Assessing Uzbekistan's and Tajikistan's Afghan Policy

The Impact of Domestic Drivers

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Abstract

The interaction between Central Asia and Afghanistan is conventionally discussed either from the perspective of spillovers or from the other side of the coin, namely economic cooperation around the slogan of reviving the Silk Road. Yet, for a better grasp of Central Asia's position on the Afghan question, it is necessary to shift the perspective of analysis from international relations to domestic policies. This article aims to decipher the many internal drivers that shape Uzbek and Tajik policies toward and perceptions of Afghanistan. Understanding decision-making mechanisms and the legitimacy of the authorities, identifying elite groups and their connection to their Afghan counterparts, and grasping the process of knowledge production, all help to better understand how Afghanistan's neighbors shape their policy.

Keywords

Afghanistan – Uzbekistan – Tajikistan – regime – scenario – ethnic minorities

Introduction

The interaction between Central Asia and Afghanistan is conventionally discussed either from the perspective of spillovers—and nearly always in one direction only, with the spillovers emanating from Afghanistan and spreading to its Central Asian neighbors, and almost never the other way around, which is nevertheless just as plausible—or from the other side of the coin, namely economic cooperation around the slogan of reviving the Silk Road. Yet, both

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aspects only represent the media face of the relationships, which themselves are far more complex and rooted in lesser-known local contexts. For a better grasp of Central Asia's position on the Afghan question, one has to shift the perspective of analysis from international relations to domestic policies. It is also necessary to stop speaking of Central Asia as a unified geopolitical entity: Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan have scarcely any historical or contemporary interaction with Afghanistan; while Turkmenistan occupies a specific place and considers itself to be largely protected from any risks thanks to its isolationist policies. This leaves Uzbekistan and even more so Tajikistan as the two main Central Asian states for which the issue of Afghanistan is actually quite considerable. This article thus focuses on the latter two countries and investigates their Afghan policy from a domestic purview. It aims to decipher the many internal drivers that shape Uzbek and Tajik policies toward and perceptions of Afghanistan.

Uzbek and Tajik Afghan Policy and Their Decision-Making Mechanisms

Foreign policy is never disconnected from domestic realities: in many cases, the choices made in this domain are closely dependent on internal questions, which is even more the case in young states which have to forge a twofold legitimacy, both domestic and international. For the Uzbek as well as the Tajik regimes, shoring up their legitimacy involves striking a subtle balance between a cult of ideological loyalty to the independent state, techniques of manipulating the masses, a hybrid political system based on certain democratic mechanisms (referendums, elections), and on authoritarian practices, and maintaining the dominant role of non-elected elites and patronage networks (distribution of political and economic resources according to a patron-client model). While it is difficult to offer an accurate description of the power loci in each country, it is nonetheless possible to define the main mechanisms behind their decision-making processes. For the majority, it is "states within the state" that are in charge of their Afghan policy.

Uzbekistan's Centralized Afghan Policy

Although the domestic policy of the Uzbek state has become largely dysfunctional over the years and increasingly incapable of providing social welfare to its population, it remains functional and centralized in foreign policy issues. The regime of Islam Karimov, who has held the presidency since 1989,revolves around his cult of personality as "father of the nation" and widespread

practices of nepotism.1 The family has been progressively monopolizing the most profitable of the country's economic sectors, especially the national mineral industries and gas sales to Gazprom, as well as niches such as construction, cement production, trade with China, communications and entertainment, even if the year 2013 saw a partial reversal of this trend.2 Closely linked to the president's family but nonetheless autonomous, the security services or SNB, the successor organization to the KGB, has become one of the main actors in the Uzbek economy. Its leaders have built a veritable commercial empire, achieved firstly by selling off Soviet-era military spare parts, and then by taking gradual control of the fiscal sectors, the Customs Committee, the Ministry of Foreign Economic Relations, the Border Guards, the National Migrations Agency, as well as the cotton export state holding, the banking system, and wholesale markets.3 The regional elites, powerful in the 1990s, have been gradually marginalized from decision-making processes in Tashkent and relegated to managing day-to-day affairs in their own regions and focusing on their primary assets, cotton and agriculture.4

In terms of relations with Afghanistan, the Uzbek decision-making process remains highly centralized. Islam Karimov sets the tone for all decisions as well as having the final say over them. The Uzbek Security Council, a key organ in defending national sovereignty principles, places policy on Afghanistan in the broader framework of Uzbek foreign and security policy. This policy emphasizes Uzbekistan's refusal of Moscow-backed multilateral institutions, distrust of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and openness to U.S. geopolitical interests. It groups together a number of figures, nearly all of whom have a background in the security services—as elsewhere in the former Soviet Union, the representatives of the Ministry of Defense are less powerful

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1 See Lawrence Markowitz, *State Erosion: Unlootable Resources and Unruly Elites in Central Asia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013); Laura Adams, *The Spectacular State: Culture and National Identity in Uzbekistan* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

2 Joanna Lillis, "Uzbekistan's first daughter Gulnara Karimova troubled by 'corruption links'," *The Guardian*, November 1, 2013, http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/nov/01/ uzbekistan-first-daughter-gulnara-karimova-troubled, and Shaun Walker, "Gulnara Karimova speaks out over infighting in Uzbekistan's first family," *The Guardian*, December 20, 2013, http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/dec/20/gulnara-karimova-uzbekistan-first-family (accessed December 28, 2013).

3 Author's unpublished research in Uzbekistan.

4 Larry Markowitz, "Local elites, prokurators and extraction in rural Uzbekistan," *Central Asian Survey* 27, no. 1 (2008): 1–14; same author, "The Sub-National Roots of Authoritarianism: Neopatrimonialism and Territorial Administration in Uzbekistan," *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization* 20, no. 4 (2012): 157–166.

than those of the security services. Many of them served in the Soviet army during the invasion of Afghanistan and some have maintained links with warlords on the other side of the border.5 The SNB is in charge of border security, and the city of Termez in southern Uzbekistan, with its Soviet-era infrastructure, is one of the more militarized places in the country. The intelligence services are also involved in decision-making given their close monitoring of domestic groups deemed to be "Islamist" and thus a threat to the regime.6 Some vested-interest groups linked to the security services have direct connections with certain Afghan powerbrokers (see the part on proxies below), but these networks have an exclusively localized impact. They do not influence state policy on the Afghan question, which has remained Tashkent's prerogative.

