



# AFGHANISTAN POST-2014: IMPLICATIONS FOR THE STABILITY OF RUSSIA'S SOUTHERN PERIPHERY

## Afganistán pos-2014: las implicaciones para la estabilidad de la periferia meridional de Rusia

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Afghanistan and the wider Central Asian region constitute part of Russia's "southern underbelly", a term that underscores the sense of vulnerability it feels along its southern border. Russia's security concerns in the region focus on cross-border instability, including the spread of religious extremism and drug trafficking. Moscow is apprehensive about the possibility of a further deterioration in Afghanistan's internal situation after the withdrawal of international forces in 2014, and has consequently been taking steps to bolster the security of both Afghanistan and its Central Asian neighbours through a variety of means. This paper analyses the drivers of Russian policy and assesses its perceptions of threat and security in the region, focusing particularly on the implications for Russia of the 2014 drawdown of the international stabilisation operation in Afghanistan (ISAF).



Abstract

Russia, Central Asia, ISAF, transnational security challenges, military assistance, Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO)

*Rusia, Asia central, ISAF, amenazas transnacionales a la seguridad, ayuda militar, Organización del Tratado de Seguridad Colectiva (OTSC)*



Key words

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*Afganistán y la amplia región de Asia central constituyen parte del «punto sensible meridional» de Rusia, un término que subraya el sentido de vulnerabilidad que siente a lo largo de la frontera del Sur. Las preocupaciones rusas en seguridad en la región se centran en la inestabilidad transfronteriza, incluyendo la proliferación del extremismo religioso y el tráfico de drogas. Moscú está inquieta por la posibilidad de un mayor deterioro en la situación interna de Afganistán tras la retirada de las fuerzas internacionales en 2014, y por lo tanto ha tomado medidas para reforzar de diversos modos la seguridad tanto de Afganistán como de sus vecinos de Asia central. Este artículo analiza los conductores de la política rusa y valora sus percepciones sobre la amenaza y seguridad en la región, centrándose en particular en las implicaciones para Rusia del retiro de la operación internacional de estabilidad (ISAF) en Afganistán.*



Resumen

In November 2013 Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu identified the withdrawal of Western coalition forces from Afghanistan in 2014 and international Islamist terrorism to be two of the three principal military threats facing Russia, highlighting government concerns about the impact of the drawdown of international troops in 2014.<sup>1</sup> Afghanistan has become an important focus of Russian foreign policy over the past decade, reflecting Moscow's concerns about stability on its southern periphery. Russia is one of several actors located in Afghanistan's "northern neighbourhood" and, although it does not border the country directly, it is concerned about the potential for instability in Afghanistan to spill over into the Central Asian region, an area that is considered to be important for Russian national security. Central Asia is part of Russia's "southern underbelly" (*yuzhnaya podbryush'ye*), a term that underscores the sense of vulnerability it feels along its southern periphery, where stability is a core concern. There is unease across the region about what may happen in Afghanistan after 2014, particularly with regards to any possible resurgence of the Taliban or spread of religious extremism. A warning from Uzbek President Islam Karimov in 2013 reflects concerns shared by all Central Asian states about the future stability of Afghanistan:

[T]he upcoming withdrawal of ISAF forces from Afghanistan by the end of 2014, without any doubt, will be a serious test for the countries bordering Afghanistan and the CIS as a whole... Chaos and disorder in Afghanistan could destabilise the situation in Central Asia. ("Uzbek leader notes Russia's role in CIS", 2013)

The Russian narrative about Afghanistan post-2014 tends to emphasise the potential for the destabilisation of the broader region and focuses on two key security threats: a rise in the spread of radical Islam and the smuggling of drugs. This article explores Russian policy and assesses its perceptions of threat and security in the region, focusing on the implications for Russia of the drawdown of the international stabilisation operation in Afghanistan (ISAF) in 2014. It analyses official Russian security discourse with regards to Afghanistan and explores what measures it is taking to foster stability in the broader region. The potential for cross-border instability emanating from Afghanistan constitutes a major preoccupation of Russian policy-makers, but what is the extent of the threat to Russian national security? Do concerns about instability mask other objectives, namely Moscow's desire to reinforce its position and influence in the region? There

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<sup>1</sup> The third was continued NATO enlargement on Russia's borders. See Brilev (2013).

