billion on the construction of new power lines, enabling it to become independent of the common electricity network running through the five countries of the region. The new Uzbek power distribution system will allow the country to transmit electricity without using power lines in neighbouring countries. This has worsened the energy situation in neighbouring Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, countries whose stated plans at hydroelectricity generation irked Uzbekistan.

In light of these developments, Tajikistan further enhanced its plans to build hydroelectricity plants across major rivers in the country. The latest project, announced in November of 2012, was the multibillion dollar construction of the Rogun Dam on the Vaksh River (a major tributary to the Amu Darya). Construction of the dam and the accompanying hydroelectric plant has been aggressively pursued by Tajik President Rahmon as the solution for the country's persistent energy crisis. However, strong objections from downstream Uzbekistan, as well as reports of mismanagement of funds have dogged the still incomplete construction of the dam, which will be the tallest dam in the world at 335 metres (1,099 ft) if completed. The World Bank halted the construction of the dam in lieu of Uzbekistan's strong objection, agreeing to organize two impact assessment examinations on different aspects of the Rogun project before authorizing the resumption of construction activities.
The potential for hydropower in Tajikistan has been estimated to be 263.5 billion terawatt hours per year, the tenth highest in the world. The Rogun dam, if pursued to completion, is to have an installed hydroelectric capacity of 3,600 megawatts per year. The already constructed Nurek Dam, slightly downstream from Rogun, is currently the world’s tallest dam, with a height of 300 meters and an annual capacity of 2,700 megawatts. Two functioning hydroelectric stations in the Tajik city of Sangtuda, the first of which was completed in 2008 and the second in 2011, have added a combined capacity of 890 megawatts. However, in spite of these projects, Tajikistan's energy problem has yet to be resolved. The crisis Tajikistan faced following the collapse of the Central Asian electricity grid in 2009, when Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan withdrew from the system amid complaints of Tajikistan illegally overdrawing energy, revealed the consequences of Central Asia's energy interdependencies. The cost of Tajikistan’s gas imports from Uzbekistan has also been steadily rising in recent years, forcing Tajikistan to curb gas imports to owing to lack of money. Even today, rural Tajik electricity consumers receive barely a few hours of electricity every day.

Uzbek President Karimov has warned of a potential war over the issue of water sharing in the region, and international observers are not denying the possibility of such conflict taking place. Central Asia's heterogeneous and complex inter-state borders have been known sites of inter-group clashes. Periodic instances of Uzbekistan disrupting the transport of goods to Tajikistan via rail networks that transit Uzbek territory have worsened relations between the two countries. Border clashes have also increased tensions between the two nations. Following an incident in 2011 where an Uzbek border guard was mistakenly shot and killed by members of the Tajik border service, there was a reported build up of Uzbek military equipment along the Uzbek-Tajik border. Soon after, a bridge explosion in Uzbekistan severed the rail link to southern Tajikistan. While the Uzbek's blamed the explosion on a terrorist attack, Tajiks claimed that the explosion was orchestrated by the Uzbek's themselves in order to sabotage southern Tajikistan's only major transport link.

Despite these challenges, Tajikistan has pushed ahead with further plans to tap into its immense hydropower potential. In August of this year, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development approved a U.S $100 million loan to the national power utility of Tajikistan, i.e. Barki Tojik, for the construction of a power converter station and related infrastructure, as part of the high-voltage transmission line project Central Asia South Asia Electricity Transmission and Trade, otherwise known as CASA-1000. As part of the CASA-1000 project, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan will benefit from the currently limited opportunity to sell available summer electricity surplus while Afghanistan and Pakistan will be able to access the much needed sources of reliable electricity supplies, including from hydropower in the region.


Islamic extremism

Tajikistan is facing a growing threat of Islamic militancy, particularly along its approximately 1,400 km long border with Afghanistan. The Tajik-Afghan border is one of the most volatile in the region, with cross-border infiltrations, and narcotics and arms trafficking rampant along the border. Tajikistan’s remote Gorno-Badakshan Autonomous Province in the southeast of the country, an isolated, mountainous region that shares rather ‘open’ borders with Afghanistan, eastern China and Kyrgyzstan, is more vulnerable to destabilizing cross border elements working in Afghanistan.

Reports of heightened militant activity across the border, in northern Afghanistan, has raised concerns in Tajikistan.

Tajiks form a substantial ethnic group in Afghanistan, constituting between 27-35% of the Afghan population.

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59 The borders in the area were patrolled by Russian troops until the Tajik government asked them to leave in 2005. [http://www.rferl.org/content/explainer-violence-in-tajikistan-badakhshan-province-a-legacy-of-the-civil-war/24657769.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/explainer-violence-in-tajikistan-badakhshan-province-a-legacy-of-the-civil-war/24657769.html)
III. TURKMENISTAN

Introduction

Turkmenistan lies at the crossroads of South and West Asia, bordering Kazakhstan in the north, Uzbekistan in the north-east, Afghanistan in the south-east, Iran in the south, and the Caspian Sea in the west. Vast hydrocarbon and natural gas reserves, although yet to be fully realized, have spelled tremendous economic success for Turkmenistan, the second most prosperous Central Asian nation after Kazakhstan. The country’s 1,768km coastline along the Caspian Sea has granted Turkmenistan access to underwater oil reserves in the Sea, with talk of potential sales to Western European markets currently underway. The economic benefits to be gleaned from such an enterprise have encouraged investors both within and outside the country to invest large sums of money in Turkmenistan.

