

Central Asia Briefing

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RECENT VIOLENCE IN CENTRAL ASIA: CAUSES AND CONSEQUENCES

I. INTRODUCTION

Beginning in early August, a series of violent incidents have brought more attention to the prospects for large scale conflict in Central Asia than at any time since the end of Tajikistan's civil war.¹ Taliban forces launched a new offensive in northern Afghanistan, bringing that country's civil war and a potential refugee problem to the border of the ill-prepared Tajikistan. This offensive coincided with a series of low-level incursions into Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan by armed detachments of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU). A number of other unlinked incidents have added to a growing sense of general insecurity.

Some Central Asian governments, along with Russia, India, China and the USA, have linked the violence in Afghanistan or the Taliban with the IMU operations, claiming or implying that a common thread in these incidents is Islamic fundamentalism under arms, on the march and threatening Central Asia. This briefing gives an overview of the recent incidents, examines the nature of this common thread to the extent that it exists, and highlights some of the responses by key governments. A concluding section reviews the issues raised by the recent violence and response to it.

II. TALIBAN OFFENSIVE

Since the beginning of August, Taliban² forces in Afghanistan have launched a series of attacks against the forces of the Northern Alliance.³ Prior to the offensive, Northern Alliance forces held Takhar and Badakhshan⁴ Provinces in the northeast (see Map 1), the Panjshir Gorge in Kapisa Province, and the Salang Pass, which connects Kabul to the north of the country. By 10 August, Russian media reported the capture by the Taliban of the cities/towns of Nahrin, Eshkamesh, and Bangi.⁵ On 5 September, Taliban forces captured the town of

¹ For a general account of conditions in the most crisis prone area of Central Asia, see ICG Asia Report No. 7, *Central Asia: Crisis Conditions in Three States*, 7 August 2000.

² Taliban is the name given to the political movement now in control of almost all of Afghanistan's territory. The movement is radical and fundamentalist, and is largely identified with the majority Pushtun ethnic group in Afghanistan (which also inhabits bordering regions of Pakistan). The group suddenly emerged as a military force in 1994, and by 1997 had conquered almost two-thirds of Afghanistan's territory.

³ The Northern Alliance is one of the armed coalitions fighting against the Taliban forces. It comprises forces loyal to the recognised government of Afghanistan and those of the National Islamic Alliance,.

⁴ Not to be confused with the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Province across the border in Tajikistan.

⁵ *Rossiiskaia gazeta*, 10 August 2000, p. 26.

Taloqan, the Northern Alliance's headquarters. Taliban forces also moved into Kunduz Province, apparently with little resistance as a result of the possible defection of former Prime Minister Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, and his forces.

On 7 September, after the loss of Taloqan, Alliance Forces were routed in a counter-attack, reportedly losing hundreds of members killed.⁶ By 22 September, there were reports that Taliban forces had penetrated some 20 km into Badakhshan Province, and had reached the bank of the Amu Darya River, which forms part of the border with Tajikistan. These military victories have blocked the main supply routes of the Alliance's other main base area in the Panjshir Valley.

On 6 October, Russian border guards on the Tajikistan/Afghanistan border reported that due to fighting between the Taliban and Northern Alliance forces in the immediate vicinity, it was necessary to close the border checkpoint at Sher Khan Bandar/Lower Panj. As of 6 October, the Taliban appeared to be in control of the town of Imam-Sahib, as well as the river port of Sher Khan Bandar, on the border with Tajikistan and some 200 km due south of Dushanbe, Tajikistan's capital.

The offensive has displaced the entire civilian population of Taloqan and some retreating Alliance forces have sought sanctuary across the river in Tajikistan.⁷ Sources report tens of thousands of displaced persons from these northern provinces waiting to enter Tajikistan.⁸ The government is preparing to receive not only refugees from Afghanistan, but may also be establishing a camp for Ahmad Shah Mas'ud and his men, should they be forced to retreat to Tajikistan.⁹ According to one Russian military officer, Russian border guards would allow Northern Alliance forces to enter if the Tajikistan government approved it.¹⁰

The vulnerability of the Tajikistan border under pressure from the Taliban operations has been one of the main causes of concern in Central Asia.¹¹ Some 10,000 Taliban troops were estimated to be in the Takhar-Konduz sector of the Tajikistan border. On 10 October, the Russian Defence Minister, Igor Sergeyev, warned that if the Taliban forces crossed into Tajikistan, then Russia's obligations under the CIS collective security treaty would come into play.¹² Russia has one

⁶ AFP, 7 September 2000.

⁷ Itar-Tass, 22 September 2000.

⁸ According to UNHCR spokesman on 10 October, Tajikistan has put measures into place to prepare for an influx of refugees from Afghanistan, where the latest fighting has uprooted about 150,000 people. No Afghans have yet fled into Tajikistan, he said, but authorities have agreed to keep the borders open and have set up centres along the border to screen refugees. UNHCR reported high refugee flows into Pakistan, some 600 km south, as a result of the Taliban offensive. From 1-12 October, 3,783 Afghan refugees entered Pakistan at the Torkham border post – 2,127 children, 943 women and 713 men. Between Sunday 8th and Thursday 12th, UNHCR monitors at Torkham observed some 2,101 new arrivals, the single largest one-week influx this year. The refugees are predominantly Dar speaking and are of Tajik ethnicity.