is little doubt that the uncertainty affords Russia the opportunity to justifiably strengthen its foothold in the region, undermined in recent years by the growing presence of other actors, particularly the US and China. There have been significant changes in wider Russian foreign and security policy over the past decade, as the country has recovered from the chaos of the Yeltsin years and developed a more coherent, coordinated policy, perceived by many to be more assertive. Russia is determined to counter the perceived expansion of Western involvement within its “sphere of influence” to ensure that it remains the predominant power in the post-Soviet area and Moscow has sought to counterbalance the growing involvement of other actors in the region. Russian policies vis-à-vis former Soviet states in Central Asia, the South Caucasus and its Western periphery (Ukraine, Moldova and Belarus) in the contemporary era are focused on maintaining influence and protecting its political and economic interests in the region. Central Asia has become an increasingly important focus of Russian foreign and security policy in recent years, both because it is considered to be within Russia’s “zone of privileged interest” and because of concerns about the potential for instability emanating from Afghanistan after 2014.

## 1. Security concerns

Haas has identified several characteristics of the development of Russian security policy, including a perception of being surrounded by “enemies”, which leads to an emphasis on external threats in security documents, and an “insatiable” desire for security, resulting in a focus on expansion and buffer zones.<sup>2</sup> These characteristics are useful in understanding the drivers of contemporary policy-making in Russia, as well as the shaping of security discourse, which focuses very much on threats from “outside” of Russia crossing the border and causing instability. This focus on external threats is apparent in the discourse on Afghanistan after 2014.<sup>3</sup> As mentioned above, Afghanistan borders the Central Asian region, which is part of Russia’s “southern underbelly”. An article in Russian military journal *Voennaya Mysl'* in 2009 emphasised the significance of the “south”, describing it as “the most worrying in terms of ensuring the national security of the Russian Federation. It is on our southern flank that events occur which directly affect national security and require a clear definition of Russia’s geopolitical interests” (Maruev & Karpenko, 2009, p. 9). The area (which includes the Caucasus and Caspian) is an unstable neighbourhood facing a range of security challenges, including drug smuggling, the activity of terrorist and extremist groups and criminal organisations, and unresolved conflicts. These reflect the principal threats to Russian national security outlined in Russia’s 2009 *National Security Strategy*, which noted that the protection of state borders was crucial to tackling challenges such as extremism, transnational criminal organisations and illegal trafficking, and preventing them from undermining Russian security. It paints a bleak vision of the future, predicting that:

Nationalist sentiments, xenophobia, separatism and violent extremism will grow, including under the banner of religious radicalism. The global demographic situation and environmental problems will become more acute, and threats associated with uncontrolled

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2 For more information see De Haas (2010, p. 3 & pp. 156-180).

3 A tendency to emphasise the “Afghan problem” and enumerate a wide range of prospective threats to Russia’s security is visible not just in the official discourse, but also in media reports, which tend to focus on the worst-case scenarios for future regional stability and security. See for example “Ukhod NATO iz Afghanistana usilit islamistov v byivshem SSSR” (2013) and Polunin (2013).

and illegal migration, drug and human trafficking, and other forms of transnational organised crime, will also increase. (*National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation*, 2009) <sup>4</sup>

In 2011, the head of Russia's Security Council (and former head of the FSB) Nikolai Patrushev identified international terrorism, drug trafficking and illegal migration as the most pressing issues facing both Russia and other countries.<sup>5</sup> Concerns about these security challenges increased in advance of 2014 and the withdrawal of international troops from Afghanistan. A leaked report drawn up for the Russian government on possible scenarios after the withdrawal of ISAF identified the destabilisation of the Central Asian region as the principal threat, noting that Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan may find themselves at the "epicentre of an explosion of Islamic extremism" (Chernenko, 2013). This warning echoed a similar prediction by Vyacheslav Nekrasov who cautioned that it would not be hard for the Taliban to penetrate CIS territory as the "Afghan-Tajikistan border is very poorly guarded" and that

the Islamists' ideas are spreading in Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan... The strengthening of the Taliban will give fresh energy to Central Asian radicals like the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and dozens of other smaller groupings that dream of creating Central Asian emirates. ("Ukhod NATO iz Afghanistana usilit islamistov v byivshem SSSR", 2013)