Uzbekistan's Afghan policy revolves around one key proposal, the 6 + 3 initiative, and Tashkent has stuck with it ever since.7 Presented in 2008 at the NATO Summit in Bucharest, this initiative is based on the precedent of "6 + 2," which was set up at the behest of the United Nations between 1997 and 1999 and which led to the adoption of the Tashkent Declaration "On main principles of settling the conflict in Afghanistan."8 The Uzbek initiative planned to reunite Afghanistan's six neighbors and the three main stakeholders—the U.S., Russia, and NATO. However, the weakness of the initiative lies in its omitting of representatives from Afghanistan, whereas it is obvious that it is precisely they who must be the drivers of any political reconciliation. By delegating the "solution" to the Afghan problems to neighboring countries and not domestic stake- holders, the initiative is too reminiscent of the influence by proxy that characterized the 1990s, but which is no more in tune with the contemporary perception of the Afghan issue by the international community. More importantly the initiative points up the role of NATO as a key actor post-2014, some- thing which is not realistic in the eyes of Iran and Pakistan, and even of Kabul; it also marginalizes India, leaving it out of the collaborative mechanism altogether. Moreover, Tashkent has not been able to convince its Central Asian neighbors of the value of its proposition—thus the lack of a regional dimension has also undermined its potential. The Uzbek authorities stick to their position, however, and maintain an "empty chair" policy at many international

5 Author's anonymous interview with Uzbek scholars, March 2013.

6 See Erica Marat, "Policing Public Protest in Central Asia," in this volume.

7 Guli I. Yuldasheva, "Uzbekistan and the Afghan Reconciliation Process," *Afghanistan Regional Forum*, no. 1, June 2012.

8 Address by President Islam Karimov at the NATO Summit, April 3, 2008, http://uza.uz/en/politics/197/.

meetings on Afghanistan, or else send only subordinate officials, claiming to have formulated their own regional stance and, in addition, endorse only bilateral relations with Kabul.9

Another key element explaining the centralized aspect of Uzbekistan's Afghan policy is the fact that out of the Central Asian states, Uzbekistan is Afghanistan's most important trading partner.10 The importance that Tashkent today places on electricity exports to Afghanistan has impacted its official stance. Today the Uzbek government has taken a more nuanced and pragmatic stance toward the Taliban and seeks to maintain channels of dialogue with it, thus representing a departure from its uncompromising position in the 1990s. Unofficially, it is preparing to recognize the Taliban as a legitimate interlocutor in order to assure its electricity exports.11 This change of position can be explained by the geostrategic competition with Tajikistan around the water/ energy nexus.12

Tajikistan's Multifaceted Afghan Policy

Decision-making in Tajikistan is made more complex not only because of traits common to the post-Soviet regimes—bureaucratic opacity, patronage, and nepotism—but also because Dushanbe's authority was for many years less assertive than that of Tashkent. From the outset, President Emomali Rakhmon experienced greater problems affirming his authority: taking leadership of the country during the civil war in 1994, he received backing from Russia and Uzbekistan in countering the United Tajik Opposition; he then signed the peace agreements which granted a large representation to the Islamic Rebirth Party of Tajikistan (IRPT), before then hardening his regime at the start of the

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9 B. Teles Fazendeiro, *Uzbekistan's Afghan Interests and its Foreign Policy after 2014: A turning point for opening Central Asia?* (Shrivenham: Defence Academy of the United kingdom, 2012), and Andrew Small, "Why Is China Talking to the Taliban?" *Foreign Policy*, June 21, 2013, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2013/06/20/why_is_china_talking_to_the_taliban#sthash.n8mbDqSE.dpbs (accessed December 28, 2013).

10 More in Saeed Parto et al., "Afghanistan and regional trade. More, or Less, Imports from Central Asia?" *University of Central Asia Working Papers*, no. 3, 2012. See also Vladimir Paramonov and Alexey Strokov, "Constraints and Opportunities for Uzbek-Afghan Economic Relations," *Afghanistan Regional Forum*, no. 5, February 2013.

11 Author's interview with anonymous Uzbek scholars, March 2013.

12 Marlene Laruelle, Jos Boonstra, and Sebastien Peyrouse, *Assessment of the impact on the Central Asian region of the 2014 withdrawal of NATO/ISAF forces from Afghanistan*, FRIDE-European Parliament, January 2014.

2000s.13 In so doing, he marginalized the Islamic opposition, liquidated the acquired autonomy of the provincial warlords, silenced any potential opponents, and set up an immense patronage network which distributes the country's wealth among members of his family, in particular his many sons-in-lawand his brother-in-law. Today the Rakhmon family controls all of Tajikistan's main industrial assets including the Tursunzoda aluminum factory, the large- scale hydroelectric projects such as Rogun, and profitable economic sectors such as communications, trade with China, and construction.14

Foreign policy comes directly under the purview of the president and is dis- cussed in the framework of the Security Council, which, as in Uzbekistan, is mainly comprised of figures linked to the security services—a large number of whom are former *Afgantsy*, who worked as translators or agents for the Soviet forces in Afghanistan.15 Whilst Russia's interests are largely represented and defended, a number of high-ranking Tajik officials also harbor a distrust of Moscow. In terms of Afghanistan, much of the debate revolves around control-ling borders, with the goal not only of preventing potential insurgent groups from crossing them, but of taking control of drug trafficking operations.16 Dushanbe also emphasizes its own experience of civil war—and, namely, the subsequent peace negotiations that brought the war to an end—in a bid to present itself as a potential model for its Afghan neighbor to emulate.17 It insists for instance on the examples of successful conflict resolution at the level of the *jamoat* (more or less like the *mahalla* in Uzbekistan, and the *jirga* in Afghanistan), the third-level administrative division that brings together local stakeholders, especially respected elders, religious leaders, and local activists with "modern" legitimacy (teachers, directors of farms, labor union activists, women activists, engineers, and so on). It also valorizes the Tajik National Reconciliation Committee, which has widely circulated a

13 Martha Brill Olcott, *Tajikistan's Difficult Development Path* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2012), chapter 2 "Politics and Religion," 11–52.

14 John Heathershaw, "Tajikistan amidst globalization: state failure or state transformation?" *Central Asian Survey* 30, no. 1 (2011): 147–168. See also Alexander Cooley's ongoing researchon Central Asia's ties with offshore international financial networks (Yale University Press, 2015).

15 Author's interviews with former Afgantsy in Dushanbe, May 2012.

16 Filippo De Danieli, "Counter-narcotics policies in Tajikistan and their impact on state building," *Central Asian Survey* 30, no. 1 (2011): 129–145.

17 Kamoludin Abdullaev, and Catherine Barnes, eds., *Politics of Compromise. The Tajikistan Peace Process* (London, 2001); *Dialogue in Action: The Tajikistan Experience* (Dushanbe: Devashtich, 2008).

reconciliatory narrative on the Tajik nation, promoting the diversity of its regional identities and ideological orientations.18

Tajikistan's Afghan policy stakes out its hope for a peaceful and prosperous Afghanistan, in which a balance of power will be equitably distributed among ethnic groups. The reasons for instability are seen, above all, as ethnic rather than religious (see the part on knowledge production). In practice, Dushanbe is obliged to pursue a balancing act, promoting state-to-state dialogue with Kabul, which it would have to do even in the advent of a pro-Pashtun regime, and backing its Tajik co-ethnics.19 Dushanbe is also intrinsically dependent upon Afghanistan's economic success and foreign investments. International investments in Tajikistan's hydroelectric sector only have meaning if the electricity is subsequently exported to Afghanistan and onward to South Asia. Not only is hydroelectricity the Tajik state's only prospect for increasing its revenues, but its geopolitical competition with Uzbekistan is also at stake.20 The failure of the Afghan economy would be a failure of both economic and geopolitical dimensions for Dushanbe.