⁹ RFE/RL Newline, Vol. 4, No. 175, Part I, 11 September 2000 and RFE/RL NEWSLINE Vol. 4, No.194, Part I, 6 October 2000.

¹⁰ Interfax, 5 October 2000, citing Lt Gen Vladimir Makarov, Chief of the Operations Department of Russia's Federal Border Guards Service.

¹¹ *Moscow News*, 11 October 2000, p. 4.

¹² Interfax, 10 October 2000.

division of ground forces in Tajikistan (about 10,000 personnel) and up to 15,000 border troops.¹³

III. IMU INCURSIONS

On 7 August, Uzbekistan announced that its security forces had been engaging in armed clashes over several days with detachments of insurgents thought to be members of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU).¹⁴ The fighting was in the southern province of Surkhan Darya, in a high-mountain area on the border with Tajikistan (see Map 2). According to a government communiqué, the IMU insurgents were operating in several groups of 70-100 men each. The insurgents' weapons were said to include submachine guns, sniper rifles, and mortars. The government alleged that the rebels moved into Uzbekistan from Tajikistan and that they had seized control of at least two villages which are located 20 km inside the border. The Uzbekistan government sent a joint task force consisting of airborne, special forces, internal affairs and state security troops to Surkhan Darya Province in order to isolate the territory held by the insurgents and cut them off from all local support. As a precautionary measure, Uzbekistan even closed road crossing points on its northern border with Kazakhstan. (Road crossing points on its southern border with Tajikistan were already tightly controlled.) An unnamed Uzbekistan official told a Russian news agency that his country's armed forces destroyed most of the members of the main insurgent force on the morning of 10 August, although military operations did continue. Efforts by one detachment of rebels to enter Uzbekistan were reportedly rebuffed by Tajikistan border troops in the Asht District of Tajikistan, just 100 km east of Tashkent.¹⁵

On 11 August, the geographic scope of the incursions widened when a group of 30-40 IMU rebels entered Kyrgyzstan's Batken Province from Tajikistan. A government spokesman told reporters that government troops intercepted the group and that the area of military action was uninhabited, mountainous terrain.¹⁶

¹³ Tajikistan is the only country of Central Asia where Russia still stations its forces.

¹⁴ The IMU is led by Juma Namangani (whose legal name is Jumabai Khojiev and who is the military leader) and Takhir Yuldash (the political leader). Both are formerly from Namangan Province located in Uzbekistan's portion of the Ferghana Valley). See Iskander Khisamov, 'Vnutrennii uzbekskii konflikt,' 4 September 2000, www.ferghana.ru. According to one of the few available accounts, for which ICG has no collateral, Namangani is a former Soviet airborne soldier who served in Afghanistan just prior to the Soviet withdrawal. In 1991 and 1992, he was involved in the organisation of military formations associated with the Islamic Rebirth Party of Tajikistan, one of the main parties opposing the Tajikistan government. In 1993, he was sent to a terrorist training camp in Afghanistan for volunteers from a variety of Islamic countries and causes. Later in 1993, he went to Peshawar where he made contact with Pakistani and Saudi intelligence officials. Later that year he returned to Tajikistan where he established, with the support of Pakistani intelligence officials, his own training camp for the Islamic opposition of Uzbekistan. As a result of the emerging civil war settlement in Tajikistan, Namangani returned with his followers to Afghanistan in 1995. From there, he went to Saudi Arabia for one year where he undertook religious training but worked with Saudi intelligence officials at the same time. In 1997, he became the military commander of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan. See Mikhail Fal'kov, 'Rukovodietli IDU', *Nezavisimaia gazeta* (Internet version), 24 August 2000, www.ferghana.ru.

¹⁵ Voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran, 10 August 2000, citing former UTO leader Ghayratshoh Adhamov, Deputy Defence Minister of Tajikistan.

¹⁶ Interfax, 11 August 2000.

By 14 August, Kyrgyzstan officials were reporting that the rebel detachment had actually comprised 100 men and that most of them had been killed.

On 14 August, officials from Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan met in order to discuss how best to coordinate efforts to put down the insurgency. The use of strikes by Uzbekistan's air force was being considered and the Ferghana Valley city of Khujand in northern Tajikistan was chosen as the headquarters for a joint tri-partite task force to organise measures against the insurgents. The same day, the IMU issued a list of its demands to the Uzbekistan government. These included the release of all IMU members imprisoned in Uzbekistan, the reopening of all mosques previously shut down by the Uzbek government, the sanctioning of Muslim dress in Uzbekistan, and the introduction of Sharia law.

On 16 August, a group of 40-50 rebels entered Kyrgyzstan. In a television address, President Akaev said that heavy fighting was taking place between the insurgents and government forces and that the IMU fighters entered from Tajikistan. The same day, the Secretary-General of Kyrgyzstan's Security Council, Bolot Djanuzakov, criticised the Tajikistan government for refusing to allow troops from Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan to pursue fleeing IMU fighters into Tajikistan in order to locate and destroy their camps. He also said that the insurgents had moved 8-10 km into Kyrgyz territory and that they were being aided by foreign mercenaries. A Kyrgyz member of the IMU informed a press source on 16 August that President Akaev was mistaken and that the insurgents had been in Kyrgyzstan since winter. On 20 August, another group of rebels invaded Kyrgyzstan in the Chong-Alai District of Osh Province.