Several Central Asian states share direct borders with Afghanistan and consequently the region has significant societal links with its southern neighbour. Afghanistan contains substantial numbers of ethnic Uzbeks, Tajiks and Turkmen, particularly in the northern border areas. The 1,200 km border between Afghanistan and Tajikistan is of particular concern as it is extremely porous, mountainous territory that has proved difficult to secure, facilitating the unregulated movement of people and goods, as well as drugs. Consequently, the Russian government is very concerned about the impact of ISAF's withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2014, highlighted by Shoigu's November 2013 warning, and the potential for instability affecting its Central Asian neighbours and, ultimately, Russia. Konstantin Sokolov, vice president of Russia's Academy of Geopolitical Problems, has also highlighted Russian concerns about instability spreading to Russia and the Caspian region:

What happens in the Near East reaches Russia fairly quickly. The conflict will move in the direction of Iran, and this is already the Caspian region. If combat operations begin in Iran, the strategic ties between that country and China, which receives energy sources from Iran, will be disturbed. There is a danger of the undermining of stability in Central Asia. It would not be difficult to do this, because the economic situation of the majority of inhabitants there is very difficult. From there the conflict would cross into Russia. (Ivanov & Shulman, 2012)

There is an assumption in the security discourse that any instability will automatically cross into Russia from Central Asia, reflecting the sense of insecurity and vulnerability identified by Haas. At a meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin in September 2013, the Afghan leader Hamid Karzai reportedly vowed to ensure that the territory of Afghanistan would not become an area from which action directed against Russia could be taken, an assurance that

*The Russian government is very concerned about the impact of ISAF's withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2014*

<sup>4</sup> Approved by decree of the President of the Russian Federation.

<sup>5</sup> See "International terrorism major threat for Russia – security chief" (2011).

the Kremlin had been seeking, highlighting Russian concerns about the potential for instability emanating from the country post-2014.<sup>6</sup> Deputy foreign minister Igor Morgulov has outlined Russian concerns, asserting that the ISAF withdrawal will lead to an increase in terror attacks, the activity of armed opposition groups and drugs smuggling, and warned about the “real threat of [Afghanistan’s] disintegration” (“Russian diplomat says concerns about Afghanistan after troops pull out remain”, 2013). Morgulov’s statement emphasises Russian concerns about the potential for threats to spill over from Afghanistan: as mentioned above, there are few direct threats to Russian security, they are mostly indirect that may impact on states in Central Asia and, consequently, Russia. President Putin has also voiced his concerns regarding a growth in the intensity of Afghan drug trafficking and the activities of terrorist groups, arguing that “[e]xtremists are already trying to extend their activities into neighbouring countries, including the states of Central Asia” (“Russian-led security bloc will help Tajikistan strength Afghan border – Putin”, 2013). Thus, according to official discourse, the two most worrying security issues for Russia arising from the draw-down of the international stabilisation operation in Afghanistan are international terrorism and extremism, as well as drug trafficking, both of which, it is feared, could impact on Russia via Central Asia. These concerns are based on an assumption that there will be a deterioration in Afghanistan’s internal situation, which in turn will prompt an upsurge in the activity of extremist groups and drug traffickers. These two principal security concerns for Moscow in the wider Central Asian region reflect major domestic security challenges within Russia, highlighting a clear link between foreign and domestic policy-making. Furthermore, as discussed above, the narrative focuses on the threat “coming” to Russia, resulting in an emphasis on border security. The 2009 NSS notes that:

The main threats to the border-related interests and security of the Russian Federation are the presence and possible escalation of armed conflicts near its state borders... Security threats to borders include the activity of international terrorist and extremist organisations which base their emissaries and terrorist means in Russia and organise sabotage on Russian territory, and likewise the increased activity of transnational criminal groupings engaged in the illegal transfer across the Russian border of narcotic and psychotropic substances.

