



Central Asia: the view from the south

by Eva Gross

The withdrawal of ISAF troops from Afghanistan and broader questions over the region's future have turned the spotlight on Kabul's relationship with its Central Asian neighbours. But increased cooperation in the areas of energy and trade, in conjunction with shared concerns over extremism and regional instability, renders Central Asia relevant also for Pakistan and, further south, India.

What unites Kabul, Islamabad and Delhi is the need to strengthen connectivity with Central Asia. This is of particular importance for Afghanistan, given the uncertain economic outlook facing Kabul, although a similar – if less urgent – logic applies to the other southern neighbours as well. But attaining these objectives is made difficult by weak bilateral and regional relations as well as overlapping and partially contradictory institutional settings and external initiatives. The picture is further complicated by lack of trust between countries, authoritarian regimes, and corruption involving central government and local officials.

Bilateral links...

Due to Central Asia's Soviet legacy, little contact with southern neighbours took place prior to the end of the Cold War, and there has been limited investment in bilateral relations since. India, where the prospect of energy resources in particular has led to calls for greater focus on the region, has so far not engaged strongly with that part of its extended

neighbourhood. Still, Delhi has formalised defence cooperation agreements with some of the Central Asian states and established Joint Working Groups on counter-terrorism, further indicating the extent of its concerns.

Pakistan views Central Asia as increasingly critical for post-2014 stability in Afghanistan, although – yet again – there has been little investment in Central Asian relations. Interest in trade and energy is perhaps partially motivated by a wish not to be outflanked by India. As for Kabul, a shared border with Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan has hardly led, at least to date, to stronger bilateral ties. Furthermore, official cross-border trade remains limited in scope, with the illicit trade in narcotics contributing to instability and corruption.

...and regional relations

Such underdeveloped bilateral relations are mirrored by a lack of institutional frameworks that would more closely connect the five Central Asian republics with the sub-continent. Expanding trade also represents less of an incentive for them as they have established strong economic links with Russia and China. To date, China is the only actor (apart from Russia) to envision and invest in trade links – but the 'Silk Road Economic Belt' launched by Beijing excludes the South entirely. This may have negative repercussions especially for Afghanistan, with Kabul finding itself increasingly cut off from

existing initiatives. Linking up economic and political endeavours is, therefore, of paramount interest to Kabul and its external supporters – such as the US, which has promoted its own ‘New Silk Road initiative’ to integrate Afghanistan into the broader region.

The Heart of Asia-Istanbul Process – a regional initiative focused on Afghanistan’s regional future – involves all three southern neighbours and four of the five Central Asian republics (bar Uzbekistan). Common initiatives include Disaster Management Confidence-Building Measures (CBM), jointly led by Pakistan and Kazakhstan, and Trade and Commerce CBM, led by India. But these processes have yet to live up to their potential, due also to the weak administrative capacities of some of the countries involved.

Finally, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) – a forum for cooperation on security issues – has accepted Afghanistan, India and Pakistan merely as observers, although India might eventually become a full member, given its interest in counter-terrorism and enhancing trade and energy cooperation.

Untapped potential

Still, there is potential for greater cooperation between South and Central Asia when it comes to trade and energy resources, in terms of both strengthening transport infrastructure as well as encouraging cross-border initiatives. The region’s reserves in oil (Kazakhstan), gas (Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan) and hydroelectricity (Tajikistan) call for an integrated South/Central Asian energy market that would yield benefits for all countries involved.

Current efforts include support for the Central Asia-South Asia Regional Electricity Market (CASAREM), particularly its CASA-1000 component; a pipeline linking Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) is under consideration; and the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Tajikistan (TAT) railway project has received significant outside support. Most exchanges and contacts, however, have been encouraged by external actors, reflecting a lack of indigenous capability and interest.

Shared water resources – the Amu Darya, the largest river in Central Asia, is shared by Afghanistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan – equally call for regional approaches in terms of resource allocation and management as well as countering pollution; but joint management of water resources has yet to be realised.

Radicalism and borders

Despite multiple ethnic links, people-to-people contacts and migration flows between Afghanistan and its northern neighbours remain negligible. This said, Uzbek jihadists – mainly the Islamist Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) – have been increasingly active in Afghanistan, where they have built a presence in nine provinces across the country’s north, and are attempting to establish a base around the city of Kunduz for future operations against Kabul. This is a concern shared with Pakistan, where IMU has been cooperating with the Pakistani Taliban and claimed responsibility for the attack on Karachi airport in 2014. This has made it one of the targets of the current offensive in North Waziristan.

It is also worth noting that the implications of activities carried out by IMU and other groups for cross-border stability can easily be exaggerated, in part also because it is often difficult to separate violent radical formations from illegal armed groups, narco-traffickers or rebel forces driven by political or ethnic grievances. Yet all these factors emphasise the need for improved border management and a focus on the rule of law – although limited indigenous buy-in on the part of Central Asian states undermines the impact of existing, externally-funded, activities.

Ways forward

The ongoing transition in Afghanistan, lingering instability in Pakistan, and Narendra Modi’s gradual review of India’s strategic foreign policy interests are likely to factor in (and perhaps also affect) future Central-South Asian bilateral and regional initiatives – but without necessarily making them truly central for any of the capitals. Instead, the pull of Russia and China (in Central Asia) and the Afghanistan-Pakistan-India triangle (further south) are likely to retain their primacy.

Fostering trade, and building up infrastructure to bolster it, remains an important objective for the wider region. Establishing and improving political links among countries in South-Central Asia would also go some way to facilitating future cooperation. The same is true of regional initiatives already in place: although still underdeveloped, enhanced mechanisms for dialogue and cooperation could help instil additional momentum to that end – provided governments and local actors also invest in cooperation and connectivity on trade, security and shared resources.

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