A third focus of the incursions appeared on 22 August, when a group of about 100 gunmen attacked a police post near Bostanlik, a popular resort area 100 km northeast of the capital Tashkent, prompting the evacuation of large numbers of schoolchildren and others staying in the near vicinity. A large contingent of troops was deployed with its operational headquarters in Gazalkent. These forces gradually surrounded the area and, as reported by national media sources, by 10 September there were no longer any IMU militants active in Tashkent Province. Media sources also claimed that fighters of IMU at one point seized control of Kamchik Pass on the main road linking the Ferghana Valley with Tashkent and the rest of Uzbekistan. While Uzbekistan authorities denied that the road had been seized, these sources suggested that government forces had managed quickly to regain control of the area.¹⁷

As of 20 August, Uzbekistan Air Force operations against insurgent positions involved air strikes on some 22 targets, including access roads or pathways in remote mountain passes.¹⁸ On 25 August, eight people reportedly engaged in reconnaissance activity for the IMU in Uzbekistan's Andijan Province were killed in a shoot-out with Uzbekistan forces. During the night of August 27-28, Kyrgyzstan troops kept yet another group of insurgents from crossing into Kyrgyzstan from Tajikistan. The rebel group reportedly consisted of 60-70 men, who tried to enter Batken Province near the Jyluu-Suu border post. One rebel was captured. During the night of August 28-29, two more groups, each comprising about 50 men, attacked border posts near the Yangi-Daban pass and the Abramov glacier.

¹⁷ 'Battles on the territory of neighbours', *Vechernyi Bishkek*, 7 October 2000, p. 1.

¹⁸ Voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran, 20 August 2000.

Both groups were driven back by Kyrgyzstan forces. On 29 and 30 August, Kyrgyzstan troops battled further small-scale incursion attempts and two attacks on border posts in Batken Province. During the night of 1-2 September, a much larger, three-pronged attack by 240 armed rebels, occurred in Batken. The Kyrgyz troops succeed in fending the rebels off, reportedly with the help of helicopter missile attacks from their own very small and relatively weak armed forces.¹⁹

Throughout much of September, IMU groups continued to attack border posts and government troops in Kyrgyzstan's Batken Province and the Kyrgyzstan government continued to state that its forces were repelling the invaders. But on 2 October, Djanuzakov announced that Kyrgyz troops were now able to concentrate on hunting down the remnants of IMU groups in the south of the country. He gave a 'final' casualty count in battles against IMU rebels (30 Kyrgyzstan troops and 120 IMU members killed), and said that no new attacks occurred in the preceding fifteen days. According to unofficial counts, the number of government troop casualties was already at 50 killed by 6 September.

According to Russian military agencies, the IMU has about 5,000 men under arms, of which several thousand are based in Afghanistan.²⁰ In late August, Russian military agencies reported that about 600 IMU fighters were in the Uzbekistan border area²¹ and in early October, 1,500 IMU fighters were reported based in the Afghanistan provinces of Balkh and Konduz.²²

Russian Defence Ministry official Colonel General Leonid Ivashov, as well as anonymous sources within the Russian Federation's military and diplomatic ranks, told journalists from Itar-Tass and Interfax on August 29 that the Uzbekistan government had requested military aid against the IMU insurgents. President Karimov denied all reports of his government's requests for Russian aid, and in a parliamentary address on August 30 stated that Uzbekistan did not need Russia's help.²³

IV. OTHER INCIDENTS

A number of other incidents have added to the growing sense of insecurity in Central Asia, though these are not directly linked either to the Taliban offensive or the IMU incursion. For example, for eight days in early September, fighting erupted in the Darband District of central Tajikistan between government forces and a small militia group under the control of Mulla Abdulla. Details of this clash are very sketchy, but up to 28 rebels are reported dead, with similar casualties on the government side. The incident was the result of an attempt by government forces to disarm the rebel group which had refused to join the 1997 peace agreement. The clash reportedly aroused some sympathy from other members of the United Tajik Opposition, who believe the government has failed to honour its commitments under the agreement. This incident demonstrates the continuing

¹⁹ Interfax, 2 September 2000.

²⁰ Interfax, 25 August 2000, citing Russia's Defence Minister.

²¹ Interfax, 22 August 2000.

²² RIA, 3 October 2000.

²³ Itar-Tass, 30 August 2000.

fragility of the political situation in Tajikistan.²⁴ and can only serve to heighten regional insecurities.

Another violent incident occurred on the night of 10-11 August, when Russian border guards reportedly repelled a group of 40 armed men trying to cross the Tajikistan/Afghanistan border in Shaartuz. It is not entirely clear whether this group belonged to the IMU. Another incident occurred in Patyuk Village, Uzbekistan where a Public Security official was killed in a shoot-out with an underground Islamist on 25 August.²⁵ The number of armed clashes between Russian border guards and attempted intruders or snipers on the Tajikistan/Afghanistan border in September was as high as for the whole of 1999.²⁶