The states of Central Asia and Russia are strongly opposed to the spread of radical Islamism. Russian fears about a possible rise in extremism in Central Asia, resulting from a Taliban resurgence post-2014, are connected to the fact that instability in Central Asia could stimulate instability in Russia, which is home to around 15 million Muslims and an ongoing Islamist insurgency in its North Caucasus region. The rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan in the 1990s was reflected by a corresponding rise in extremism in Central Asia, manifest by the emergence of groups such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), whose stated goal was the overthrow of Uzbek President Islam Karimov’s government. The IMU broadened its perspective after 2002 to include the whole of Central Asia and China’s Xinjiang region, and was declared a “terrorist organisation of particular concern” by the Bush administration. An offshoot of the IMU, the Islamic Jihad Union (IJU), claimed responsibility for attacks in Tashkent and Bukhara in 2004 that killed 47, and re-emerged in 2007 when three men with alleged ties to the IJU were arrested in Germany for plotting terrorist attacks against the US military base at Ramstein, as well as the US and Uzbek consulates. Both the IMU and the IJU are listed as

*Russian fears about a possible rise in extremism in Central Asia are connected to the fact that instability in Central Asia could stimulate instability in Russia*

6 See “Afghan leader vows to prevent anyone in Afghanistan threatening Russia – Kremlin” (2013).

foreign terrorist organisations by the US State Department.<sup>7</sup> There are concerns that groups such as these could be re-activated and undermine stability in Uzbekistan and Central Asia. According to the US State Department, whilst the government in Tashkent is confident about the security of its own border with Afghanistan, it has concerns about the porosity of the borders of its Central Asian neighbours, particularly the potential “infiltration of extremists through Uzbekistan’s long, rugged border with Tajikistan.”<sup>8</sup>

The rapid advance of Islamic State (IS) in Syria and Northern Iraq has renewed fears about radicalisation in Central Asia and Russia, particularly as there have been unconfirmed reports of citizens from Central Asian states and Russia fighting alongside IS, and there have been warnings that IS may expand into Central Asia from Afghanistan, with Tajikistan and Turkmenistan particularly vulnerable.<sup>9</sup> As discussed above, Tajikistan is perceived to be the “weakest link” in Central Asia because of its porous borders and underdeveloped security structures. This has prompted significant Russian assistance to bolster regional security and counter perceived cross-border security threats, discussed in more detail below.

Nevertheless, in spite of these concerns, there have in reality been few attacks in Central Asia, where governments have adopted harsh measures to counter the perceived threat in the name of national security. Strachota argues that the “assumption of the ‘Afghan threat to Central Asia’” is a clear example of a “self-fulfilling prophecy”, a contention that is “misused for the purposes of internal...and external policy”, asserting that “Afghanistan did not, does not and will not constitute either a direct strategic threat to Central Asia, nor a reason or necessary condition for destabilisation” (2013, p. 51). Whilst there is little doubt that extremism (and drug trafficking) can cause instability, there is little evidence to support the prevailing belief that the withdrawal of international troops from Afghanistan in 2014 will inevitably prompt a growth in the manifestation of such challenges. Several observers have pointed out that the principal security challenges to Central Asia are internal, not external. That said, Strachota goes on to argue that “[a]lthough the Afghan threat in Central Asia is definitely mythologised, over-estimated and instrumentalised, this does not mean that the region is and will remain stable” (2013, p. 57).

Russian apprehension about the potential spread of radical Islamism is not just linked to concerns about instability in Central Asia, but also to its domestic security concerns regarding the ongoing Islamist insurgency and radicalisation in its North Caucasus region. Although Moscow formally declared the end of its “counterterrorism operation” in Chechnya in spring 2009, there has been a conspicuous escalation in militancy and Islamist radicalism across the broader North Caucasus since 2005, as well as a string of attacks across Russia. The Russian military operation in Chechnya (1994-1996, 1999-2009) destabilised the region, with large numbers of displaced Chechens, as well as rebel fighters and arms, seeking haven in neighbouring republics within the North Caucasus. The Kremlin consistently justified its second campaign in Chechnya from 1999 on the grounds that the country was defending itself against the threat from Islamist terrorists and Putin issued repeated warnings about the threat that Russia (and

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7 For further information see US Department of State, Bureau of Counterterrorism (2013): “Chapter 6: Foreign Terrorist organisations”.