Turkmenistan is home to the great Kara Kum (Garagum) desert, which extends from the eastern shores of the Caspian, in the west, to the eastern border with Uzbekistan along the Amu Darya River, covering over 80 per cent of the country’s territory. The Kopetdag mountain range forms the southern border with Iran, while the southeastern region is largely plateau land that is used for agriculture production.
With an area of 488,100 sq. km, Turkmenistan is the second largest Central Asian republic in size, and has extensive natural gas and oil reserves. The country is also rich in minerals, and possesses one of the largest deposits of sulphur in the world, found primarily in the Kara Kum desert. The desert is surrounded by a series of oases watered by the Amu Darya River in the north and by rivers descending from the Kopetdag mountain range in the south. There are no significant natural water systems in the central and western regions of the country, but the Kara Kum Canal transports water from the Amu Darya westwards towards Ashgabat (the capital) and the rest of the region. Water scarcity has been an issue in the largely desert country, and years of cotton agriculture that relied on irrigation waters from the Kara Kum Canal have contributed to the tremendous decline in the level of the Aral Sea (since the diversion of a large share of the Amu Darya river flow for irrigation purposes curtails the river’s ability to replenish the Aral Sea) and resulted in the desiccation of agricultural lands.

The population of Turkmenistan is a contested issue. According to various external estimates, the population is approximately 5.5 million (5,231,422 according to the July, 2015 estimate in the CIA Factbook; 5.307 million according to 2014 estimates of the World Bank). In 2006, however, Turkmenistan’s official statistical agency declared that the population of the country was over 6.7 million people at the time. It is difficult to obtain independent population statistics in the closely guarded country. However, the figures presented by the Turkmen National Institute of State Statistics and Information is much more than the best external estimates.

The population of Turkmenistan is one of the most homogeneous populations in the region, although the country has a significant Uzbek and Russian minority. The Turkmen population is 73% Turkmen, 9% Uzbek, 6.7% Russian, 2% Kazakh, 6% are of other ethnicities. 45% of the population lives in urban areas, and close to 55% lives in rural areas. Despite being the most ethnically homogenous country in the region, Turkmen minorities have faced problems in the country. The Uzbek minority has faced years of discrimination at the hands of the Tajik majority, and has demanded independence from Turkmenistan at various points in time in the past. Turkmen treatment of ethnic Uzbeks has led to tense relations with the country’s neighbour Uzbekistan. The Russians in Turkmenistan on the other hand, have been allowed to retain dual citizenship of Turkmenistan and Russia. Turkmen, spoken by 75% of the population, is the official language of the country. Russian is also widely used as an inter-ethnic language of communication. The Turkmen are predominantly Sunni Muslim, although there is a small minority of Shiites and Orthodox Christians.

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60 5.307 million is the World Bank estimate for July 2014.
62 CIA Factbook.
Present-day Turkmenistan occupies territory that has been annexed and lost by several rulers. The area was ruled by various Persian empires in antiquity, and subsequently exchanged hands in a series of conquests by Alexander the Great, Muslim crusaders, the Mongols, Turkic warriors, and finally the Russians in the late 1800s. Turkmenistan became a Soviet republic in 1924, with its borders drawn up arbitrarily by the Soviet regime planners. The disparate territory of the country, with mountains in the south and desert in the north and west, contributed to the relative isolation of various Turkmen tribes. This non-existent sense of common nationhood among the different tribes did not improve too much even after the creation of a Turkish republic under the Soviet umbrella. Despite possessing a defined territory, national identity in the Turkmen SSR remained superficial, much like in the other Central Asian republics. Apprehension of Soviet rule caused many Turkmen to flee to Afghanistan and Iran, where a sizeable diaspora remains. Turkmenistan eventually gained independence in 1991 upon the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

Saparmurad Niyazov, a Communist Party loyalist who rose through the ranks and was appointed Chairman of the Supreme Soviet of Turkmenistan (the highest legislative body in the Soviet republic) in January, 1990, became the first leader of independent Turkmenistan. The post of the Executive President was created in October, 1990, with Niyazov winning 98.3% of the votes for the same. It was with him at the helm of the state legislative body that Turkmenistan declared independence from Soviet Union in 1991. In the first elections to be held in post-independence Turkmenistan, in June of 1992, Niyazov was elected President with 99.5% of the vote in an election with no other candidates.

Niyazov, who died of heart failure in 2006, was an eccentric figure who cultivated a larger-than-life image of himself. As the International Crisis Group noted in one of its earliest reports on the country, the absence of a strong sense of nation- or statehood allowed Niyazov to “construct the idea of a Turkmen nation around his own personality”.

This was initially supported by many locals who felt Niyazov had the power to unite Turkmens across the country and undertake nation building. In 1993, he adopted the name ‘Turkmenbashi’, which translates to ‘father/head of all Turkmen’ in English. This not only served to emphasize his self-proclaimed status as the ultimate leader and arbiter of all Turkmens, but also augmented his cult persona. In 1994, Niyazov won an extension to his term in office via a referendum. While the referendum did not meet international standards, the result was not extraordinary. In Niyazov, Turkmens saw a determined leader who could stabilize the newly independent country. His move to make Turkmen the national language of the country gave nationalist Turkmens reason to rejoice, and further attempts at nationalism were widely supported. This nationalization process went hand in hand with increasing efforts to secure absolute power. Niyazov began to rapidly consolidate power through the nineties, and allowed within his administration only those who pledged

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loyalty to him. The regularly-held elections to the Mejlis (People’s Assembly), the legislative body that replaced the Supreme Soviet in independent Turkmenistan, were far from democratic, with a stymied opposition unable to challenge the ruling elite. Much like its neighbours, Turkmenistan lacked a plural political sphere. Niyazov outlawed all opposition parties, while the Communist Party, rechristened the Democratic Party of Turkmenistan, remained the only lawful political party in the country. The rubber-stamped Mejlis voted in 1999 to grant Niyazov the right to remain in office for as long as he wanted, effectively making him president-for-life.

