



CHATHAM HOUSE

Chatham House, 10 St James's Square, London SW1Y 4LE
T: +44 (0)20 7957 5700 E: contact@chathamhouse.org.uk
F: +44 (0)20 7957 5710 www.chathamhouse.org.uk

Charity Registration Number: 208223

Programme Paper

Security Cooperation between Western States and Russia over Central Asia/Afghanistan: The Changing Role of Uzbekistan

Roy Allison

24 November 2008

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Introduction

The prospects for US-Russian and NATO-Russian collaboration over security and stabilisation in Central Asia/Afghanistan have declined sharply since the highpoint of the May 2002 Bush-Putin summit and the agenda of mutual activity that offered. The potential for such cooperation is determined not only by the quality of Russian-Western relations, but also by the forms of engagement of key Central Asian states. Uzbekistan, in particular, has held a pivotal role in efforts to meet new security challenges in Central Asia.

Uzbekistan's firm security relationship with the US and NATO had weakened by 2004 and effectively crumbled after May 2005 over acrimonious differences of interpretation of the crisis in the city of Andijan. In November that year the US lost access to the military facility at Karshi-Khanabad in Uzbekistan (which it used to support Operating Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan). NATO suspended most of its activities with Tashkent, while the EU imposed sanctions on the country. In a series of apparently counterbalancing steps Russia's security partnership with Uzbekistan was significantly upgraded, especially by signing in November 2005 a 'treaty on allied relations'. This did not quite create alliance commitments between Moscow and Tashkent but still seemed to reflect a renewed climate of Russian-US competition in the region. It coincided with a further deterioration in Moscow's relations with Western powers and it became clear that previous policy options for Central Asia developed in the spirit of 'cooperative security' could no longer be advanced.

Since 2005 any hopes to revive this cooperative agenda have been significantly influenced by the evolving security and foreign policy outlook of Uzbekistan, which occupies a geographically pivotal role in the region. This briefing paper outlines the fluctuations in Uzbekistan's security policy ties and signs recently of a partial re-engagement between Tashkent and Western partner states. Next it summarises security policy perspectives from Uzbekistan, as offered in a series of interviews of officials in Tashkent. Finally, it reviews the diminishing prospects (as of August 2008) for practical security policy collaboration between Russia and the West, in partnership with the local states, over Central Asia and Afghanistan.

Forms of Engagement with Uzbekistan

Uzbekistan's leadership has strongly focused on the national autonomy and sovereignty of the state. Since at least the mid-1990s this was expressed in an emphasis on bilateral over multilateral relations and the formation of ties with major Western states to offset Russian influence over Uzbek policy formation and to attract foreign investment. After 2005, Uzbekistan's official enthusiasm for foreign policy re-engagement with Russia has been much publicized. But President Karimov has remained wary of concessions to Russia that could constrain Uzbekistan's own field of manoeuvre in Central Asia or allow Russia direct access to Uzbek military facilities. By resisting a relationship of tutelage under Russia he has set limits to the depth of Russian-Uzbek strategic partnership.

Karimov has made plain he will not countenance any domestic challenge to his control of the Uzbek state, so has continued to clash with the US promotion of political pluralism in Central Asia. However, three factors have kept the option of re-engagement with Washington on the agenda. First the Uzbek leadership remains aware of the possible future strategic need to balance Russia. Secondly, Karimov's paramount external security concern, to insulate and eventually overcome turmoil in Afghanistan, has been directly related to and dependent on US military action and broader primarily Western-driven reconstruction efforts in that fractured country. Thirdly, Tashkent has been unsettled by the close US-Kazakh military relationship, that could encourage Kazakhstan's regional self-confidence and ambitions in Central Asia and beyond at the expense of Uzbekistan's traditional regional influence.

In 2008 there were signs of a thaw in Uzbek-US military ties. A visit by the head of the US Central Command to Uzbekistan in January 2008 was followed by information in March that Tashkent had agreed to allow Americans attached to the NATO international staff access to the aerial facilities at Termez by the Afghan border on a case by case basis (Termez has been used by Germany as a transshipment base as part of humanitarian assistance to NATO operations in Afghanistan). It seems that options for reviving bilateral US-Uzbek military contacts were quietly under review.