8 See US Department of State, Bureau of Counterterrorism (2013): “Chapter 2: South and Central Asia”.

9 See “Expert says ISI likely to expand to Central Asia” (2014).

the rest of the world) faced from global terrorist networks funded by extremist Islamist groups.<sup>10</sup> Moscow accused the Taliban of training Chechen rebels at camps in Afghanistan and was furious when the Taliban opened diplomatic relations with the Chechen “government” in January 2000, opening a Chechen “embassy” in Kabul.<sup>11</sup>

The North Caucasus region remains very unstable and there has been a campaign of assassinations targeted against local officials, particularly clerics and security representatives, and a string of terrorist attacks against economic targets such as railway lines, gas pipelines and other strategic infrastructure: Dagestan and Ingushetia have been particularly badly affected by the insurgency. While the situation in Chechnya provided the inspiration for growing radicalism across the North Caucasus, violence in the region has been fuelled by corrupt local government, poverty and the Kremlin’s policy of seeking to exert direct control over republics, for example, appointing regional leaders instead of allowing them to be elected locally, as was the case previously. Russian fears about the potential for further attacks were heightened in September 2014 when IS threatened to launch an attack against Russia and “liberate” the North Caucasus as a response to Moscow’s support for the Assad regime in Syria. There are serious concerns that IS might join forces with militants from the Caucasus Emirate and other radical groups in the North Caucasus, who are seeking to create an Islamic state across the Caucasus. Instability in the North Caucasus has the potential to undermine security across Russia (demonstrated by terrorist attacks in Moscow and other cities) and represents a genuine security threat. The return of the Taliban to power in Afghanistan could bolster support for Islamist militants in the North Caucasus and Moscow fears a repeat of the situation in 2000 when the Taliban opened diplomatic relations with the Chechen “government”. However, the assumption that there will be a growth in radicalisation emanating from Afghanistan via Central Asia after 2014 is flawed and certainly not a *fait accompli*. Although the radical element in the North Caucasus became stronger and more internationalised after 1999, the “scarecrow” of international terrorism is diverting attention away from issues that need to be tackled at the local level.

Another core Russian security concern connected to Afghanistan is the smuggling of drugs. Russia lies on one of the principal routes for the trafficking of drugs from Afghanistan. According to one estimate, in 2009-10 around 25 per cent of heroin from Afghanistan was smuggled via the northern route to and through Central Asia, amounting to 90 million tonnes of heroin.<sup>12</sup> The majority of this heroin is destined for markets in Russia and the UN Office on Drugs and Crime annual *World Drug Report 2014* (p. 27) highlighted a significant increase in the seizures of heroin being trafficked through Central Asia and into Russia between 1998 and 2004, although noted that overall seizures have since declined. The head of Russia’s Federal Drug Control Service, Viktor Ivanov, maintains that the production of drugs in Afghanistan has increased forty-fold since the beginning of the ISAF operation.<sup>13</sup> Russia does have a significant problem with narcotics abuse: according to a government report released in September 2013, the number of drug addicts in the country is estimated to be 8.5m people, almost six per cent

*The North Caucasus region remains very unstable and there has been a campaign of assassinations targeted against local officials*

10 Moscow accused Osama Bin Laden and the Taliban of assisting Chechen rebels, providing them with arms and training separatist fighters at camps in Afghanistan and Pakistan, claims that were apparently corroborated when many Chechens were found to be amongst the Taliban fighters during the US military operation in Afghanistan in 2001.

11 For more information see “Chechen ‘embassy’ opens in Taleban’s Kabul” (2000).

12 Figures quoted in *Afghan Narcotrafficking: A Joint Threat Assessment* (2013, p. 27).

13 “Russian official hails joint efforts to combat drug trafficking in Central Asia” (2013).

of the total population, with most addicts aged 18-39. Over 90 per cent of addicts use heroin and Russia has the greatest number of heroin addicts per capita of any country in the world, with over 30,000 people dying each year from drug-related illnesses (“Over 8 Mln Russians are drug addicts – govt report”, 2013). Russia’s heroin market is valued at US\$6bn, making it a highly lucrative business: in October 2013, the head of counter-narcotics in southwest Siberia was arrested for selling heroin.<sup>14</sup>