Niyazov’s Turkmenistan followed a strict policy of isolationism, which the administration dubbed ‘neutrality’ in order to conceal its real intentions. The isolationist stand of Turkmenistan was reflected in its foreign policy, and more subtly in the government’s incessant promotion and glorification of all things Turkmen. The Turkmen Parliament declared the country’s foreign policy position to be one of ‘permanent neutrality’, subsequently accepted and approved by the United Nations General Assembly in 1995. Although the principle of permanent neutrality implied the maintenance of peaceful, friendly and mutually beneficial relations with all the countries of the world, Niyazov instead pursued the policy of isolationism under this guise of neutrality. Turkmenistan remained isolated from global, and particularly regional, politics. Under Niyazov, Turkmenistan regularly refused to take part in regional initiatives, also due in part to the country’s tense relations with Uzbekistan over the treatment of ethnic Uzbeks in the former, water sharing issues pertaining to the Amu Darya River and border demarcation issues. Niyazov’s isolationist policy reached its peak during the late nineties, when all foreign mails and telephone calls were monitored, outside information entering the country highly restricted and censored, and free information exchange virtually impossible with a ban on independent internet-providers. In 1997, the government closed all international rail and bus routes, and cancelled international flights from all cities except from the capital Ashgabat. In 2000, the government instituted the joint Council for the Supervision of Foreigners that was mandated to monitor the activities of all foreigners arriving or temporarily residing in the country. International observers asserted that these measures were aimed at preventing foreigners, especially journalists, from reporting the widespread human rights abuses occurring in the country, as well as curtailing Turkmen’s ability to access outside information in an effort to eliminate the possibility of dissent.

In later years, Niyazov’s increasingly extravagant attempts at establishing himself as the ultimate embodiment of Turkmenistan disillusioned many who had earlier supported him, and further alienated those who never did. Niyazov erected statues of himself all over the country, including an ostentatious, large golden statue in central Ashgabat that revolves slowly to face the sun as it changes direction from dusk to dawn, dubbed the ‘Neutrality Arch’. He also renamed major cities, towns and streets after himself, including the port city of Krasnovodsk which was renamed ‘Turkmenbashi’. His portraits adorn buildings, billboards, books, currency as well as labels on food products. He went so far as to rename months of the year after himself and his late mother. Niyazov’s coup de grace, though, was his decision to codify the ethics of the Turkmen
nation in a spiritual guide he called the *Ruhnama*, or Book of Soul, in 2001. The 400-page volume, allegedly authored by Niyazov himself, is part-autobiographical, part-historical and part-doctrinal. The book is a compilation of Niyazov’s life history, traditional epithets and folk sayings, as well as the history and philosophy of Turkmenistan as interpreted by Niyazov. The Ruhnama was placed on an equal footing to the Quran and the Bible, and enforced as learning material in schools and universities across the country. Candidates for civil services were required to give intensive examinations on the book, and were to undertake regular readings of the Ruhnama few hours a week. Niyazov’s policies had larger implications for Turkmenistan’s education sector – he dismantled the modern education system. Access to education was severely limited, and secondary schooling was cut from ten years to nine years, while university education was limited to two. The curriculum in schools was revamped – conventional education was given less precedence to the Ruhnama; social sciences courses were replaced with highly ideological courses such as ‘The History of Neutral Turkmenistan’ and ‘The Independence Policy of the Great Saparmurad Turkmenbashi’. A shortage of textbooks forced teachers to rely on Soviet-era books, and poor infrastructure plagued students in rural Turkmenistan. Turkmen students who wished to study abroad faced multiple obstacles, including high costs as well as increased difficulties getting readmitted to local institutions on their return home. In 2004, the Turkmen government declared all foreign-earned degrees invalid in the country. Thus, students who do go abroad to study rarely return home if they can find employment outside. In addition to these restrictive conditions, students, many as young as ten, are forcibly pulled out of school and made to pluck cotton between the harvest months of September and November, similar to the practice of child labour in Uzbekistan’s lucrative cotton production industry. While the practice is not as widespread as before, or the government is doing better to conceal it, child labour in the cotton industry continues unabated. The deplorable quality of education in Turkmenistan, rendered unbalanced and weak due to the inordinate emphasis on teachings of the Ruhnama

Niyazov’s regressive policies also severely debilitated the struggling health sector in the country. Post-independence, Niyazov set off to dismantle Soviet-era hospitals and clinics in a bid to reduce the number of inefficient hospitals in the country. However, the closure of hospitals and clinics was not followed by a corresponding investment in outpatient clinics or the opening of new hospitals. Budget revenues intended for funding the health sector had been allegedly redirected to fund Niyazov’s ordered constructions of grandiose statues and ice palaces. Many Turkmens were left without access to healthcare, and the healthcare provisions that were made available proved expensive for a majority of Turkmens. The lack of specialist doctors and facilities in district and regional clinics forced Turkmens needing complex treatments to travel to Ashgabat for the same, only if they could afford it. It was, and still is hard to determine the status of health care in the country. State figures on infant mortality and other health care indicators are highly elevated, as in other Central Asian countries, claim multiple independent healthcare organizations. It was alleged by some of these external groups in the mid-2000s that Turkmenistan has an HIV-AIDS epidemic, although state data for the same painted a vastly different narrative. Doctors are allegedly ordered to diagnose instances of HIV/AIDS and
tuberculosis as minor ailments, in order to substantiate the government’s claim. Healthcare organizations are concerned about this approach in a country and region\(^6\) where cases of HIV/AIDS and tuberculosis are rapidly increasing. The crippling blow for many Turkmens came in 2004, when Niyazov called for the privatization of the healthcare system in the country. Cost of healthcare skyrocketed, with Turkmens expected to bear 50 per cent of the medical costs since medical insurance would cover only half the costs. A debilitating healthcare system with weakened infrastructure and personnel has severely impacted the health sector in the country.