V. ISLAMIC FUNDAMENTALISM: A COMMON THREAD?

In the wake of some of the events described above, a number of governments, including Russia and the USA,²⁷ have directly linked the military operations of the Taliban, the IMU and other Islamic fundamentalists. Though the characterisations differ at the margins, these governments, explicitly or implicitly, portray a hostile alliance of Islamic fundamentalists in Afghanistan and Central Asia intent on violence against either national interests or peace and security of the region. Russia's Defence Minister, Igor Sergeyev, speaking on 25 August, said that the IMU attacks in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan 'illuminate the far-reaching ambitions of Muslim extremists aimed at forming their own state in the region and destroying by military means among others the very foundations of the state system in Central Asia'.²⁸ Tajikistan's Minister of Interior, Khumdin Sharipov, made similar remarks the same day.²⁹ In a statement of 15 September, the US State Department spokesman issued a statement saying that the IMU fighters 'have trained in camps in Afghanistan, some controlled by Usama bin Laden', and that the IMU 'receives assistance from the Taliban and other groups based in Afghanistan'.³⁰

The Taliban and the IMU clearly share important goals, ideological inspiration, and sources of operational support. For example, both oppose the neo-communist governments of Central Asia, both believe that Sharia law should be the organising disciplinary principal of society, and both have links to organisations in Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. These points of commonality can be important tools for mobilising support as the perception begins to take hold that each movement represents part of a larger historic wave of resurgent and militant Islam. But they may be relatively superficial. A firm judgement must await the

²⁴ ICG's first Central Asia report highlighted the risk of new tensions arising from the government's failure to honour its commitments. See ICG Asia Report No. 7, *Central Asia: Crisis Conditions in Three States*, 7 August 2000.

²⁵ *Obshchaia gazeta*, No. 37, 14-20 September 2000, pp. 1, 5.

²⁶ *Moscow News*, 11 October 2000, p. 4.

²⁷ India and China have made similar statements. India made such statements during a visit by President Putin on 5 October 2000. Interfax, 5 October 2000.

²⁸ Interfax, 25 August 2000.

²⁹ Itar-Tass, 25 August 2000.

³⁰ Statement by Richard Boucher, 15 September 2000. This statement was made in connection with the US government's listing of the IMU as a 'Foreign Terrorist Organisation' under US law.

emergence into the public domain of more reliable sources of information on the IMU. ICG does not accept at face value Taliban claims that it has not trained the IMU or any guerrillas for action in Central Asia³¹ but the extent of material cooperation between the Taliban and IMU may be relatively insignificant compared with the material support that each takes from other sources.

The Taliban and the IMU share a strong antagonism toward the governments of Central Asia which they identify closely with both the Communist-atheist past and with degenerate and exploitative Western influences and interests. But hatred of the Communists and adherence to rather extreme forms of Islam are things that the IMU and the Taliban also share with Afghanistan's Northern Alliance forces. So the Taliban's enemy are just as likely as the Taliban to have been providing some support, training and inspiration to the militants in exile from Central Asia, such as the IMU (even though the Northern Alliance has itself accepted military support from the governments the IMU is opposed to). Whether or not there is a significant flow of support to the IMU from the Taliban, the political and military successes of the latter undoubtedly portend greater pressure from radical Islamists on the Central Asian governments.

There is common ground between the Taliban and IMU in their religious vision and their concept of political order based on faith, which can probably be characterised as fundamentalist in some senses.³² But to the extent that either has a coherent ideology of government and politics, this common ground may not be that great. It is doubtful that a significant part of Uzbek society would accept implementation of the Taliban's vision in their country. The extent of ideological common ground is also greatly tempered by more divisive elements of ethnicity, religious practice, and history. In Afghanistan itself, the fact that the Taliban are largely seen as an ethnic formation, closely identified with the Pushtun ethnic group, pits them against the Uzbek and Tajik of northern Afghanistan and these contradictions will undoubtedly increase in the wake of their military victories. The extent to which these same ethnic groups in Central Asia will be able to look past ethnic difference while accepting support from the Taliban will probably be limited over the longer term.

The degree of commonality of material sources of support or the strength of one side's material support for the other is extremely difficult to judge. The available public information on the sources of IMU funding, and especially the extent of it, must be considered unreliable. There have been public statements by outside supporters of the IMU, such as representatives of Osama bin Laden, declaring sums of money which been promised or given to the IMU. It is reasonable to suppose also that drug-traffickers, who certainly have massive resources, might find common cause with the insurgents and give them material support.

³¹ Itar-Tass, 4 October 2000, citing the Foreign Minister of the Taliban government, Abdul Wakil Muttawakil.

³² In this, the IMU can count on some support. Attitudes toward the more 'conservative' or 'extreme' forms of Islam are certainly changing among the general population of Uzbekistan and its neighbours. In a recent poll conducted in Kyrgyzstan, often thought of as the least "Islamic" of Central Asian countries, 44 per cent of Uzbeks in the country, and 42 per cent of those with low income levels supported the prospect of establishing Sharia law in the country. Though there is considerable apprehension about talking on this topic, stemming from fears that one might be identified by the government as an Islamic extremist, many people will speak privately of their support for a greater role for Islam and even an Islamic form of government, while they typically oppose military means of achieving this. BBC Monitoring, 15 June 2000, citing a poll published in *Delo No*, 31 May 2000.

Uzbekistan's claims that fighters are being paid \$100 a day may be more in the realm of propaganda than well-documented information. One approach to an assessment of the insurgents' resources is to look at the scale, scope and effectiveness of their campaigns; and by this measure, they are limited at best. They would probably like very much to actually have the international network of support that is attributed to them.