However, in contrast with Uzbekistan, Tajikistan's Afghan policy is not entirely under the control of the central elites. The Islamic Rebirth Party has its own network in Afghanistan, inherited from the civil war period, and cultivates contacts with figures from Ahmad Shah Massoud's family. It does not seem to have contacts with Taliban groups, and endorses a moderate version of Islam that is more nationalist than international, and one that is also pan- Tajik, which is viewed unfavorably by the Pashtuns. The regional elites also have their own connections in Afghanistan, once again inherited from the period of the civil war. In the Rasht Valley, historically rebellious to Dushanbe's control, former warlords have maintained links with insurgent groups who rejected the peace agreements of 1997 and withdrew to Afghanistan by joining the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU). This was possibly the case of the former mullah and fighter Abdullo, who is alleged to have attempted to return to Tajikistan in 2010 and to have been killed by Tajik law enforcement agencies.21

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18 Author's interview with Parviz Mullojanov, Dushanbe, May 16, 2012, and author's ongoing research.

19 Kosimsho Iskandarov, "The Withdrawal of NATO Forces and the Prospects for Afghan-Tajik Relations," *Afghanistan Regional Forum*, no. 8, May 2013.

20 Volker Jacoby, "If Only It Was Only Water… The Strained Relationship between Tajikistan and Uzbekistan," *Central Asia Policy Brief*, no. 9, May 2013.

21 John Heathershaw, and Sophie Roche, "Islam and Political Violence in Tajikistan: An Ethnographic Perspective on the Causes and Consequences on the 2010 Armed Conflict in the Kamarob Gorge," *Ethnopolitics Papers* 8 (2011).

In the autonomous region of Gorno-Badakhshan, the elites of the regional capital Khorog also have their own connections with Afghan counterparts on the other side of the border. Milal-Inter, an association of 60 Pamiri business- men headed by the influential apparatchik Boymamad Alibakhshov, himself a former member of the Tajik Communist Party Central Committee and head of the State Investment Committee during the Soviet era, is for instance the main intermediary between Pamiri and Afghan businessmen from Fayzabad.22 The interaction between Afghan and Tajik societies is more intense than that between Uzbek and Afghan societies, and feeds more complex regional net- works, not all of which are under the unique control of the central authorities and the Rakhmon family.

Transactional Policies

Being a neighbor to Afghanistan is also used as a bargaining chip to attract the attention of the great powers, especially the United States. This Afghanistan chip can be deployed in three different forms: the "speak-to-me" policy— attracting U.S. attention in order to negotiate a privileged status and to keep Washington focused—; the "transactional" policy—leveraging part of the large sums of money distributed by the international community—; and the "projecting power" policy—asserting one's soft power in order to enhance international visibility and one's status as an essential actor in the debate on Afghanistan. This bargaining capability is important to the shaping of the Central Asian states' policy toward Afghanistan.

Transactional policies have become a major element of Central Asia's positioning on the international and regional scene, multiplying the number of local actors and intermediaries that benefit from the current instability in Afghanistan. Becoming a supply route for Afghanistan constitutes for instance an extraordinary rent opportunity for the Central Asian regimes—in particular for Uzbekistan, which accounts for close to 90 percent of the Northern Distribution Network (NDN) transit, and provides the Navoy airport, which is used to fly supplies to and from Afghanistan.23 Altogether, the Central Asian states reap $500 million in annual transit fees for the use of their infrastructure by the NDN. Added to this is the price per container of $17,500, which according to the calculations of Graham Lee, equates to an influx of $682.5 million annually

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22 More in Sebastien Peyrouse, "Economic Trends as an Identity Marker? The Pamiri Trade Niche with China and Afghanistan," *Problems of Post-Communism* 59, no. 4 (2012): 3–14.

23 On the NDN, see Andris Spruds, and Diana Potojmkina, eds., *Northern Distribution Network. Redefining Partnerships within NATO and Beyond* (Riga: Latvian Institute of International Affairs, 2013).

into the Central Asian economies, or a total upwards of $1 billion annually.24 In addition, the value of supplies bought locally in Central Asia by the Defense Logistics Agency for U.S. troops was reportedly $1.3 billion in 2012, mostly consisting of Turkmen fuel.25 The opacity surrounding the contracts signed by NATO members and the Uzbek authorities seems to indicate that a large part of these rents never reach the public purse, but instead the offshore accountsof local elites.26

The financial aid is not exclusively linked to ISAF supply needs and reverse transit. More generally, being Afghanistan's neighbor and the victim of possible "spillovers" guarantees financing for military modernization programs. This is the case for Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, whose armies are able to operate only due to international aid, and for the development of border security structures. The United States doubled its military aid to Tajikistan in 2013 as compared with 2012.27 In 2012 Uzbekistan was waived from a 2004 Congressional ban on military aid that followed repeated human rights violations in the country. Military assistance to Tashkent, waived every six months on national security grounds, has allowed Washington to reintegrate Uzbekistan into its Foreign Military Financing, obtaining assistance to the tune of $1.5 million in 2012 and 2013.28 While official arms purchases remain subject to special restrictions, including vetting procedures, Tashkent wants to take advantage of the draw- down of troops to obtain some of the materials left behind, which can be negotiated with less scrutiny from civil society and Congress. It is likely that the country will obtain some helicopters, as well as armored personnel carriers and night-vision equipment, as part of negotiations to lower the astronomical prices of reverse transit.29 Furthermore, the State and Defense Departments

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24 Lee Graham, "The New Silk Road and the Northern Distribution Network: A Golden Roadto Central Asian Trade Reform?" *Central Eurasia Project*, Occasional Paper Series No. 8, October 2012, 13.

25 Joshua Kucera, "Turkmenistan Big Beneficiary Of Pentagon Money, While Uzbekistan Lags," *Eurasianet.org*, December 3, 2012, http://www.eurasianet.org/node/66248 (accessed December 28, 2013).

26 Ken Silverstein, "Is Pentagon in Bed with "Queen of the Uzbeks?" *Washington Babylon*, March 25, 2010, http://harpers.org/blog/2010/03/is-pentagon-in-bed-with-queen-of-the -uzbeks/ (accessed December 28, 2013).

27 Jim Nichol, *Central Asia: Regional Developments and Implications for U.S. Interests* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, May 31, 2012).

28 Jim Nichol, *Uzbekistan: Recent Developments and U.S. Interests* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, August 3, 2012), 17.

29 Scott Horton, "*Great Games, Local Rules*: Six Questions for Alex Cooley," *Harpers Blog*,August 3, 2012, http://harpers.org/blog/2012/08/_great-games-local-rules_-six-questions -for-alex-cooley/ (accessed December 28, 2013).

hope to spend more than $4 billion in a counter-narcotics program, the Central Asia Counter-narcotics Initiative (CACI), which is designed to provide training and equipment to set up counter-narcotics task forces for the whole region,[30] including establishing training facilities in Batken and near Dushanbe to combat drug trafficking and terrorism.[31]

These transactional tactics blur long-term geostrategic logics with lucrative, but short-term, financial engagements. Afghanistan policy is therefore almost systematically hostage to other strategic issues and superseded by other priorities. Afghan instability is a source of revenue for elites: neighboring Afghanistan constitutes both a political and financial rent, which can result in policies toward Kabul being marked by ambiguous goals and a very narrow calculus.