Niyazov also tightened his hold over legislative powers in the country, amending the national constitution in 2003 to lessen the powers of the parliament and instead make the 2,504 member Halk Maslahaty (People’s Council) the most important legislative body in the country. The Halk Maslahaty consists of all the leading officials and deputies in the administration, and prominent judges as well. The body meets only once a year, and spends much of the session praising the President. An assassination attempt on Niyazov’s life in 2002, when the President’s motorcade was fired upon by gunmen in passing vehicles, led to further centralization of power in the hands of Niyazov. In the months following the attack, several opposition leaders were imprisoned or forced into exile, while Niyazov also purged members of his government who he suspected were involved in the failed assassination bid. Close aides of the President revealed at the time that Niyazov also suspected Russian and Uzbek involvement in the bid to assassinate, two countries that Turkmenistan shared tense relations with at the time. The repression only increased in the wake of this incident, with censorship and state monitoring of citizens at its peak.

Policies and actions such as these rendered Turkmenistan essentially a one-man autocracy, with Niyazov in control of all three functions of the state – the executive, legislative and judicial. Niyazov was both the President and the Prime Minister, and all draft laws tabled in the Mejlis were pre-approved by the President. Bureaucrats and ministers within the government were afraid to take independent decisions, and rarely ever did. This served to weaken local and national institutions, and undermined the independent working of the state’s organs and institutions. Niyazov’s iron hold on power and his carefully acquired cult status, with many identifying Turkmenistan with Turkmenbashi, led international observers to compare Niyazov to China’s Mao Zedong and Iraq’s Saddam Hussein.

In 2004, rumours of declining health raised concerns of a post-Niyazov political future. International observers predicted a period filled with chaos and instability in the aftermath of Niyazov’s death, or resignation from the post of President. What followed Niyazov’s death in December, 2006 from heart failure, however, was a swift and peaceful transition of power.

\(^6\) Uzbekistan and Tajikistan too have been accused of fudging numbers and downplaying instances of tuberculosis and HIV/AIDS.
Gurbanguly Berdimuhammedov\textsuperscript{65}, the deputy chairman of the Council of Ministers, with the help of Akmurat Rejepov, the head of the Presidential Guard and close Niyazov aide, acquired interim leadership of the Turkmen nation. Elections were scheduled for February, 2007, following a brief period of interim leadership. In the run up to the elections, Berdimuhammedov pledged multiple reforms, including those in the education and agricultural sectors, free internet access, and higher salaries and pensions, among other things. Although five other candidates were allowed to stand against Berdimuhammedov in the election, they offered little to no challenge and belonged to the Democratic Party of Turkmenistan. The ban on opposition parties remained, with many opposition leaders exiled and thus unable to protest the undemocratic transition. Berdimuhammedov won the elections, which witnessed a turnout of 99 per cent per state reported figures, by a landslide 89 per cent of the vote.

Berdimuhammedov first course of action after being elected President of Turkmenistan concerned the dismantling of his predecessor’s meticulously constructed personality cult. Niyazov’s pictures were removed from buildings and billboards, currency notes containing his images were discontinued from print, statues of Turkmenbashi razed. In January, 2010, Berdimuhammedov published a decree ordering the dismantling of Niyazov’s revolving statue atop the Neutrality Arch in central Ashgabat. The statue, the decree further went on to state, would be relocated to a suburb in the capital city. In 2011, the statue was relocated to a southern suburb in the city and placed atop the Monument of Neutrality, different from the Neutrality Arch in central Ashgabat. While Berdimuhammedov was undertaking these measures to dismantle Niyazov’s cult status, there were growing concerns that the former was seeking to establish his own personality cult in place of the latter’s. Niyazov’s pictures on boards and buildings were gradually replaced with that of Berdimuhammedov. The current President even renamed a Turkmen military unit after his father, reminiscent of Niyazov’s act of renaming months of the year after himself and his mother. Berdimuhammedov has also authored and published multiple books, although he initially fell short of making these mandatory reading as Niyazov did with the Ruhnama. In 2012, Berdimuhammedov stood for reelection, which state officials declared he secured with 97 per cent of the vote. Although there were seven other candidates in the poll, this was largely seen as symbolic with Berdimuhammedov guaranteed to win. The other candidates mostly praised the policies of the incumbent candidate, and offered meek resistance if at all.

The promises of reform made by the President-elect, giving hope to many who desired genuine political change and a break from the authoritarian practices of the past, remained empty

\textsuperscript{65} In 1993, Turkmenistan began a transition from Cyrillic, in use since Soviet times, to a new alphabet based on the Latin script. However, the international media often uses Russian versions of personal and place names, resulting in a variety of spellings for the same place or person. This briefing follows current Turkmen usage to a certain extent, falling back on more “Russified” spellings for easy recognition and readability: thus, “Berdimuhammedov” instead of “Berdymukhammedov”, but “Niyazov”, instead of “Nyýazow”, the more “correct” Turkmen spelling. Similarly, “Türkmenbashi” is used when referring to Niyazov’s (Crisis Group, Turkmenistan after Niyazov) preferred honourific but “Türkmenbashy” for the Caspian sea port city formerly known as Krasnovodsk.
posturing that never saw fruition. Although Berdimuhammedov did order the construction of more hospitals and schools to correct shortages in the system, these were state of the art creations centered in Ashgabat and other major cities, and thus inaccessible to most ordinary Turkmen. The white marble hospitals in Ashgabat, despite having high-end equipment, offer narrow specializations. On the other hand, rural hospitals and clinics, the major sources of healthcare for a disparate and largely rural population, are in total disrepair. Many lack even basic supplies, such as phones and toilets. A diminishing supply of qualified doctors and medical personnel, many of whom belong to the Soviet era and are now retiring, and medicines in these rural clinics has worsened the state of healthcare in these areas.