The focus on links between the Taliban and the IMU obscures the importance of domestic sources of support for the IMU in Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. It is highly improbable that the IMU could attract supporters without being able to argue convincingly that their cause is righteous. IMU fighters include people who come from a variety of backgrounds and who join for a variety of reasons. A significant contingent of this movement are people who joined as early as the beginning of the 1990s and who fled Uzbekistan as the crackdown on unofficial Islam intensified over the course of the decade. There is no reason to suppose that anything other than personal convictions, social networks and individual responses to domestic circumstances, especially sharp drops in standard of living, are primarily responsible for drawing these people into the movement. The Sukhan Darya region in Uzbekistan is one of the poorest in the country, is inhabited mainly by Tajiks, and was the location of vigorous Islamic political organisation in the early 1990s.³³

It is also important not to ascribe too great a degree of coherence to the IMU as a military organisation, though Russian public sources report a fairly substantial organisational framework. The total number of fighters in the IMU is minuscule compared to the overall population of Uzbekistan or even some sub-region of the country. There is no reliable public-source information on who actually makes up the rank-and-file of the IMU. It is far from clear that the insurgents operating in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan in August and September and identified by the governments as IMU were a tightly organised force unified behind a common goal. It is well known that the IMU is supported ideologically, if not also materially and militarily, by parts of the former United Tajik Opposition (UTO) in Tajikistan who are not compliant with the policies of the central government, and who are very antagonistic toward the Karimov regime in Uzbekistan.³⁴ The UTO fighters might be involved in the incursion, though this has been vigorously denied by some UTO leaders.³⁵

It is highly unlikely that the motivation of the incursions was to open up new drug routes. There are paths for drug-trafficking which are much more suitable than

³³ *Vremia*, 11 August 2000.

³⁴ This antagonism goes back to Uzbekistan's intervention in the Civil War on behalf of the anti-Islamist forces, as well as subsequent actions of the Uzbekistan government that were perceived as attacking Tajikistan in general, and the Islamists in particular. Most likely, Tajiks from the UTO in Tajikistan have been involved in the actual fighting in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. The motivations of such Tajiks can include furthering the cause of Islamism in the region, getting back at the former Communists in Uzbekistan for the perceived wrongs that Tajiks have suffered under Uzbek domination during the Soviet era, and even the prospect of receiving compensation, given the lack of other opportunities in that war-ravished country. There may also be Uzbeks from Tajikistan and Afghanistan involved, as well — both countries having substantial Uzbek populations whose youth have grown up in an environment characterised by both an orientation toward Islam and a culture of warfare.

³⁵ Voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran, 10 August 2000, citing former UTO leader Ghayratshoh Adhamov, Deputy Defence Minister of Tajikistan.

the remote and inaccessible areas where the insurgents are operating. The borders of these countries are already highly permeable to drug traffic, with seizures in the Central Asian region amounting to less than 2 per cent of total estimated Afghanistan production. It is possible, though, that some of the local networks of support for the insurgents have been previously developed and used by drug-traffickers. It may well be these people who are closely aligned with the insurgents as government officials allege.

VI. GOVERNMENT RESPONSES

The military incidents have contributed to a variety of new moves in international security relations in and around Central Asia, and given higher prominence to a number of developments recently announced but in planning for some time. In what follows, the response to date, individually and collectively, of regional powers, and the major powers (especially Russia), is briefly sketched.

Central Asian States

Apart from making a direct military response or shifting to a heightened state of security alert, several Central Asian governments broke new ground in their policy response to the recent violence. This was most noticeable in the attitude toward the Taliban. Up until September 2000, all of the Central Asian countries except Turkmenistan had unequivocally denied the legitimacy of the Taliban regime and continued to offer moral or financial support to President Burhanuddin Rabbani and General Ahmad Shah Mas'ud. Toward the end of September, President Karimov of Uzbekistan announced that he no longer perceived the Taliban as a significant threat to Central Asia's security. He also proposed that the Northern Alliance and the Taliban form a coalition government in order to end the conflict.³⁶ Furthermore, on 2 October, Uzbek Foreign Minister Abdulaziz Komilov informed the media that Uzbekistan's ambassador to Pakistan had met with the Taliban representatives in Islamabad the previous day and that the two sides had agreed not to interfere in each other's affairs. Komilov also stated that the Uzbek government is willing to acknowledge the legitimacy of any government in Afghanistan that has the support of the population.³⁷ On 10 October, President Karimov criticised what he saw as Moscow's exaggeration of the threat of Islamic fundamentalism in Central Asia.³⁸ The Kyrgyz government has echoed those sentiments about they need to deal with the Taliban in a statement made by National Security Council Secretary Bolot Djanuzakov.³⁹ By contrast, Tajikistan considers the Taliban to pose a serious security risk not just to Tajikistan, but to all of Central Asia.⁴⁰

The Tajikistan government has responded to the situation by granting Uzbek helicopters the right to fly into its airspace, if necessary, in order to prevent further rebel incursions and by ordering its Internal Affairs and border troop units to stop rebel movements in either direction across the Uzbekistan-Tajikistan border. On 31 August, ITAR-TASS reported that Tajikistan would reinforce its

³⁶ RFE/RL Newsline Vol. 4, No. 187, Part I, 27 September 2000.