Afghanistan as a Mirror of Regimes' Anxieties: the "Islamic Threat" Narrative

Neighbors' national policies toward Afghanistan often say a lot about their own domestic anxieties. For Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, admittedly to varying degrees, state building and nationhood are intrinsically linked and perceived as potentially fragile. Securitizing identity thus constitutes an element of political legitimacy that helps establish a consensus between elites and their constituencies. It is at once a political tool wittingly used and a broadly-shared perception. In the context of Afghanistan's neighborhood, securitization is accompanied by a fear of disengagement, inherited post-1989, when the region's importance abruptly diminished, falling off the radar of international, and especially U.S., attention. While securitization discourse aims at obtaining external support, it is mostly addressed at a domestic audience.

The Wrongly Formulated "Islamic Threat"

The Central Asian regimes have founded a large part of their political legitimacy on their fundamentally secular nature, a heritage of their Soviet predecessor, and fears of a creeping Islamism in their regional environment.

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30 U.S. State Department Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, "The Central Asia Counternarcotics Initiative (CACI): Fact Sheet," U.S. Department of State, February 21, 2012, http://www.state.gov/j/inl/rls/fs/184295.htm (accessed December 28, 2013).

31 Deirdre Tynan, "Pentagon looks to plant new facilities in Central Asia," *Eurasianet.org*, June 8, 2010, http://www.eurasianet.org/node/61241 (accessed December 28, 2013).

Uzbekistan and Tajikistan do have obvious differences in their state-religion policy: Uzbekistan has prosecuted every Islamist movement since 1993,32 while Tajikistan has adapted itself to the IRPT, which is a legacy of the civil war and the 1997 peace agreement. However, these differences do not prevent them from similarly arguing that their secular regimes are the only possible bulwark against the risk of a "green wave." Both regimes, which are also becoming increasingly alike, tend to systematically associate all political dissidence with Islamism, and in turn, Islamism with spillovers from Afghanistan or an Al-Qaeda-style international Jihadism.33

Both cultivate a very useful misperception of what are in reality very diverse phenomena, and deliberately confound re-Islamization, political Islam, and violence. The re-Islamization of Central Asian societies has two main aspects: an apolitical retraditionalization which is marked above all by more conservative mores and by gender segregation, and the respect of Islamic rites demanded by the youths of the middle classes and some elites as a new identity. Other, more minority phenomena are also visible: in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, and to a lesser extent in Tajikistan, some of the younger generations call for a kind of Islamo-nationalist regime; globalized networks of believers work in interaction with foreign proselytizing groups such as the Tablighi Jama'at from the Indian subcontinent. Underground structures offering community help such as Hizb ut Tahrir have forged relatively powerful networks, as have mutual aid organizations among the merchant and small entrepreneurs. A growing part of the Uzbek and Tajik population supports the Islamist narrative on the need for more social justice, less corruption, and demands the right to practice Islam freely and to receive religious education.34

There exist few connections between these different facets of Islamic identities, and almost none of them are related to neighboring Afghanistan. Groups advocating the seizure of power by violence or insurgencies based on an Islamist narrative are rare. They could potentially emerge as cross-border spillovers from Afghanistan but also from Russia, especially through the North Caucasus. However, the risk of any Islamist insurgencies is mainly

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32 More in Martha Brill Olcott, *In the Whirlwind of Jihad* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2012).

33 On the state narrative on Islam, see Emmanuel Karagiannis, *Political Islam in Central Asia* (London: Routledge, 2010), and Adeeb Khalid, *Islam after Communism: Religion and Politics in Central Asia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

34 More in Marlene Laruelle, "Revisiting Islamism. A Factor for Democratization in Central Asia?" *PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo* No. 298, September 2013, http://www.ponarseurasia.org/sites/default/files/policy-memos-pdf/Pepm_298_Laruelle_Sept2013.pdf (accessed December 28, 2013).

home-grown, with some numerically small groups inspired by the IMU and its derivatives, or by jihadist narratives being active in the south of Kyrgyzstan, in the Uzbek part of the Fergana Valley, in the Rasht Valley, around the areas bordering Afghanistan in Tajikistan, and in the north and west of Kazakhstan.35 However, the national territories remain under the firm control of the central state, with minor periodic exceptions—the Rasht Valley and the Pamir region in Tajikistan during the summer months.

More importantly, despite ostensible cultural similarities, Central Asians regard Afghans with disdain. Those interested in the political potential of Islamism are justifiably fed up with their corrupt, repressive leaders. But the image of protracted violence in Afghanistan, in addition to public executions, prohibitions on music and alcohol, and stoning for adultery, is certain to weaken domestic Islamists, and buttress the legitimacy of secular authoritarian regimes.36 Central Asians interested in Islamic ideas tend to admire the Turkish or the Malaysian model, and remain influenced by Islamic debates emanating from Russia, with almost none of them considering the Taliban as a model to follow. So how can we assess the risks of Islamic spillovers from Afghanistan for Uzbekistan and Tajikistan?

Uzbekistan's Risk of Spillovers

Uzbekistan has been the main target of the region's Islamist insurgency so far. From the start of the 1990s, the IMU, formerly known as the *Adolat* movement for justice, which drew popular support mostly from the Ferghana Valley, challenged Islam Karimov by calling for the establishment of a theocratic regime. Tashkent's harsh suppression pushed several thousand Uzbek militants to leave the country and join ranks with the Taliban. Trained in Afghani- stan and then in Waziristan, they have become associated with the international networks of Al-Qaeda.37 The dislodging of Al-Qaeda from Afpak borders, and the possible return of the Taliban to some positions of power in Kabul, has concerned the Uzbek regime about the risk of a revival of the IMU and its diverse successors in Central Asia itself.

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35 T. M. Sanderson, D. Kimmage, D. A. Gordon, "From the Ferghana Valley to South Waziristan. The Evolving Threat of Central Asian Jihadists," *CSIS Transnational Threats Project*, March 2010.

36 Marlene Laruelle and Scott Radnitz, "Spinning the Spillover: Why NATO Withdrawal from Afghanistan Does Not Pose a Threat to Central Asia," *PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo* No. 301, September 2013, http://www.ponarseurasia.org/sites/default/files/policy-memos-pdf/Pepm_301_Radnitz_Sept2013.pdf (accessed December 28, 2013).

37 Vitali Naumkin, *Radical Islam in Central Asia. Between Pen and Rifle* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005).