Reforms in the Turkmen education sector were more definitive. The ten year secondary school system was restored in 2007, and as of 2013, students have been required to complete twelve years of schooling in order to finish their secondary education. This reform was undertaken in order to make the Turkmen education system more compatible with international standards, thereby allowing more Turkmen students to study abroad. Congruent to this, the government decided to recognize foreign diplomas, reversing the decision made by Niyazov in 2004. However, the problem of corruption in the Turkmen education sector remains. Reports of students being required to pay bribes in order to successfully pass university entrance exams have been coming out of the country for many years now. The allocation of government funds for high schools also suffers from corruption. In 2012, over 114 new schools were opened across the country. However, the building contracts grossly over-inflated costs, with the declared costs so high that many thousands of schools in Turkmenistan could have been renovated for the same amount of money.66 Due to severe funding shortages, the majority of high schools in the country are self-run and rely on donations from pupils’ parents to make the necessary building repairs. The propagation of state ideology through the education system, rampant during Niyazov’s time, has continued under Berdymuhammedov. Although the mandatory study of Niyazov’s Ruhanam in secondary schools and universities was eliminated in 2013, students are now being made to study Berdymuhammedov’s books. The current President’s portraits are also now replacing his predecessor’s in school textbooks.

Thus, what cautious optimists hoped would be a new era for Turkmen politics, was instead a continuation of the old, albeit the one man autocracy was now headed by Berdimuhammedov. The promised reforms were quickly forgotten, with the President accumulating greater powers in a country deemed one of the most repressive in the world.

While political uncertainty is no longer an issue following Berdymuhammedov’s ascent to power, Turkmenistan is presently facing multiple socioeconomic and security challenges. Economic decline, rising poverty, the threat of Islamic militancy are all issues that have the potential to destabilize Turkmenistan.

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Economic Decline

Turkmenistan is one of the more prosperous Central Asian economies with an expanding export sector. According to Turkmenistan's national statistics agency, the country has consistently witnessed annual GDP growth rates of over 10 per cent, even reaching fifteen per cent in the years 2009 and 2012, making it one of the fastest growing economies in the world. It must be noted, however, that these state published figures are subject to wide margins of error, but in the absence of independently established assessments of the Turkmen economy these are the figures to be relied on.

The most important sector in the Turkmen economy is the energy sector (oil and natural gas), which accounts for more than 60 per cent of the country's GDP. Agriculture is also an important sector which, although it accounts for only 10 per cent of the GDP, employs close to half the country's labour force.

From 1998-2005, Turkmenistan experienced economic troubles due to lack of adequate export routes for its natural gas (its only market being Russia at the time), and from obligations on extensive short-term external debt. In recent years, however, total exports have risen and revenue from natural gas and oil exports has seen substantial increases because of higher international prices for the same. Additional pipelines to China, construction on which began in 2010, and increased pipeline capacity to Iran served to expand Turkmenistan's gas export routes in recent years.

However, economic reform has been slow in one of the most authoritarian regimes in the region. The Turkmen government introduced a privatization plan in 2012, but its implementation has been slow. High levels of corruption have also affected the national economy. Revenues from the country's lucrative export sector are generally pocketed by the political and bureaucratic elite. A still-substandard education system has hampered high-skill labour development. In a break from Niyazov's isolationist, closed-market economic policies, the current President Berdymuhammedov has attempted to open up the national economy. From unifying the country's dual currency exchange rate, reducing state subsidies for gasoline, to initiating development of a special tourism zone on the shores of the Caspian Sea, Berdymuhammedov is attempting to bring economic success to the country based on Western models of economic development. Although foreign investments are now being encouraged, restrictive state policies and numerous bureaucratic obstacles continue to impede international business activity.

The recent economic troubles in Russia have also affected Turkmenistan. The fall in migrant remittances from Russia has affected many Turkmen families, although being a relatively less remittance dependent country, it has not proved to detrimental to the Turkmen economy. However, the drop in Russian demand for Turkmen gas has deeply impacted Tleaving Turkmenistan with a smaller export market and reduced export revenues.
Turkmenistan was also forced to devalue its currency by approximately 20 per cent at the start of 2015, dropping the manata-to-dollar rate from 2.85 to 3.5. The devaluation, Turkmenistan’s first in nearly seven years, puts into question Turkmenistan’s claims of isolation and stability amidst the region’s downturn. Some suggest that the government devalued the manat in order to help the country diversify its trade. With the ruble so low compared with the manat, Turkmenistan’s few exports to Russia were uncompetitive, and thus a devalued manat would help make Turkmen exports more price competitive.

Despite the recent developments, Turkmenistan still has the brightest macro-economic prospects within Central Asia. The IMF predicts an 11.5% GDP growth for the year 2015, with no notable downturns attributable to the economic contagion stemming from Russia’s downturn. The decline in energy prices and fluctuating demand for Turkmen gas will likely reduce export revenues, thereby weakening the current account. In light of these realities, GDP growth is projected to slow to 9.7% in 2015 and 9.2% in 2016, reflecting lower public investment. However, Turkmenistan’s strong external buffers, with its foreign exchange reserves estimated to be worth 22 months of imports in 2014. Moreover, breakeven petroleum prices for the fiscal and external balance are considered to be the lowest in the region, providing some insulation against fluctuating energy prices.