Drug addiction and drugs trafficking causes a series of security and social problems in both transit and destination states: it is linked to an increase in local crime levels, including corruption, increases the number of those with drugs-related health issues, and there are also concerns about the use of revenues to fund regional Islamist extremist groups. Consequently, states across the broader Central Asian region are taking joint action to tackle the narcotics problem. Russian Interior Minister Vladimir Kolokoltsev proposed the establishment of an “anti-narcotics security belt” around Afghanistan to minimise the threat posed by drug smuggling, which he described as “a scourge of our civilisation” (“Russian ministry proposes anti-drug belt around Afghanistan at CIS session”, 2013). Russia, Tajikistan, Afghanistan and Pakistan have already conducted joint operations to combat drug trafficking, destroying 22 labs and nearly 20 tons of heroin destined for Russia during 2013. They plan to build on this success, signing a roadmap that facilitates the planning and execution of large-scale joint raids to intercept Afghan heroin.<sup>15</sup> The Afghan-Tajik border is considered to be especially vulnerable: the majority of Afghan opiates trafficked via the northern route initially transit Tajikistan and it is thought that most laboratories are concentrated in areas along the border (*Afghan Narcotrafficking: A Joint Threat Assessment*, 2013, p. 28). Russian border guards manned Tajikistan’s southern border until 2005 and there was discussion in 2013 of a renewal of the Russian presence. However, CSTO Secretary-General Nikolai Bordyuzha ruled this out, maintaining that the Tajik border troops were “fully manned”, although he did suggest that Russia was considering equipping them, as they “must be provided with means that allow them to control the border successfully enough” (“Russian border guards won’t be sent to Tajikistan – Bordyuzha (Part 2)”, 2013).

*Russia is boosting its bilateral and multilateral cooperation with those Central Asian states that directly border Afghanistan*

## 2. Taking action

Amid concerns about the possibility of a deterioration in Afghanistan’s security situation after the withdrawal of international forces, which could trigger instability in Central Asia (particularly with regards to the spread of radicalism and narcotics), Russia is boosting its bilateral and multilateral cooperation with those Central Asian states that directly border Afghanistan, as well as reinforcing its military presence in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. In 2013, Afghanistan, Tajikistan and Russia signed a memorandum of understanding on border security coordination in an effort to counter drugs smuggling and terrorism (Hamdard, 2013). It was reported in 2013 that Russia is providing US\$1.3bn-worth of military assistance to these two Central Asian countries to strengthen regional security: Kyrgyzstan is anticipating US\$1.1bn of equipment, including helicopters, armoured personnel carriers (APCs) and missile launch systems, whilst the remainder is going to Tajikistan (Safronov, Chernenko & Karabekov, 2013). Tajikistan will receive assistance “in the form of aviation, communications systems, artillery, [...] anti-aircraft

14 See “Siberian Anti-Drug Police Chief Caught Selling Heroin” (2013).

15 See “Russian official hails joint efforts to combat drug trafficking in Central Asia” (2013).

missile launders and also firearms”, whilst free training for Tajik citizens at Russian military higher educational institutions will be expanded from its current level of 500 (Safronov, Chernenko & Karabekov, 2013).<sup>16</sup>

The Russian 201<sup>st</sup> army base in Tajikistan is the largest grouping of Russian armed forces outside of the borders of the Russian Federation, highlighting the importance of the area and its stability for Moscow. As mentioned above, it is perceived to be the “weakest link” amongst the Central Asian states, particularly in terms of border security. Formed in 2004, the 201<sup>st</sup> base contains 7,000 servicemen spread across three cities: Dushanbe, Kulob and Qurghonteppa. In 2011, Russia extended its lease of the base up to 2042. The base has been reorganised into a division and, by the end of 2013 had been reinforced to 80 percent of its manpower capacity. It is expected to reach full capacity by 2014. According to the bilateral agreement between Moscow and Dushanbe, signed in 2012, Russia does not pay rent for the use of the base, pledging instead to equip the Tajik army with modern weaponry and assist in its modernisation (“Ratification of agreement on Russian military base draws mixed reaction”, 2014). In September 2014, servicemen from the 201<sup>st</sup> base took part in a training exercise on the Tajik-Afghan border that envisaged 500 “terrorists” attempting to cross the border (“Russian base holds anti-terror drill on Tajik-Afghan border”, 2014). Russian and Kyrgyz servicemen also took part in counter-terrorist drills at Kant in September 2013. The head of the CIS Counter-Terror Centre, Andrei Novikov, stated that the “decision to hold such drills was right because we all know about the events that are going to happen in 2014 [...] We will not allow destabilisation of the situation in the Central Asian region” (*Vecherniy Bishkek*, 2013).