³⁷ RFE/RL Newsline Vol. 4, No. 191, Part I, 3 October 2000.

³⁸ *Rossiiskaia gazeta*, 10 October 2000.

³⁹ RFE/RL Newsline Vol. 4, No. 200, Part I, 16 October 2000.

⁴⁰ RFE/RL Newsline Vol. 4, No. 187, Part I, 27 September 2000.

northern borders to intercept rebel groups moving in either direction and that the measures were being undertaken in cooperation with the governments of Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan.⁴¹ Even the major Islamic party in Tajikistan, the Islamic Renaissance Party, which had fought against the government in the civil war, began urging its followers not to join unlawful groups.⁴² Tajikistan has identified a different Islamic group, the Hezb-e Tahrir, as a major threat to the region.⁴³

However, recriminations continued between Tashkent and Dushanbe about the fact, denied by Tajikistan, that the IMU rebels continue to operate out of Tajikistan.⁴⁴ On 28 August, Tajikistan's Minister for Emergency Situations Mirzo Ziyoev stated that based on a government investigation, he was able to conclude that there were no IMU bases in western Tajikistan; the commission visited the western areas of Tajikistan which border on Uzbekistan and found no IMU bases. But Ziyoev, a former commander of the Islamic opposition in Tajikistan's civil war, is not an impartial observer, since he has characterised the IMU as a 'force wanting liberty' and not as a terrorist organisation.⁴⁵

In this context, an offer by UTO Chairman, Said Abdullo Nuri, to mediate between the Uzbek government and the rebels has been rejected by Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. On 29 August, the Secretary General of Kyrgyzstan's Security Council, Bolot Djanuzakov, told reporters that his government had no intention of negotiating with the rebels. Both Djanuzakov and President Karimov have severely criticised the Tajikistan government for not doing enough to destroy the IMU groups. Karimov refused to accept Tajikistan's assurances that there are no IMU bases in Jirgatal, Gharm, and Tavildara. However, Tajik Security Council Deputy Secretary Nuralisho Nazarov responds to the criticism by stating that in fact, the insurgents have a base in Kyrgyzstan's Batken Province, close to the village of Zardali.

On 22 August, Kazakhstan's President Nazarbayev warned his compatriots, especially in the south of the country, to be vigilant. He said that Kazakhstan was affected by the new outbreak of fighting and that while there was no direct military threat now, the government would not stand idly by and let circumstances develop.⁴⁶ He urged Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan to appeal for military aid in line with the opportunities presented by the CIS collective security treaties. By 25 August, Kazakhstan had already taken urgent measures to ensure security of its southern borders and had transferred the majority of its special forces units to the south of the country.⁴⁷ By late September, a Russian

⁴¹ Itar-Tass, 31 August 2000.

⁴² Voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran, 27 September 2000.

⁴³ Itar-Tass, 25 August 2000, citing Tajikistan's Interior Minister, Khumdin Sharipov.

⁴⁴ On 8 August, a senior Tajikistan military officer denied that any of the IMU groups crossed into Uzbekistan from Tajikistan's territory. On 11 August, another senior Tajikistan official denied that the IMU rebels who invaded Kyrgyzstan's Batken District could have come from Tajikistan's territory. Tahir Yuldash, one of the IMU leaders (currently living in exile) offered his support to these claims when he told RFE/RL's Tajik Service that the IMU's supporters have been in Uzbekistan for a long time. During his interview Yuldash also refuted the Uzbek Foreign Minister's allegation that the IMU fighters have been receiving support from the United Tajik Opposition (UTO -- the Tajik opposition coalition which fought against Tajikistan government forces during much of the civil war).

⁴⁵ Voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran, 28 August 2000.

⁴⁶ Interfax, 22 August 2000.

⁴⁷ Itar-Tass, 25 August 2000.

magazine reported that a new check by Kazakhstan authorities over one week revealed a much higher level of underground Islamic activity than had been imagined.⁴⁸

But the picture of security relations between these states remains quite mixed. After the fall of Taloqan to Taliban forces in early September, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan signed a new agreement on military cooperation with the purpose of countering Islamic extremism.⁴⁹ There have been a number of bilateral and multilateral meetings to discuss cooperation. On 14 August, representatives of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan met to discuss insurgency. On 20 August, the Presidents of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan met with the Secretary of Russia's Security Council, Sergei Ivanov, in Bishkek to discuss the fighting. Their meeting resulted in a joint declaration of readiness to coordinate efforts against terrorism, and an anti-terrorist centre has already been established as a joint initiative in Moscow. The four presidents also expressed their opposition to the launching of any air strikes against other independent states (3 months prior to their meeting, Ivanov had suggested bombing northern Afghanistan).

But in spite of these meetings, there was very little effective cooperation between the states in the response to the incursions, and the collective security arrangements that were concluded this very year to respond to eventualities such as occurred were not invoked to implement any significant responses apart from consultation. Uzbekistan in particular remains to one side, pursuing an independent path. When the regular meeting of the CIS Collective Security Council was held on 11 October in Bishkek, President Islam Karimov of Uzbekistan, though invited to participate at least in an observer role, did not attend.