Tashkent's relations with NATO were significantly boosted by President Karimov's participation in the April 2008 NATO and Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council summit, during which he identified a broad range of security challenges and set out factors to improve the security situation in

Afghanistan. He offered to discuss and sign with NATO an agreement to provide a corridor and transit through its territory to deliver non-military cargos to Afghanistan, though the border junction Termez-Khayraton. This built on the existing bilateral Uzbek-German transit agreement and dovetailed with (and must have been coordinated with) a Russian offer at the NATO summit to provide a humanitarian land corridor across Russian territory, providing non-military support to ISAF operations in Afghanistan (which resulted in a NATO-Russian agreement on the issue). The Russian proposal could hardly work in practice without transit through Termez.

Karimov went further with a proposal that seemed to balance between Russian and American interests. He urged the resumption of negotiations for peace in Afghanistan within the framework of the 6+2 group (which had operated during 1997-2001, with UN support and brought together the neighbour states of Afghanistan as well as the US and Russia), but suggested that it could be reconfigured into a 6+3 format, involving NATO in its consultations. He also offered broad discussions that could lead to more practical Uzbek-NATO security cooperation.

These proposals suggested Karimov wished to move to some extent out of the shadow of the Russian-dominated Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), which Uzbekistan had joined in December 2006, but probably unenthusiastically. Uzbekistan has depended on its *bilateral* military-security relationship with Russia since 2005 to access training, equipment and specialist advice for the continued modernization of its armed forces (as it had to some extent in previous years). But Tashkent must be aware that working through the CSTO *multilateral* framework hampers any potential Uzbek rapprochement with NATO or a significant upgrading of its relationship with Washington. For example, any plans to restore American access to the military facilities at Khanabad, would be challenged by Russia since Moscow interprets CSTO obligations as requiring each member state to advise its treaty partners, including Russia, of any changes in military relations with third-party countries.

Russia itself and the Russian CSTO Secretary-General Nikolai Bordyuzha have persistently called for a direct CSTO-NATO dialogue, including joint stabilisation activities in Afghanistan. But Russian plans, reflected also in proposals from the CSTO secretariat, compete directly with NATO: the recent idea to turn the CSTO from a military-political organisation into a universal international structure that can collectively react to all challenges and threats; the loose notion of a 'zone of CSTO responsibility'; the October 2007 decision

to create joint 'CSTO peacekeeping forces' (which seems to counter the efforts of the US and its allies to develop interoperability with Kazakh and other Central Asian forces); the efforts by the CSTO to develop its own security relationship with Afghanistan, involving training, arms supply and counter-narcotics, assisted by a CSTO Working Group on Afghanistan.

Much of this suggests that Russia wishes to insert itself between the Western alliance system and CSTO countries in Central Asia, to force the latter to deal with the West via Russia and not directly. If this is the case it poses a dilemma for a country such as Uzbekistan that ultimately does not wish its geostrategic field of manoeuvre to be seriously constrained by multilateral agreements of any kind. But it also highlights the difficulty for either the US bilaterally or NATO multilaterally to fashion an agenda for security cooperation with Russia over Central Asian security issues in a way that includes the local states as actors with independent voices.

Perspectives from Tashkent

Discussions with officials in Tashkent in 2007 reveal a number of themes that provide insights into Uzbekistan's potential future role.

First, despite the termination of the country's security assistance programmes with Western states, confidence was expressed that threats to Uzbekistan are diminishing (despite acute concern about Afghanistan – see below). It was felt that various international crises have placed smaller states actually in a better situation to resolve their own problems, though Uzbekistan had been forced to increase its military expenditure to develop a small professional army. This theme of self-sufficiency seemed to signal a readiness to keep some distance from Russian efforts at security integration in Central Asia. Uzbekistan is willing, it was emphasised, to reciprocate cooperation with the US and Europe.

Second, there was a clear preoccupation with the rising profile of Kazakhstan in Central Asia, with an 'imbalance' in Western relations with Kazakhstan and other Central Asian states. Dealing with Kazakhstan alone, it was stated emphatically, means that any Central Asian policy by Western states is 'doomed'. Kazakhstan's overconfidence, it was noted, was creating difficulties for cooperation with Uzbekistan (in this context the analogy given was of 'New Europe' not being as developed as older European states).