The Russian airbase at Kant in Kyrgyzstan is also being reinforced and will receive additional aircraft and helicopters, enabling it “to effectively attack targets in mountainous terrain” (Brilev, 2013). Russia opened its base at Kant in 2003, shortly after the US had established an air base at the Manas international airport near Bishkek in late 2001 to support military operations in Afghanistan. In 2009 Russia and Kyrgyzstan signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) to increase Russia’s military presence in the south of the country, primarily as part of the CSTO rapid-reaction force. After Putin agreed in September 2012 to write off Kyrgyzstan’s debt to his country, President Atambayev agreed to a 15-year extension to Moscow’s lease on the Kant air base. Russia has been keen to counter US influence in Central Asia. Prior to September 11 2001, the possibility of a formal American military commitment to the states in Central Asia was assumed to be remote. However, this changed dramatically with the 2001 terror attacks against the USA, which triggered a significant US presence across Central Asia, and bases in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, in support of the operation in Afghanistan.

The US security presence in Central Asia disconcerted Moscow and the ISAF drawdown means a reduction in the US presence in Central Asia and Afghanistan. Whilst this represents a positive outcome for Moscow, its satisfaction is countered by its concerns about the potential for instability emanating from Afghanistan. Whilst Russia is clearly concerned about the potential for destabilisation in Central Asia as a result of spillover from Afghanistan, the uncertainty affords Moscow the opportunity to justifiably strengthen its foothold in the region. Russia’s military bases outside of its own sovereign territory are not only a way to contribute to stability in the region, they also enable Russia to maintain its influence. These agreements were seen

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16 The report also claimed that Russia promised to introduce preferential terms for Tajik migrants and the abolition of export duties on the supply of fuels and lubricants.

by some as a sign that Russia is seeking to consolidate its position in Central Asia on the eve of the ISAF drawdown, and to prevent the US from boosting its position in the region. One Russian analyst noted that the question of “who is going to shape the security structure in Central Asia after 2014 is acute” and Russian assistance to Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan enabled Moscow to “seize the initiative from the United States and remain the centre of gravity for the Central Asian republics... in the security sphere” (Brilev, 2013). The presence of Russian military bases in Central Asia has drawn criticism from some observers in the region who consider the bases as a threat to the sovereignty of individual states and signals the weakness of those states. It has also been criticised by religious organisations in the region. Jamaat Ansarallah, a banned religious organisation in Tajikistan, urged the Tajik government not to ratify the agreement extending the Russian military presence in the country, stating that the

presence of the Russian military base is against the Islamic values and national interests of the Tajik people. Any document which allows a state of unbelievers to be present with its army or military units on the territory of Tajikistan...is invalid and illegitimate. (“Banned religious group challenges Tajik-Russian pact on military base”, 2013)

In fact, the increasing Russian military presence could itself trigger a rise in radical activity (as opposed to spreading from outside), suggested in the warning from Jamaat Ansarallah, which reflects Strachota’s “self-fulfilling prophecy” contention. A strong security presence intended to deter the feared upsurge in radical Islam could in itself be a catalyst for increasing support for extremist ideologies.

### 3. Multilateral cooperation

Russia and the Central Asian states are also working within the framework of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) to secure the region. Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are all members of the organisation, which was established in 2002 to boost military cooperation between member-states in order to maintain security on a collective basis.<sup>17</sup> Russia’s 2009 NSS describes the CSTO, which conducts annual large-scale military exercises, as the “main interstate instrument for responding to regional threats and challenges of a military-political or military-strategic nature” (*National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation*, 2009, Par. 13), thus there is an expectation that it will play a key role in the future maintenance of regional security. The organisation held its first joint peacekeeping exercises in Kazakhstan in October 2012, exercises which reflected regional concerns about possible instability emanating from Afghanistan in the wake of ISAF’s withdrawal: *Nerushimoye-bratstvo-2012* (Unbreakable brotherhood-2012) involved the establishment of a collective peacekeeping force in a Central Asian CSTO member-state enduring “a crisis situation as a result of activities of international extremist and terrorist organisations, as well as disputes between ethnic groups”, reflecting prevailing concerns about the potential spread of extremist groups and ideology.<sup>18</sup> A meeting of the CSTO’s Security Council held in Sochi in September 2013 discussed the provision of assistance to Tajikistan to reinforce its border with Afghanistan, as well as stepping up cooperation

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17 See *Treaty on Collective Security* (n. d.). Uzbekistan withdrew from the organisation in 2012 to focus on its security cooperation with NATO and the US.