Further divisions are evident in the approaches to the Taliban. While Turkmenistan's relations with the Taliban have always been relatively friendly, some shifting is now evident in the positions of other Central Asian states. The Uzbek Foreign Minister, Abdulaziz Komilov conducted informal talks with the Taliban on 2 October, as part of an apparent rapprochement.⁵⁰ On 13 October, the Secretary of the Kyrgyz National Security Council, General Bolot Djanuzakov, signaled Kyrgyzstan's readiness to shift its position on recognizing the Taliban as the legitimate government of Afghanistan.⁵¹ Tajikistan is likely to be much slower to accept a defeat of the Tajik-dominated Northern Alliance, not least because of the threat that this poses of massive refugee flows across its borders.

Major Powers

Russia's response to the IMU incursions and the Taliban offensive has been quick and pragmatic, and has involved bilateral and multilateral arrangements. On 11 August, the Russian General Staff made a public offer of military assistance to Uzbekistan if it asked.⁵² On August 24 and 25, Russian Interior Minister Rushailo met with Tajikistan's President Rahmonov and Tajik Interior Minister Khumdin

⁴⁸ Boris Kuzmenko, 'Land of Underground Places of Worship,' *Vremia*, 29 September 2000, p. 3.

⁴⁹ *The News* (Islamabad), 1 October 2000.

⁵⁰ RFE/RL Newsline, Vol. 4, No. 191, 3 October 2000.

⁵¹ RFE/RL Newsline, Vol. 4, No. 200, 16 October 2000.

⁵² Interfax, 10 August 2000 (GMT).

Sharipov in order to discuss the insurgency, the illegal drug trade, and terrorism. CIS Defence Ministers (or their representatives) met on 25 August near Astrakhan in southern Russia and discussed the situation in Central Asia. They agreed on a set of measures to be put to CIS governments for approval toward shoring up stability in Central Asia and defeating the insurgent groups. One measure reportedly includes creation of a joint Russian and Central Asian military headquarters.⁵³

On 7 September, the Defence Minister, Igor Sergeyev, confirmed that Russia would provide additional technical military assistance to Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan.⁵⁴ On 29 September, the heads of the security councils of the six countries participating in the Collective Security Treaty agreed upon a number of measures in the event of a humanitarian crisis associated with refugee flows on the border between Tajikistan and Afghanistan.⁵⁵

Russia's response first to the IMU incursions and the Taliban offensive has been quick and pragmatic. On 11 August, the Russian General Staff made a public offer of military assistance to Uzbekistan if it asked.⁵⁶ On 7 September, the Defence Minister, Igor Sergeyev, confirmed that Russia would provide additional technical military assistance to Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan.⁵⁷ On 1 October, the Secretary of the Security Council, Sergei Ivanov, reiterated that Russia had no plans to increase its troop presence on Tajikistan's border,⁵⁸ reinforcing similar statements of early September that Russia would not send military units to help in Uzbekistan or Kyrgyzstan.

Most Russian official characterisations of the impact of the Taliban on Central Asia have been grim but fairly measured. For example Russia, like the USA, claims that there are IMU training camps in Afghanistan,⁵⁹ and this activity poses an important, if low-level threat to Central Asia. But some official Russian sources have been exaggerating or playing up the scale of imminent military threat.⁶⁰ Representatives of Russia's Security Council have been making relatively alarmist statements during recent months, with one official citing Taliban efforts to acquire nuclear technology.⁶¹ The Secretary of the Council, Sergei Ivanov, also reported on 29 September that there are 30,000 Arab mercenaries, including members of the Pakistan armed forces, fighting in Afghanistan.⁶² A number of interests may be served by playing up the threat. Some in Russia are definitely keen to reassert the country's geostrategic dominance in Central Asia. And Russia's arms producers are watching with interest, hoping to seize new opportunities to save their flagging production lines.⁶³

⁵³ Interfax, 25 August 2000.

⁵⁴ Itar-Tass, 7 September 2000.

⁵⁵ Itar-Tass, 29 September 2000.

⁵⁶ Interfax, 10 August 2000 (GMT).

⁵⁷ Itar-Tass, 7 September 2000.

⁵⁸ AP, 4 October 2000.

⁵⁹ AP, 4 October 2000.

⁶⁰ See for example, remarks by the Deputy Director of the Federal Border Guards Service, Colonel General Aleksei Kovezhnikov, cited in Interfax, 6 September 2000. Kovezhnikov suggested that the fighting in northern Afghanistan presented a serious danger to the Russian border guards protecting Tajikistan's territory.

⁶¹ Interfax, 7 October 2000.

⁶² Itar-Tass, 29 September 2000.

⁶³ Interfax, 30 August 2000.

But the difference in tone of Russian statements may lie in domestic policy disputes about the right policy to pursue toward the Taliban and Afghanistan. One of the more dramatic diplomatic responses to the Taliban offensive and the insurgency incidents in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan has been a public Russian statement on the need to view the Taliban as the most important force in Afghanistan. The new Russian position is motivated by its belief that the Taliban has a huge influence on militant Islamic groups in Chechnya and Central Asia, and that Russia must deal with the Taliban to help secure its own interests. According to a Russian news source, Russia has also opened new contacts with Pakistan⁶⁴ for a similar reason.⁶⁵ During a visit to Pakistan in early October, one of President Putin's key national security advisers, Sergei Yastrzhembskii, pressed Pakistan hard on its support for the Taliban and, in turn, on the Taliban's support for terrorist training camps in Afghanistan. He gave the Pakistan government a full briefing on Russia's knowledge of who support what in Central Asian insurgency and implied that Russia expects and end to it, because Pakistan can influence the Taliban. He added that the 'genie is out of the bottle but it is firmly held by the beard'.⁶⁶

The CIS Collective Security Council (the heads of participating CIS governments or their representatives) met in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan on 11 October to sign a series of new agreements on military cooperation, including establishment of combined units, and to discuss the situation in the region.⁶⁷ President Putin represented Russia. President Karimov of Uzbekistan, invited as an observer, did not attend.