However, three caveats should be noted. First, Uzbek and other Central Asian combatants in exile are now internationalized jihadists. They would often rather be active in the major war—and media— theaters of Jihadism, such as the Middle East, in particular Syria, or the North Caucasus, than focus on their own homelands. Second, the Taliban have made no claims that they will seek to support Islamist insurgencies in neighboring countries. The Quetta Shura has stated that it is not interested in fighting the Uzbek regime at all costs and, on the contrary, wants to negotiate with it in order to maintain trade relations. It is also probable that the Peshawar Shura and Haqqani networks, even if they are more radical, do not have as their main goal the destabilization of their northern neighbors.38 Third, in the case of attacks by the IMU or its successors on Uzbek territory, the Uzbek army is better prepared, for instance, than its Tajik or Kyrgyz counterparts and should be able to effectively counter a few hundred or even thousand jihadists leading localized campaigns. Uzbek statehood is thus not under threat, even if the country might face a fresh out- break of localized violence targeting symbols of power. The largest risks for Uzbek domestic instability stem not from spillovers originating from Afghanistan, but from potential mismanagement of the presidential succession, from regional elites' discontent with their access to state resources, and from home-grown Islamization.39

Tajikistan's Risk of Spillovers

Tajikistan is probably the only Central Asian state for which the spillover discourse would appear to be, at least to some extent, more founded. Although it is the only country of the region to have an official Islamic party, many underground Islamist movements are emerging. The IRPT is being increasingly challenged by Salafi movements that accuse it of engaging in power games with Rakhmon and endorsing an overly moderate Islamo-nationalism.40 These new Salafi networks do not come from Afghanistan, however, and have not been trained by the Taliban. They are home-grown and inspired by similar movements in Russia (about one million Tajiks work in Russia as migrants), or led by young mullahs trained abroad who have failed to find a place for themselves in the official mosques.41 The only Islamist influence from Afghanistan that

38 Antonio Giustozzi, "Turmoil within the Taliban: A Crisis of Growth?" *Central Asia Policy Brief*, no. 7, January 2013.

39 More in Olcott, *In the Whirlwind of Jihad*.

40 Interview with Muhiddin Kabiri, IRPT chairman, Dushanbe, May 19, 2012.

41 David Abramson, "Foreign Religious Education and the Central Asian Islamic Revival : Impact and Prospects for Stability," Silk Road Papers, mars 2010.

might be able to sway the future of Tajikistan directly would be a rise of radical groups, whether the Taliban themselves or others inspired by them, among the Tajiks in Afghan northern provinces, combined with a infiltration of radical groups across the Tajik-Afghan border.

If the official Uzbek and Tajik narrative about the risk of radical Islam spilling over is not convincing, there are other categories of potential spillovers which may quite rightly raise some concerns, as they put Central Asia in a context of fragility relative to Afghanistan: the risk of a collapse of Afghan armed forces and a spread of arms and private militias; the risk of uncontrolled waves of migration, especially of refugees; and for Tajikistan the risk of becoming a base of operations for Tajik-Afghan warlords.42 Indeed, in the case of renewed civil war or low intensity conflict in Afghanistan, Tajik powerbrokers in northern Afghanistan might seek to resist any partial return of the Taliban by using Tajikistan as their support base. In this case, the intrinsic weakness of Tajikistan's central authorities in controlling their own territory might come into play. In recent years, several local insurrections have taken place in the summer months in the mountainous parts of the country, especially the Rasht Valley and the Gorno-Badakhshan region. These attest to Dushanbe's efforts of asserting its authority over these restive provinces during conflicts with local elites.43 Dushanbe would thus probably be affected, transforming an already porous border into a zone of interaction and non-containment, and aggravating Tajikistan's internal weakness. The authorities tend, however, to mismanage their preparation for this type of risk, since they wrongly liken it to the risk of Islamist militancy, or of a Taliban/Pashtun surge in Tajikistan, whereas these two phenomena are not related and whereas the instability will be mostly intra-Tajik.

Relevance and Limits of The "Proxy" Angle

Part of the neighboring states' policies toward Afghanistan includes managing proxy groups. A popular slogan says, "you do not buy an Afghan, you rent him." The fluidity of belonging, always multifaceted, and such a changing environment contributes to submitting all alliances between external actors and

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42 For more on these spillovers, see Laruelle, Boonstra, and Peyrouse.

43 See Sebastien Peyrouse, "Battle on Top of the World: Rising Tensions in Tajikistan's Pamir Region," *Wider Europe*, August 2012, http://www.gmfus.org/wp-content/blogs.dir/1/files_mf/1346248601Peyrouse_Tajikistan_Aug12.pdf; and Eric McGlinchey, "States of Protest in Central Asia," *PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo* No. 299, September 2013, http://mason.gmu.edu/~ emcglinc/McGlinchey_Ponars_2013 (accessed December 28, 2013).

Afghans to opacity and unpredictability. Marked by the memory of civil war of the 1990s, foreign observers tend to reproduce the "proxy" model for post-2014 Afghanistan. However, conditions have changed drastically. All Afghan parties have now gained autonomy from their patrons. In addition, the number of potential patrons has increased significantly since state actors may be in competition with non-state actors. More importantly, the idea of proxy itself is relative. The asymmetry between the expectations of clients and patrons is immense. Afghans are not passive subjects dependent on external forces, but actors in their own right, who have developed independent strategies and skills of manipulation. The patron/client or mutually beneficial win-win logics are subject to multiple uncertainties. For external actors, it is difficult to control the interests of their Afghan partners. Some have pragmatic interests (businessmen securing their assets or smuggling niches, local leaders concerned about legitimacy in their communities), others have political goals (to be elected governor, be appointed to a position in Kabul), and yet others have ideological aims (overthrow the regime, impose sharia, fight the infidels).

The leverage capability of the Central Asian states is limited to their co-ethnics in northern Afghanistan. The Tajiks, at around 8 million, are the second-largest ethnic group in the country after the Pashtuns. They have been largely privileged in Afghan institutions since 2001 as recognition for their struggle against the Taliban. This makes them direct competitors of the Pashtuns in efforts to control the central organs of power in the post-2014 context. This political struggle is framed according to a double narrative: on the one hand, the ethnic balance (Tajik versus Pashtun) and, on the other, the nature of the regime (moderate or secular obedience versus Sharia-oriented).44

The links between Tajiks on both sides of the border are close: hundreds of thousands of people fled the two countries' civil wars in the 1990s by moving to the other side of the border.45 In Tajikistan, especially in the southern provinces, almost every family has at least one member who has had interactions with Afghanistan: whether as refugees or through the shuttle trade, work, or study. The information space is also largely shared, and the feeling of common destiny is dominant. During the Tajik civil war, Ahmed Shah Massoud and his Panshiri networks were in contact both with the official authorities in Dushanbe and their opponents in the United Tajik Opposition. Even today, the

44 Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: The Power of Militant Islam in Afghanistan and Beyond* (London: I.B.Tauris, 2010).

45 More in Shahrbanou Tadjbakhsh, "Central Asia and Afghanistan: Insulation on the Silk Road, Between Eurasia and the Heart of Asia," *PRIO Paper* no. 3 (2012).

Islamic Rebirth Party has close ties with Panshiri leaders.46 The central authorities in Dushanbe rely on similar networks with the Mazar-i-Sharif elites. They maintain fraternal contacts with Ahmad Zia Massoud (younger brother of Ahmed Shah), who was vice president of Afghanistan from 2004 to 2009, with Hazara leader Mohammad Mohaqiq and his Hezb-e Wahdat party, and with the long-serving governor of Balkh, Atta Mohammed Noor, the local strong- man who probably has the most popular support.47 They also had cordial relations with Burhaniddin Rabbani (1940–2011), who had a constructive role in the Tajik peace process. However, the Tajik authorities also play the central government card in backing Karzai's circles in order not to be accused of favoring northern secessionism. In any case, despite these enduring relationships, Dushanbe's financial reach is so limited than it cannot really support Afghans and influence local contexts.48 It can offer little more than moral support and become a rear-operating base again for northern elites in the case of renewed conflict.