**Chronic water shortages**

Turkmenistan has been facing chronic water shortages for years. With a lack of water systems, the country remains entirely dependent on the struggling Amu Darya River. Residents in different parts of the country continue to experience water cuts that last for days on end. In a country where temperatures can reach close to 50 degrees Celsius, lack of water can prove deadly. The mostly desert Turkmenistan is the ninth most water insecure country in the world, and many experts predict that serious water shortage will afflict the country as early as 2020.

Despite the country's unforgiving physical geography, a large part of the problem in Turkmenistan is man-made. The Turkmen government has invested millions in urban greening projects and huge parks. These projects require large quantities of water to not only build but sustain these structures. In 2013, Berdymuhammedov ordered the planting of over three million trees and saplings that heavily depend on irrigation for their survival. This lack of government foresight on the sustainability of its ambitious designs has proved detrimental for the country. Ashgabat city planners also diverted water from the Amu Darya into the many fountains adorning public spaces in the city. Many of these are today lying inactive due to the water crisis.

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67 Asian Development Bank predictions.
68 International Monetary Fund estimate.
The country's intensive yet lucrative cotton industry also uses large quantities of water, even more so than in other countries practising cotton farming due to the hot and arid climate of Turkmenistan.

The crisis is worsening, and is fueling public anger at the government's apparent incompetence at dealing with the problem. In a region already facing acute water shortages, the situation in Turkmenistan threatens to destabilize not just the country but the entire region as it edges closer to the brink of water wars.
IV. KYRGYZSTAN

Introduction

One of the smaller Central Asian countries, Kyrgyzstan is nestled between China on one side and its Central Asian neighbours on the other. The high altitude border with China, comprising the entire mountainous, eastern flank of Kyrgyzstan, serves as an important gateway for the exchange of gas, oil, machinery and other goods that are traded between China and the Central Asian nations. Kyrgyzstan also shares borders, many of these tenuous, with three of the four other Central Asian countries - Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kazakhstan. Periodic border closures and skirmishes are a routine feature in a region with a history of tense and uneasy interstate interactions. The fertile and ethnically heterogeneous Fergana Valley straddles Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, and is home to a large population of ethnic Uzbeks, Tajiks and Kyrgyz. These ethnic groups are spread sporadically across the valley, and not according to national boundaries. This has often led to disputes and violence in parts of the valley, the most recent and prominent incident being the violence in Kyrgyz city of Osh in 2010. Ethnic Uzbeks living in Osh, a The Fergana population is intermixed, hared composed of territories

The landlocked country is largely mountainous, dominated by the Tien Shan and the Pamir (in the south) mountain ranges. Glaciers and rivers are a common feature in Kyrgyzstan due to its elevated topography. As a result, Kyrgyzstan is one of the most water abundant countries in the region, the other being Tajikistan. Despite being hailed for its natural beauty, with many terming it the 'Switzerland of Central Asia', Kyrgyzstan has failed to attract tourists in large numbers. Crumbling infrastructure, lack of modernization in tourist services and industry, and poor transport system cont, particularly in the remote parts of the country, have impacted the country's tourism sector.
Kyrgyzstan’s population is ethnically diverse, composed as it is of Kyrgyz (64.9 percent), Uzbek (13.8 percent), Russian (12.5 percent), Dungan (1.1 percent), Ukrainian (1 percent), and Uygyr (1 percent) peoples.\(^7\) Population distribution is concentrated in the Fergana, Talas, and Chu valleys and is centered in the cities of Bishkek (the capital) and Osh (the site of the 2010 violence against the ethnic Uzbek minority). Kyrgyzstan, much like the other Central Asian republics, is a secular state. However, most citizens are adherents to the religion of Islam (75 percent), and a sizable minority of Russian Orthodox (20 percent) also exists. Kyrgyzstan has two official languages, Kyrgyz and Russian.

Political instability: The 2005 Tulip Revolution and 2010 leadership changes

In the first years of Kyrgyzstan's full independence, President Askar Akayev appeared wholeheartedly committed to the reform process. However, despite the backing of major Western donors, including the International Monetary Fund (IMF), Kyrgyzstan had consequential economic difficulties from the outset. These came mainly as a result of the breakup of the Soviet trading bloc, which impeded the Republic's smooth transfer to a free-market economy.

In 1993, allegations of corruption against Akayev's closest political associates blossomed into a major scandal. One of those accused of improprieties was Vice President Feliks Kulov, who resigned for ethical reasons in December. Following Kulov's resignation, Akayev dismissed the government and called upon the last communist premier, Apas Djumagulov, to form a new one. In January 1994, Akayev initiated a referendum asking for a renewed mandate to complete his term of office. He received 96.2% of the vote.

A new Constitution was passed by the Parliament in May 1993. In 1994, however, the Parliament failed to produce a quorum for its last scheduled session prior to the expiration of its term (February 1995). President Akayev was widely accused of having manipulated a boycott by a majority of the parliamentarians. Akayev, in turn, asserted that the communists had caused a political crisis by preventing the legislature from fulfilling its role. Akayev scheduled an October 1994 referendum, overwhelmingly approved by voters, that proposed two amendments to the Constitution, one that would allow the Constitution to be amended by means of a referendum, and the other creating a new bicameral parliament called the Jogorku Kenesh.

Elections for the two legislative chambers – a 35-seat full-time assembly and a 70-seat part-time assembly – were held in February 1995 after campaigns considered remarkably free and open by most international observers, although the election-day proceedings were marred by widespread irregularities. Independent candidates won most of the seats,

\(^7\) CIA Factbook
suggesting that personalities prevailed over ideologies. The new Parliament convened its initial session in March 1995. One of its first orders of business was the approval of the precise constitutional language on the role of the legislature.

Kyrgyzstan's independent political parties competed in the 1996 parliamentary elections. A February 1996 referendum – in violation of the Constitution and the law on referendums – amended the Constitution to give President Akayev more power. It also removed the clause that parliamentarians be directly elected by universal suffrage. Although the changes gave the President the power to dissolve Parliament, it also more clearly defined Parliament's powers. Since that time, Parliament has demonstrated real independence from the executive branch.