18 The CSTO collective peacekeeping force was established in 2007 and entered into force in 2009 with a total of 4,000 personnel.

between Russia and Tajikistan within the CSTO framework to ensure national security. CSTO Secretary General Nikolai Bordyuzha maintained that boosting the effectiveness of border security at the Tajik-Afghan border was vital as it is the “external border for all CSTO member states” whose “security depends upon its condition” (Aleksandrov, 2013, pp. 1-3).

Another regional organisation, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation,<sup>19</sup> has also discussed taking a more active role in stabilising Afghanistan post-2014, led by China’s economic dominance. At first glance this would seem to be a natural fit as the primary concerns of the organisation are extremism, terrorism and separatism, as well as organised crime, drug trafficking and illegal migration, with member-states keen to avoid instability developing in neighbouring states. However, how they intend to do this remains a question and the SCO has been unable to develop a unified strategy on Afghanistan, hindered by mutual mistrust on the part of Russia and China. Despite common concerns about instability from Afghanistan spilling over, unified action amongst Central Asian states to mitigate any risk remains negligible, as the regional states remain focused on national, rather than regional, solutions. There is a lack of unity amongst the states of Central Asia and certainly no regional stance towards these common security challenges.

*There is a lack of unity amongst the states of Central Asia and certainly no regional stance towards the common security challenges*

#### 4. Concluding remarks

Moscow is very concerned about the possibility of a further deterioration in Afghanistan’s internal situation after the withdrawal of international forces in 2014, and has consequently been taking steps to bolster the security of its Central Asian neighbours through a variety of means. It is clearly defining its national security interests in the region and its official discourse on Afghanistan post-2014 focuses on the potential for destabilisation, identifying two key security threats for Russia arising from the draw-down of the international stabilisation operation in Afghanistan: a rise in the spread of radical Islam and drug smuggling, both of which could impact on Russia via Central Asia. There is some debate about the extent of these threats, but there is little doubt that they constitute a major preoccupation of Russian policy-makers, as they are both major domestic issues. The focus on the “external” as opposed to the “internal” sources of these security challenges facilitates the pursuit of a tough response and measures.

Russian policy towards the Central Asian states is driven to a large extent by concerns about security and stability, both its own and that of its southern neighbours. Amid concerns about the possibility for a further deterioration in Afghanistan’s security situation after the withdrawal of international forces, which could trigger instability in Central Asia, Russia is boosting its bilateral and multilateral cooperation with those Central Asian states that directly border Afghanistan, as well as reinforcing its military presence in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. Russia’s priority with regards to Afghanistan and the wider Central Asian region is to ensure stability. As discussed above, Tajikistan is perceived to be the “weakest link” in Central Asia because of its porous borders and underdeveloped security structures. This has prompted significant Russian assistance to bolster regional security and counter perceived cross-border security threats. Concern about the situation in Afghanistan has provided Moscow with the justification to boost

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19 The SCO encompasses cooperation in political, military, economic, energy and cultural fields between its six member states: Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.

its military presence in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, as well as promote closer cooperation within multilateral structures such as the CSTO.

Whilst there is little doubt that extremism (and drug trafficking) can cause instability, there is little evidence to support the prevailing belief that the withdrawal of international troops from Afghanistan in 2014 will inevitably prompt a growth in the manifestation of such challenges: Russian concerns about instability in Afghanistan and Central Asia reflect key domestic security issues. However, the growing Russian military presence in Central Asia, ostensibly intended to secure its southern periphery against possible instability emanating from Afghanistan, could have the reverse effect of actually stimulating a rise in the activity of extremist groups in the region. Furthermore, the perceived threat from the region has enabled Moscow to shore up its influence there. Moscow considers the broader post-Soviet space to be a sphere of its exclusive influence and has sought to counterbalance the growing involvement of other actors across the region, which has led to rising tension between Russia and some of its neighbours, most recently Ukraine. This is reflected in Russian concern about Afghanistan and Central Asia: whilst it is worried about non-traditional security threats, Russia is also seeking to regain its position as the predominant power in the Central Asian region. Thus, whilst it is imperative to recognise Russia's sense of vulnerability on its southern periphery, which is the source of many security challenges, it is also important to recognise Russia's desire to remain the predominant power in the region, which has increased in significance since 1991 with the growing interest of external actors. Russia has strong ties with the region and it is seeking to reassert its influence there, to counter the influence of actors from outside of the region, particularly the US. The uncertainty affords Russia the opportunity to justifiably strengthen its foothold in the region, undermined in recent years by the growing presence of other actors.

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