Uzbekistan can also play the card of its Uzbek co-ethnics in Afghanistan, who number between 1.5 and 3 million. Tashkent considers the Balkh province, on its southern border, to be its main point of protection against any instability from Afghanistan. The province is also the site of important Uzbek economic investments, particularly due to the railway links between the two countries. The opening of an Uzbek consulate in Mazar-i-Sharif in 2002 symbolized the importance of its adjoining province for Tashkent.

During the civil war, Uzbekistan backed the Uzbek general Dostum and his Jumbesh party (*Jombesh-e Melli-ye Islami-ye Afghanistan*), providing them with arms, ammunition, and non-military supplies such as fuel.49 It even conferred official status by recognizing them as its official counterpart in the northern provinces during the years of Taliban rule. However, the Dostum- Karimov relationship was not free from tensions and rapidly cooled. Thus, when Dostum was forced to go into exile between 1997 and 2001, and again for a few months in 2008–09 when he was stripped of his title as chief of the army, he left for Turkey, not Uzbekistan. There are many reasons why this alliance has been dysfunctional. First of all, Islam Karimov has not forgiven what has

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46 Interview with Muhiddin Kabiri, IRPT chairman, Dushanbe, May 19, 2012.

47 Antonio Giustozzi, "The Resilient Oligopoly: A Political-Economy of Northern Afghanistan 2001 and Onwards," *Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit*, December 2012, 45.

48 This is what has come out of the debates that took place during the International confer- ence "Afghanistan's Stability and Regional Security Implications for Central Asia," Central Asia Program and EUCAM, Dushanbe, Tajikistan, May 17–18, 2012.

49 Ibid.

been interpreted as Dostum's "abandonment" of Mazar-i-Sharif to the Taliban in 1997. The Uzbek president then perpetuated an autarkic vision of his country, which was not conducive to the development of Uzbek soft power in northern Afghanistan; meanwhile Dostum grew close to other patrons such as Turkey. Finally, rather than building an Uzbek-centric ethnic rhetoric, Jumbesh developed a pan-Turkic message to give his party a broader appeal beyond Uzbeks. The party also includes Turkmens, Aimaqs, Arabs, Qizilbashes, and some Tajiks, Hazaras, and Pashtuns; it is based primarily on regional identity and loyalty to Dostum.50 This narrative displeases Tashkent, which is alarmed by the premise of any pan-Turkic renaissance. Last but not least, Karimov seeks to show his support for U.S. policy and therefore prefers to back Karzai over Dostum when there are tensions between the two.

Relations between Tashkent and Dostum are transactional above all else. The two parties exchange "good services" and favors—illegal trade benefiting some privileged figures on both sides of the border, and likely narco-trafficking operations between Dostum's inner circle and the Uzbek SNB.51 Tashkent does the same thing with Atta Mohammed Noor, with whom relations are warmer. Atta is in some ways an even more central ally for Tashkent, as he can secure the Balkh province whereas Dostum's traditional stronghold is in Sheberghan, in Jowjzan province, which has longer borders with Turkmenistan than Uzbekistan. Dostum is also in a difficult political position. He partially lost control of Jumbesh in the process of trying to turn it into an actual political party with ideological and strategic platforms, rather than just a disparate coalition.52 Since the beginning of 2013, Dostum has been seeking to reassert power over the party in preparations for the 2014 presidential elections.53 Uzbekistan thus cannot count only on Dostum or Atta, with whom relations are more competitive than cooperative,54 and needs to support wider and more consensual alliances. Unlike the Tajiks, the Afghan Uzbeks have more peripheral ambitions, and their calls for regional autonomy, recognition of the Uzbek language in local bodies, and participation in economic decision-making

50 Ibid.

51 Author's anonymous interview with Uzbek experts, March 2013.

52 Robert Peszkowski, "Reforming Jumbesh. An Afghan Party on its Winding Road to Internal Democracy," *Afghanistan Analyst Networks*, August 2012, http://www.aan-afghanistan.org/uploads/20120831Peszkowski-Jombesh-final.pdf (accessed December 28, 2013).

53 Thomas Ruttig, "New Trouble in the Jombesh: Dostum reasserts leadership," *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, February 17, 2013, http://www.aan-afghanistan.org/index.asp?id=3258 (accessed December 28, 2013).

54 Giustozzi, "The Resilient Oligopoly: A Political-Economy of Northern Afghanistan 2001 and Onwards," 57.

processes are easier to meet than the Tajiks' demand to have a key role in the central state structures. Both Uzbekistan's and Afghan Uzbek power brokers' position will therefore probably be more consensual in the case of a partial comeback of the Taliban to power and a central authority controlled by Pashtuns, than the position of Tajikistan and Afghan Tajiks.

Knowledge Production and Locally Produced Scenarios

Last but not least, knowledge production is a key element of any public policy, even if the link between knowledge and decision-making is often difficult to articulate. Whether at issue is the bureaucratic complexity of the democratic regimes and of their multiple counter-powers, or the opacity of hybrid or authoritarian regimes, in all cases monitoring the chain leading from knowledge production by academia or expertise circles to decision-making is no easy task. However, the importance cannot be ignored both of having the right assessment at hand, so as to avoid taking decisions that are contrary to long- term state interests, and of producing ideas to defend one's viewpoint and one's vision on the international arena and among the population. In the com-plex chain leading from knowledge production to decision-making, the sites of production are multiple and can be classified according to three major categories: fundamental research at university and in academic research centers; applied research and strategic expertise in think tanks; and internally produced analyses by the bureaucratic apparatus (commissioned works, off-the- record publications, and intelligence activities). Access to the third type of production is extremely restricted and therefore difficult to study.

Each of Afghanistan's neighbors has its own intellectual history, whether it is the British legacy for India and Pakistan, the Soviet one for Russia and the Central Asian states, or the legacy of having had little interaction with the knowledge production of the international community in the case of China and, to a lesser degree, Iran. In Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, knowledge production has been limited by local political conditions, which have impeded the expression of free intellectual opinion critical of the authorities. Experts' publications therefore tend to reproduce governmental positions, although divergences of viewpoint or nuances appear. Even when they have to conform to official standards, academic and expert publications offer a different view of policy-making. They shed light on the largely shared perceptions shaping decision-making, such as feelings of ethnic/linguistic/religious proximity, or anxieties concerning the future of the nation. They reveal cultural backgrounds and historical memories which would not otherwise be accessible.

Tightly Controlled Uzbek Knowledge Production

During the Soviet period, Uzbekistan occupied a preeminent position among the Central Asian republics, being privileged by Moscow and used as a show- case of the success of Muslim socialism to Third World countries. This status was also evident in the intellectual domain: the Academy of Sciences and the republican universities were more developed than their counterparts in the rest of Central Asia. As a result, they received Central Asian scholars from neighboring republics and established a certain legitimacy in the field of Oriental Studies. The Soviet division of labor required, however, that the Academies of Sciences of each republic only produce knowledge on their own domestic questions. Subjects related to international affairs could not be studied unless they were justified by a particular connection to their own respective domestic issues.55 Thus, despite the existence of a Department of Oriental Studies in Tashkent, there was no specific focus on Afghanistan, since Uzbekistan—in contrast to Tajikistan—was not considered to be "linked" to Afghanistan. Priority was instead accorded to classical Oriental studies, which included Arabic literature, Koranic studies, and Middle-Eastern history.