There has also been an important development in China's military relations with Central Asia. On 24 August, China and Uzbekistan signed an agreement on military cooperation. President Karimov said that 'from now on, Uzbekistan can count on the military assistance of China' in the repulsion of aggression.⁶⁸ Karimov evaluated the Chinese military support in glowing terms, saying that while it is not large, it is important as a symbol of China's 'sympathy and intention to help us.' China supplied several hundred rifles, flak-jackets and other materiel. Uzbekistan's Defence Minister, Lt Gen Yury Agzamov (recently removed from his position), made a visit to China just prior to the signing of the agreement, and met with China's Vice President Hu Jintao on 25 August.⁶⁹

The US has not been silent either. President Karimov, upon returning to Tashkent on September 13 from the UN Millennium Summit in New York City, announced that he met with Secretary of State Madeleine Albright at the summit and that

⁶⁴ Pakistan's role in the IMU incursions needs to be more fully investigated. ITAR-TASS has reported that Pakistan responded to the stalling of the IMU operation in southern Uzbekistan by using its military transport aircraft to supply rubber boats to IMU forces in Afghanistan, 40 of whom who subsequently used by them in an effort to break through the Afghanistan/Tajikistan border. This effort was stopped by fire from Russian border guards. ITAR-TASS, 13 August 2000.

⁶⁵ ICG Interview.

⁶⁶ Moscow News, 4 October 2000.

⁶⁷ Governments represented at this meeting were Russia, Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Uzbekistan is not a member of the treaty.

⁶⁸ Itar-Tass, 29 August 2000.

⁶⁹ Xinhua, 25 August 2000.

she informed him that the US is willing to provide political, moral, and even material aid against the insurgents, if necessary.⁷⁰

VII. OUTSTANDING ISSUES

Links between the Taliban and the IMU clearly do exist and some collaboration clearly suits the goals of each party for the present. The exact nature and extent of the links however remain to be convincingly documented and need to be characterised in a more subtle manner. Accounts which highlight the threat of Islamic extremism also tend to downplay the weight of domestic factors that have fuelled the insurgencies in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan.

The violent incidents in the past three months have been contained or limited in scale and therefore in important respects cannot be said to have had a serious effect on the national security of the three Central Asian states (Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan). And the incidents have produced a number of useful steps toward closer regional coordination and deeper engagement of a supportive and constructive kind by external powers. But the military incidents demonstrate the potential for far more serious threats to security to arise in the future. The IMU will almost certainly return in even larger numbers next year for cross-border probes. In the upcoming campaigns, there will be a substantial risk that infiltration of militants from the territory of Tajikistan and Afghanistan will affect more than just the border regions of Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan.

The incursions into Uzbekistan showed the limitations of what had been assumed to be much stronger control of the borders in that country. In spite of Uzbekistan's frequent declarations that the insurgents were nearly defeated and President Karimov's pronouncement a few days after the start of the conflict that the 'situation is under complete control and there are no apprehensions about a possible escalation of the conflict,'⁷¹ it was nevertheless over a month before Uzbekistan's armed forces routed the fighters on their territory. Even at the time of writing, more than two months after the start of this year's incursions, efforts by the Kyrgyzstan armed forces to expel a relatively small number of remaining insurgents from their territory are continuing.

The reported action of Uzbekistan in mining much of its border with Tajikistan is one example of how inappropriate some of the military responses to the pressure from the insurgents has been. According to a senior Tajikistan official speaking on 22 September 2000, the entire length of the border has been mined by Uzbekistan, an action that has resulted in the deaths of eleven Tajikistan civilians (including children) and border guards, and one Uzbekistan border guard.⁷² Mining will not be a deterrent or much of an obstacle to a force like the IMU, but will continue to interrupt the economic and social development of the already suffering border regions. It adds yet another issue to those raising tensions between Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, which have been at relatively high levels throughout the post-Soviet period.

⁷⁰ Interfax, 11 September 2000.

⁷¹ Interfax, Aug. 9, 2000.

⁷² Ria, 22 September 2000; Voice of the Republic of Iran, 25 September 2000.

It will be important in coming months, as governments remain focused on military responses to the recent incidents, not to lose sight of the need for broad-ranging economic and political responses that will help to contain any political appeal the IMU insurgents may have. Military responses to rising discontent in the region should not be allowed to overshadow or displace responses in these other areas of policy, like economic and political reform. As the major powers become more deeply involved in Central Asian conflict prevention, the value of coordination⁷³ and the dangers of unnecessary competition should not be forgotten. Russia will need to remain sensitive to the widespread perception in Central Asia that its robust involvement with the anti-Islamist cause stems from a desire to reassert its domination.

Central Asia/Brussels, 18 October 2000

⁷³ As exemplified in the joint US-Russia working group on Afghanistan meeting for the first time on 1-2 August 2000.