An October 1998 referendum approved constitutional changes, including increasing the number of deputies in the upper house, reducing the number of deputies in the lower house, rolling back Parliamentary immunity, reforming land tender rules, and reforming the state budget.

Two rounds of Parliamentary elections were held on 20 February 2000 and 12 March 2000. With the full backing of the United States, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) reported that the elections failed to comply with commitments to free and fair elections and hence were invalid. Questionable judicial proceedings against opposition candidates and parties limited the choice of candidates available to Kyrgyz voters, while state-controlled media reported favorably on official candidates only and government officials put pressure on independent media outlets that favored the opposition.

In 2002 Azimbek Beknazarov, a leading opposition figure, was imprisoned by the local authorities, in what many believe to be politically motivated circumstances. This led to protests resulting in clashes with police forces, culminating in the death of five people in Jalal-Abad.

As May approached the authorities further extended their hold on power, imprisoning the vocal former Presidential ally, Feliks Kulov, to ten years for alleged "abuses of office". During the same month the entire government resigned, accepting blame for the loss of life during the protests earlier in the year. A new government led by Nikolay Tanayev was then formed and has remained ever since.

In November the President faced yet more protests, as the opposition announced it would march on the capital and demand his resignation. The police reacted by arresting large amounts of demonstrators, further adding to international disapproval at the authoritarian nature of Akayev's government.
Government office building in the village of Tamchy, Issyk Kul Province

By June 2003, the lower house of Parliament announced that President Akayev and two other "puppet" leaders of Kyrgyzstan, from the Soviet era, would be given lifetime immunity from prosecution, raising the prospect of Akayev finally stepping down.

In 2005, following disputed results of the 2005 parliamentary elections, Kyrgyzstan was thrown into a state of political turmoil, with different parties claiming that they were the legitimate government. On 10 July 2005 interim President and opposition People's Movement leader Kurmanbek Bakiyev won the presidential election in a landslide victory. (See: Tulip Revolution).

In 2006, Bakiyev faced a political crisis as thousands of people demonstrated in a series of protests in Bishkek. They accused him of reneging on promised constitutional reforms limiting presidential power and giving more authority to the parliament and cabinet. They also accused him of failing to eradicate corruption, crime, and poverty.[1] Bakiyev in turn accused the opposition of plotting a coup against him. Several parliamentarians had been killed during the political unrest.[2]

Presidential elections, originally expected in 2010, were rescheduled for 23 July 2009.[3] President Bakiyev was widely expected to retain his mandate, while the opposition United People's Movement (OND) announced on 20 April 2009 that it would field a single candidate – Social Democratic Party leader Almaz Atambayev.[4] The election turnout was reported at 79.3%.[5] As of 00:45 local time in Kyrgyzstan on 25 July 2009 (with 2058 of 2330 polling districts reporting), Bakiyev had won the election with 83.8% of the vote.[6]

In assessing the election, the OSCE stated that Bakiyev had gained an "unfair advantage" and that media bias "did not allow voters to make an informed choice." Additionally, they found that the election was "marred by many problems and irregularities", citing ballot stuffing and problems with the counting of votes.[7] On polling day Atambayev withdrew his candidacy claiming widespread fraud, stating "due to massive, unprecedented violations, we consider these elections illegitimate and a new election should be held."[8] Independent candidate Jenishbek Nazaraliev also withdrew on election day.[9] An opposition rally of 1,000 people in Balykchy on election day was broken up by riot police.[8]

The arrest of an opposition figure on 6 April 2010 in the town of Talas led opposition supporters to protest.[10] The protestors took control of a governmental building, demanding a new government. Riot police were sent from Bishkek, and managed to temporarily regain control of the building. Later the same day several more opposition figures were arrested, while the government claimed to have regained control of the situation. The following day, however, hundreds of opposition supporters gathered in Bishkek and marched on the government headquarters. Security personnel attempted to
disperse the protestors with the use of stun grenades and live rounds, at the cost of dozens of lives. The protests continued, however, resulting in the flight of President Bakiyev to his southern stronghold of Jalalabad, and the freeing later the same day of the arrested opposition figures. A new government was formed under opposition leader Roza Otunbayeva, while Bakiyev remained for several days in southern Kyrgyzstan, before fleeing to Belarus, where he was given asylum by President Lukashenko. The new interim government held consultations on a new constitution, intended to increase the powers of the parliament and reduce those of the president. A referendum was held on the resulting document on 27 June 2010, and was approved by over 90% of voters, with a turnout of 72%. Elections were subsequently held on 10 October 2010. These elections resulted in five parties reaching the 5% threshold necessary to enter parliament. As of 25 October, the five successful parties were continued negotiations on the formation of a governing coalition.

Energy shortages

Much like Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan lacks sufficient energy resources to supplement its growing energy requirements. Insufficient reserves of natural gas and oil have forced Kyrgyzstan to rely on gas and oil imports from its neighbours to meets its domestic energy demand. However, in light of increasing tensions between the nations of the region, Kyrgyzstan has faced difficulties in obtaining gas and electricity in the region. This has forced the country to explore and exploit its massive hydropower potential through the construction of power stations and dams across some of the major river systems in the country, much to the chagrin of neighbouring Uzbekistan.