This heritage was jeopardized upon Uzbekistan's independence. As in numerous post-Soviet countries, the Uzbek academic world became a victim of collapsing public budgets for research, the redeployment of scholars to more profitable sectors (salaries remain extremely low), and generational change. In terms of the latter, former specialists from Soviet times have not managed to bequeath their legacy to a younger generation, who, instead, have turned away en masse from academia. Moreover, the authoritarian political context, the difficulties involved in integrating into the international academic community through grants, stipends, travel, or publications abroad, as well as the extreme decline in strategic expertise—once again for political reasons—have all been detrimental. Academic expertise on Afghanistan remains limited to the Oriental Studies Institute at the Academy of Sciences and the Oriental Studies Department at the National University, with a handful of specialists often working on broader subjects such as the Middle East, South Asia, or radical Islam.56 One of the country's main think tanks, the Center for Political Studies (run by the president's eldest daughter, Gulnara Karimova),57 and, to a lesser extent,

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55 More in Marlene Laruelle, and Sebastien Peyrouse, *China as a Neighbor. Central Asian Perspectives and Strategies* (Washington, D.C.: The Central Asia-Caucasus Institute, Silk Road Monograph, April 2009).

56 Author's interview with anonymous Uzbek scholars, Rome, July 2012, and author's own research.

57 See the Institute's website www.cps.uz/eng/about_us/.

the Foundation for Regional Politics,58 both organize regular conferences on security in the wider region, sometimes with a specific focus on Afghanistan; they remain content to invite foreign scholars, however, and validate only the country's official 6 + 3 doctrine, without valorizing their own national output. Whereas many young Uzbek scholars do work on Afghanistan, they often study it from angles that have scarcely been probed. The dominant topic remains security and the involvement of external actors, especially NATO, followed by the study of radical Islam. In the latter case, the narrative produced has to be expressed within a very strict framework of denouncing radicalism and the "external forces" seeking to destabilize the region, as well as promoting the legitimacy of Uzbek policy to maintain a tight control on freedom of religion.59 Even when these young specialists speak Dari, few have been able to travel to Afghanistan, and they instead tend to "internalize" Western and Russian output which they adapt to the local narrative.

Even if it is difficult to gain access to Uzbek output, the main tenets of local knowledge production on Afghanistan can be discerned.60 First, the scenarios produced are dominated by pessimism. They forecast that Afghanistan will plunge back into a state of instability, that the central government will not be able to maintain legitimacy post-ISAF, and that there will be a partial collapse of the Afghan National Security Forces with the concomitant risk of a black market for arms mushrooming throughout the wider region. Second, contrary to Tajikistan, the question of co-ethnics is rarely addressed. Uzbekistan's policy on this issue has always been cautious, with Tashkent refusing to sup- port its co-ethnics dispersed throughout the neighboring countries.61 The Uzbek minority in Afghanistan is, moreover, a broadly taboo subject—the links between some officials in Tashkent and Dostum are, for example, never evoked—and analysis always concerns the state level, never the intra-state one. This absence of interest in local actors and their motivations—in contrast with Tajik research (see below)—is evidenced by the Uzbek 6 + 3 initiative, which seeks a political reconciliation between regional actors without involving the domestic stakeholders themselves.

Third, even if the official discourse centers on the risk of spillovers and therefore on the need for more international funds and support to be given to the regime, Uzbek experts are on the whole confident both in their country's

58 Ibid.

59 Author's own research.

60 Author's interview with anonymous Uzbek scholars.

61 Matteo Fumagalli, "Ethnicity, State Formation and Foreign Policy: Uzbekistan and 'Uzbeks abroad'," *Central Asian Survey* 26, no. 1 (2007): 105–122.

ability to transform its border into an impermeable wall and in the level of training of its armed forces, probably Central Asia's most powerful. However, it is radical Islam that is of most concern and, in this context, the weakness of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan to "contain" spillovers. Viewed from Uzbekistan, the interest in assessing Afghan domestic issues is therefore limited. The "Afghan question" is understood mostly as a regional problem involving a balance between neighbors, the involvement of great powers, and also as a more general issue of radical Islam/terrorism. It does not closely affect Uzbekistan except through the instability of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. Thus, in spite of their shared border, Afghanistan is viewed as a distant land on the Uzbek geo-political map.

Tajik Knowledge Production: Afghanology as Self-Projection

Tajik academia currently finds itself in dire straits, both in terms of human capital—like its neighbors it has also suffered from a brain drain, especially during its civil war—and a lack of financial resources. In the Soviet period, the Tajik Academy of Sciences was, due to its ethnic-linguistic proximity, the only one in Central Asia to have a Department of Iranian Studies, thus enabling local researchers to study neighboring Iran and Afghanistan. The topics treated were essentially historical and literary but Soviet foreign policy needed Afghanologists, and consequently, a number of specialists on topical issues were trained. During the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 Tajik scholars found themselves in demand, and were recruited en masse by the Soviet armed forces as translators or advisors.62

In spite of the above, knowledge production on Afghanistan today no longer attains the same heights as it did during the Soviet Union. The Center of Strategic Studies, which is close to the presidency and regarded as the government's official think tank, has only very few Afghanologists (one of the main exceptions being Abdunabi Sattorzoda) and trains few young scholars in this area. The "Center for the Study of Afghanistan and Adjacent Region," headed by Kosimsho Iskandarov within the Academy of Sciences, has found it hard to build on its Soviet heritage. The National University and the Russo-Tajik University, the country's two main higher education institutions, do not have any sections devoted to the study of contemporary Afghanistan, although they both have Departments of Iranian Studies (in the sense of classical Oriental studies) and of International Affairs (very general in scope). Instead, it is in the small private institutions, NGOs, or centers for sociological surveys that former scholars on Afghanistan have redeployed. Examples include the NGO "Public

62 Author's interviews with anonymous Tajik scholars, Dushanbe, May 2012.

Committee for Democratic Processes" which Parvis Mullojanov heads, or the Sharq Center under its director Muzaffar Olimov.