Third, Uzbek-Russian relations, unsurprisingly, were viewed as having improved during the Putin administrations, and the contrast was made with earlier years when the disarray of the Russian military allowed unofficial Russian support to be given to the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan in its movements in the region. Some alarm was expressed already in 2007 about the pace of deterioration of Russian-Western relations, which was a 'two-sided process' and uncertainty whether this was just a phase, a psychological game or a new Cold War.

Fourth, Uzbekistan's recent new engagement with regional multilateral institutions was presented as furthering the country's own interests. But insofar as strong players like Russia and China are participating, Uzbekistan will not put much effort into multilateral institutions. In this context Tashkent was under no illusions that the CSTO and the SCO are viewed as hostile by the West. Uzbekistan had been 'forced' to further integrate with the CSTO, implicitly by the breakdown of relations with Western states. The SCO in turn was interpreted as increasingly China-driven and benefiting China rather than other SCO members, but the security dimension of the SCO still interests Uzbekistan. However, it was emphasised that Tashkent seeks western values more than Chinese values and the same goes for investment.

Fifth, Uzbek officials confirmed that security developments related to the insurgency in Afghanistan dominated their thinking on external threats. Uzbekistan had to be protected from growing dangers emanating from Afghanistan. A basic fear was that a strengthened Taliban could try to implement a 'Central Asian agenda'. The Taliban had to be prevented from regaining power in Afghanistan even if NATO were to leave in the future. The solution required an urgent return to a nation-building strategy, but also it was suggested rather unrealistically a ratio of 1:20 for troops per native Afghan. If the West were to leave Afghanistan, it was predicted, Pakistan and Iran would move in. Indeed, in the medium-term, especially if NATO withdraws from Afghanistan, there is the possibility of wars between states in the region.

With these risks in mind, and acknowledging the existence of different states' national interests in Afghanistan, Tashkent affirms that the threats from Afghanistan and the need to resolve key issues demands cooperation between regional states – a regional solution, that includes Russia. Uzbekistan supports coalition efforts in Afghanistan, but argues that the coalition should want to cooperate with Russia (though Russia's reluctance to become directly involved in Afghanistan is admitted). Uzbekistan itself, it was noted, is ready to offer help with (unspecified) negotiations and in practical

terms it has already built roads and other infrastructure in Afghanistan. Uzbekistan is also described as ready for regional cooperation since the Central Asian countries in common are targeted by extremist groups. The defence of borders this implies was also linked to the surge in the flow of drugs from Afghanistan into Central Asian states during recent years.

Future security policy collaboration over Central Asia and Afghanistan

These Uzbek perspectives on security priorities and factors influencing international security policy collaboration clearly suggest Tashkent's wish to recover a role as an active participant in processes and frameworks to consolidate the security of Central Asian states and not to appear just as part of a Russia-led bloc. However, for the Uzbek leadership state security invariably is associated with regime security, though this is not spelt out, and in this sense the inclination for both Uzbekistan and Western states to negotiate new measures or channels for security assistance that involve Tashkent still depends on how far these proposals are made conditional by Western leaders on progress towards political pluralism in Uzbekistan.

Uzbekistan wishes to avoid a stark and long-term choice between Russian and Western sponsored security frameworks and relationships in tackling regional security challenges. Such a choice not only limits its geopolitical field of manoeuvre and could help empower its regional competitor, Kazakhstan. It is also contrary to the region-wide approach that Tashkent believes is essential for mitigating the risks emanating from Afghanistan (though Karimov still opposes regional initiatives for CIS Central Asian states or Eurasian Union type ideas promoted by Kazakhstan). Uzbekistan's post-2005 security policy entente with Moscow remains. But the serious deterioration of Russian relations with Western powers and NATO since August 2008 reinforces Tashkent's dilemmas if it wishes more balance in its external relations.

This is revealed by meetings held by the Uzbek leadership in late August. On the one hand, after meeting Russian President Medvedev in Dushanbe President Karimov described Russia as a 'reliable strategic partner'. Medvedev proposed a memorandum of cooperation with Uzbekistan to implement a joint programme for the creation, modernization and supply of weapons to the year 2010. Russia also thanked the Uzbek leadership for its 'balanced and unbiased stance' regarding the crisis over Georgia. On the other hand the acting commander of the US Central Command visited

Tashkent and referred to joint cooperation of the two sides in fighting terrorism, extremism, drug trafficking and other threats. The two sides discussed the expansion of military cooperation and strengthening regional security.