The Kyrgyz republic was home to the Soviet Union’s largest gold mine (Makmal), which continues to be one of the largest proven gold reserves in the world Kyrgyzstan’s economy, like that of other poor countries, is dominated by the agricultural sector. A full 55 percent of the labor force is engaged in farming. Nomadic herders raise sheep (for both meat and wool), cattle, and yaks. Other agricultural products include cotton, tobacco, and a variety of vegetables. Industry, which accounts for just 15 percent of the labor force, is limited to gold, small machinery, textiles, and food processing. During its first decade of independence, Kyrgyzstan implemented more market-oriented economic reform but experienced slower economic growth than the other former Soviet republics of Central Asia. Perhaps the most pressing geographical/political issue facing Kyrgyzstan is its complex western boundary with Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. Three large Tajik exclaves exist entirely within Kyrgyzstan’s borders, and a serious boundary dispute continues with Uzbekistan. Here, seemingly arbitrary boundaries fragment ethnic groups and unite dissimilar peoples. Kyrgyzstan’s relative location has also fostered a growing problem of illegal narcotics traffic. The country has become a corridor for the movement of opium and heroin produced in Afghanistan and Tajikistan, bound for the European market. Combating terrorism represents an additional problem confronting Kyrgyzstan. Radical Islam has penetrated the country, and
Osh is considered by many to be the Soviet Central Asian headquarters of Wahhabism.  

Territory occupied by modern-day Kyrgyzstan was annexed by Russia in 1876. In 1916, the Kyrgyz staged a major revolt against the Tsarist Empire, which led to the deaths of close to one-sixth of the Kyrgyz population. In 1924, the Turkestan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (which comprised the territories of all five Central Asian nations) was split into the Turkmen SSR (which later became Turkmenistan post Soviet-collapse) and Uzbek SSR. The latter included areas occupied predominantly by ethnic Tajiks. In 1929, the Tajik SSR was carved out of the existing Uzbek SSR. It was only in 1936 that Kazakh and Kirghiz Soviet republics were created. The Kirghiz SSR (today's Kyrgyzstan) was created upon the elevation of the autonomous Kara-Kirghiz Autonomous Oblast region within the Russian SFSR\(^71\) to the status of a republic. Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, Kirghiz SSR gained independence, and the new country was rechristened 'Kyrgyzstan'. The post-independence political history of the country has been much more eventful than those of its Central Asian neighbours, and Kyrgyzstan remains the only country in the region, apart from Turkmenistan, to have witnessed multiple changes in leadership post independence. The Russian-educated Askar Akayev, with a background in science, was the first President of independent Kyrgyzstan. After entering the Kyrgyz Communist Party as the head of the Scientific Department in 1986, Akayev rapidly rose through the ranks to ultimately be appointed the President of Kyrgyzstan in 1990, when the country was still under Soviet rule. Akayev was subsequently elected President of independent Kyrgyzstan by direct popular vote in 1991. At the time, Western commentators had hailed Akayev as a beacon of hope for democracy in Central Asia. Although this proved partially true,

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\(^{71}\) Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic, the central unit in the Soviet Union.
STRATEGIC PLAYERS IN THE REGION

Russia

The other imposing fact is that Soviet Russia orchestrated the construction of a lot of the key infrastructure and transport networks. Major Soviet military facilities such as military bases and satellite and missile launch pads were located in the Central Asian republics, and the five countries have retained much of that. All major road and rail networks, running across the five countries, were also planned and constructed by the Soviets. Telephone lines and communication networks were similarly setup by Soviet Russia. These have largely been retained by the Central Asian countries, and offers Russia unparalleled advantage and control over the five Central Asian republics. Professor Phunchok Stobdan, a prominent scholar on Central Asia who served as India's Ambassador to Kyrgyzstan from 2010 to 2012, states that Russia still has the capability to influence and perhaps even change things in each of the five Central Asian countries. The Russians have intimate understanding of the infrastructure, transport, energy and communication networks in these countries which puts them at an advantage over other countries like China who are trying to establish a greater presence in the region. The fact that Russian is widely spoken in the entire region, owing to its status as an official language in all five countries, also gives the Russians access to and control over the local media and the information that is disseminated to the local populations. This, Professor Stobdan contends, gives Russia continued power to
influence events in the region, and is not a position that China can take over anytime soon unless Central Asian peoples learn Mandarin en masse.

**China**

Central Asia: Iran, turkey struggle to influence region (rfe/rl)

India - Professor Stobdan feels India will not gain a foothold in the region any time soon. As long as the Chinese are dominant in the region, India won't get the chance. Plus, unlike Chinese businessmen and investors, Indian businessmen do not have the

**CONCLUSION**

Central Asia is a complex region, and one that is clouded in relative obscurity. The authoritarian and secretive regimes of the region have steadfastly controlled the flow of information in and out of their countries. Reported instances of human rights abuse, suppression of political opposition through imprisonment and/or death, censorship, socioeconomic discontent and religious intolerance have led regional commentators to predict instability in the region on various occasions, but more often than not these predictions were proven incorrect, or rather premature.

The ongoing climate of government repression as well as systemic corruption can certainly foster ill will towards the governments of the region, and stoke public anger that can turn violent. However, while the Central Asian nations possess the symptoms for internal instability, the authoritarian and iron-fisted regimes of the region have managed to control and suppress any and all forms of dissent.

It is the eternal threats facing these nations that have potential to destabilize them. And many of these threats are facing all the five CARs, requiring integrated regional action.

A water conflict may soon engulf the region unless strong water sharing agreements are concluded; energy crises may result conflict. Islamic terrorism, if and when it becomes a real threat, will require integrated regional action.

SCO and other orgs are just a forum or platform for discussion; these are yet to translate into a framework for real regional integration.

One of the huge mistakes from Western policy was believing democracy comes with elections and free market reform, and Albania is a case study of that not being true. Democracy comes from democratic institutions and
democratic culture, and those are two things lacking in Albania today. 
http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/albania-history-interview_55ae99e9e4b0a9b94852bcdc?utm_hp_ref=world