These Afghanologists have a shared double background as translators/advisors for the Soviet forces in Afghanistan in the 1980s, and as active players in the democratization processes that the country underwent during the last years of perestroika. Almost all the figures associated with the public intellectual life of independent Tajikistan spent some amount of time in Afghanistan during the 1980s. The majority of them—albeit not all—rallied to the United Tajik Opposition during the civil war, professing political views veering toward European-style social democracy or toward moderate Islamo-nationalism. Most members of the Tajik National Reconciliation Committee, which helped enable the signing of the 1997 peace agreement, and which played a major role in civil society initiatives like the Secular-Islamic Dialogue Initiative, are often former personnel from the Soviet intervention from Afghanistan. If knowledge output on Afghanistan is low in Tajikistan, Afghanistan's place in the instruction of the post-Soviet Tajik elites, and in the forming of civil society activists, has been crucial.63

Despite some disagreements, several traits distinguish the dominant narrative produced by Tajik experts on Afghanistan from that of its neighbors.64 First of all, it unambiguously puts forward an ethnic reading of the Afghan conflict: the prism of opposition between Tajiks and Pashtuns is the broadly dominant one. The ideological stakes, in particular between the secular vision of state, moderate Islam, and a Wahhabi/Deobandi interpretation of Islam are grasped as a second-order issue: that is, as pertaining to the ideologization of a conflict whose *essence* is supposedly ethnic.65 Secondly, an overriding solidarity is evident with the Tajiks on the other side of the border—the sharing of one and the same linguistic space also means a shared space of information, and therefore the stakes in Afghanistan are read through a Tajik- centered prism. If the interlinkages between both societies, Tajik and Afghan, is a recurrent topic of public and private discussions, one should not be misled: this intertwining, whether vaunted or feared, is seen as being with Afghan

63 Muzaffar Olimov's presentation at the International conference "Afghanistan's Stability and Regional Security Implications for Central Asia," Central Asia Program and EUCAM, Dushanbe, Tajikistan, May 17–18, 2012.

64 See for instance Parviz Mullojanov, "Prospects and Challenges of the National Reconciliation Process in Afghanistan: Development Scenarios," *Afghanistan Regional Forum*, no. 9, June 2013.

65 Muzaffar Olimov and Saodat Olimova, "The Withdrawal of NATO Forces from Afghanistan: Consequences for Tajikistan," *Afghanistan Regional Forum*, no. 6, March 2013.

Tajiks and not with all Afghans as such, and certainly not with the Pashtuns, who are seen to be completely "other."

Thirdly, the dominant assumption is that a centralized Afghan state is an impossibility: the country is seen not to be able to operate other than under a form of extreme decentralization. Some Tajik experts think that the north- south division of the country is inevitable; others that a federalization in which the north would have a large degree of autonomy could work. Those experts that envisage the partition of Afghanistan do not necessarily view it as positive for Tajikistan: indeed, there is no discourse calling for the creation of a "Greater Tajikistan" that would encompass the north of Afghanistan. On the contrary, the possible north-south division of Afghanistan is seen as a risk that would rush Tajikistan headlong into civil war, and would likely involve local actors, in particular Uzbekistan, which would not allow Tajiks on the two sides of the border to unite. The locally produced scenarios are thus largely infused with pessimism. No one thinks that the elites currently in office in Kabul will be able to stay in power post-2014; but neither does anyone believe in the capacity of the Pashtun/Taliban to control the entire country. The leading scenario is therefore one of a return to a low-intensity civil war in which the northern elites will fight the Pashtuns and maintain autonomy of their regions. Even having a buffer zone between Pashtun-controlled areas and Tajikistan does not reassure Tajik experts, however. It is thought that spillovers destabilizing Tajikistan may derive from Tajik Afghans themselves, not from the Taliban or their allies. Regardless of the scenario painted, Tajik experts do not believe that Dushanbe has any power to influence Afghanistan's future; in other words, Tajikistan will have to endure evolutions in the neighboring country without being able to influence them.66

Two other themes are also discussed. The growing recruitment of Tajiks or Uzbeks from the northern regions into the ranks of the Taliban and the spread- ing of radical Islamic messages in regions hitherto spared of such are, again, seen as bad news for Tajikistan. This ideological "Talibanization" of the Afghan north in fact echoes the radicalization occurring among a growing part of the Tajik youth, who are becoming more and more receptive to the Salafi message, and who criticize the moderate, indeed almost secular, narrative of the Islamic Rebirth Party. Further, the regional balance post-2014 presents a problem, in particular due to tensions with Uzbekistan. Many Tajik experts think that their country faces the possibility of a yet-unknown scenario—namely, one of potential cooperation between Uzbekistan and Afghanistan, which, driven by

66 Discussions at the International conference "Afghanistan's Stability and Regional Security Implications for Central Asia".

their electricity trade, will jointly try to obstruct Tajikistan. It is thought that such a situation would reverberate within intra-Afghan political life, entailing the breakaway of Uzbek warlords such as Dostum from the Tajiks and leading to a negotiated support for the Taliban in exchange for a guarantee of autonomy for the Uzbeks—not Tajiks. This scenario is revealing of the Tajik elites' fears of encirclement and their feeling that they lack options. Viewed from Dushanbe, the choice seems to be between, on the one hand, a new civil war that would push the Tajiks from Afghanistan to use Tajikistan as their staging ground, thus plunging the country into a state of instability, and on the other, a stable, Taliban-led Afghanistan that "sandwiches" Tajikistan through a paradoxical alliance with Uzbekistan.67

Conclusion

Uzbekistan and Tajikistan will remain moderately influential actors in shaping post-2014 Afghanistan, each having a low level of influence in contrast to Pakistan and Iran, and even to India and China. They nonetheless remain important regional actors, since they in part impact the future of the Afghan northern provinces, in particular on the economic level, via electricity trade, transit prospects, and small cross-border trade. They can also serve as allies with other actors involved in Afghanistan, whether this means being reintegrated into a unified, post-Soviet, Russia-led strategy, or favoring India's projections over Afghanistan and Pakistan. They can also, as is already the case with Tajikistan, serve as a transit space for China to reach the Afghan provinces, or align more with the strategy of Iran, which all Central Asian states perceive as a legitimate actor in Afghan games. This article has sought to clarify the extent to which the stakes of the "Afghan question" are also shaped by domestic issues and perceptions. Understanding decision-making mechanisms and the legitimacy of the authorities, identifying elite groups and their connection to their Afghan counterparts, and grasping the process of knowledge production, all help us better understand how Afghanistan's neighbors shape their policy. A look at domestic drivers thus makes it possible to go beyond the conventional discourse on the opacity of Afghan policies, and might further help to enable better-framed policy decisions.

Whatever Afghanistan's future has in store for it, Uzbekistan in particular, and to a lesser extent Tajikistan, will maintain a form of resilience: their temporality is not the same as that of the international community but instead

67 Ibid.

operates along a longer timeframe in which questions of state sovereignty and ethnic identity predominate. The upheaval of 2014 is apprehended as pertinent for their relationship with the international community and especially with the United States, but not in their relationship with Afghanistan, which plays out on a different time scale. Both counties are weakened, at diverse levels, by their own domestic challenges, and view the Afghan neighborhood as only one element of their future among many others. Uzbekistan can easily remain focused on a defensive policy revolving around border security and some electricity and railway-oriented investment projects in its buffer zone without bothering too much about the political processes going on in Kabul. Tajikistan, by contrast, remains more open to having deeper interaction with Afghanistan. However, in order to truly understand how Afghanistan can shape the future of its northern neighbor and to avoid falling for a narrative about the inevitability of chaos, it is worth thinking not about "spillovers" but rather about the role of Tajik *Afgantsy* in the democratization processes that Tajikistan underwent during the last years of perestroika, and in initiatives like the Secular-Islamic Dialogue Initiative. Indeed the permeability of Tajik- Afghan identity changed the political and cultural landscape of Tajikistan's experience of perestroika and its first years of independence, and could actually become a constructive element of civil society on both sides of the border.