If the post-August 2008 deterioration of Russian-Western relations results in a strong reinforcement of competitive bilateralism between Moscow and Washington in Central Asia, then Uzbekistan will find it difficult to recover the latitude in security policy ties it seems to hope for – it will continue to lean towards Russia, based on the 2005 treaty of allied relations. In this scenario of competition in the region the prospects for US-Russian bilateral collaborative measures for Central Asian security necessarily would be poor, except perhaps in some cases when there exists a specific Central Asian dimension to any wider global security/proliferation/counter-terrorism agendas between Moscow and Washington that survive the current downgrading of the two sides' ties.

Karimov has staked out his preference for a diplomatic framework for discussions on Afghanistan that takes proper account of the Central Asian states. At the August 2008 Dushanbe SCO summit he reaffirmed his *démarche* to revive and transform the 6+2 contact group on Afghanistan, in a 6+3 format with the inclusion of NATO. Tashkent clearly accepts that NATO's command role in Afghanistan and hence its integral influence over the security and stability of Afghanistan's northern borders makes it an indispensable partner for dialogue on regional security.

This raises the question of how far NATO's suspension of meetings of the NATO-Russia Council and Russia's subsequent suspension of much of the wider Russia-NATO relationship in August 2008 will impact on NATO-Russian collaboration over Central Asia and Afghanistan?

On one level it is now highly unlikely that Russian appeals for a broader NATO-CSTO dialogue will make any headway. In the past Russian CSTO officials have raised the idea that any CSTO member state (i.e. all the Central Asian states besides Turkmenistan) wishing to accept a deployment of non-CSTO troops on its territory must first accept the agreement of all the other CSTO countries – in other words Russian approval would then be needed for US or NATO troops or exercises or military transit in Central Asia. This Russian effort to insert itself between Western states and CSTO countries is now all the more objectionable to NATO in conditions when Russia has shown itself ready unilaterally to project military forces into a neighbouring state (Georgia). This means that any further CSTO efforts to develop a

security relationship with Afghanistan, assisted by a CSTO Working Group on Afghanistan will not be coordinated in any way with NATO. NATO will work instead with Central Asian states bilaterally, or through the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council.

In the case of NATO-Russian relations, much depends on how far the mutual recognition of real threats in Afghanistan and to a lesser extent in Central Asia allows cooperation to continue in these regions even if NATO-Russian relations further west on the periphery of Europe descend into hostility or even military brinkmanship. Russia's initial suspension of relations with NATO, in the words of the Russian permanent representative to NATO, Dmitriy Rogozin, has preserved cooperation on 'strategic issues, for instance, in the struggle against the Taleban in Afghanistan, against terrorism, against non-military challenges'. In principle this leaves open important fields for joint work, together with Central Asian states.

But the situation is highly uncertain. Rogozin kept open the possibility that cooperation over Afghanistan could be frozen in the future. Russia's April 2008 offer to permit the transit of NATO non-military cargoes for Afghanistan across Russian territory still seems to stand (although as of November 2008 this route was not yet operational) and hence the parallel Uzbek offer of a transit corridor continues to serve to open out the Uzbek-NATO relationship. But this is a flimsy basis for joint Russian-NATO-Central Asian state security policy coordination. Moreover, a topic for similar trilateral cooperation that involves the other major Central Asian state, Kazakhstan, does not seem to have been identified.

On the basis of past discussions one field still appears promising for such coordinated activity - the prevention and interdiction of narcotics crossing from Afghanistan into CIS Central Asian states and the training of border guards for this purpose. Joint efforts to develop elements of a regional counter-narcotics policy are desirable; they require resources and commitment and should proceed. But increasingly they appear to be just the residual of earlier grander hopes for cooperative security in the region. It seems unlikely, especially since August 2008, that a focus on the problems of drug production and transit will act as the catalyst for a broader programme of positive sum collaboration between Russia, the West and the local states over security policy in Central Asia and Afghanistan.