

Central Asia concerns over US pullout from Afghanistan

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By Ahmed Rashid.

The neglected region of Central Asia faces a new threat from Islamic militancy as the US withdrawal from neighbouring Afghanistan nears, reports guest columnist Ahmed Rashid.

The five Central Asian Republics are deeply fearful of the consequences of next year's withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan.

Having faced attacks from the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and other al-Qaeda linked groups before and after September 11 2001, they fear a redoubled onslaught of extremists coming across their borders from Afghanistan and Pakistan.

And there are reports that the IMU and their allies are trying to establish new bases along the Afghan border adjacent to Central Asia.

While addressing the UN General Assembly on 27 September, the foreign ministers of Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, Abdulaziz Kamilov and Erlan Idrissov, warned of serious threats to regional and global security from terrorism, extremism and drug trafficking emanating out of Afghanistan after 2014.

'Slighted'

Separately, they both blamed the West for failing to secure a political solution to the Afghan conflict before pulling troops out next year.

The five republics - Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan - do not trust the Americans or Nato to secure the region after 2014, because of their collective failure to secure peace inside Afghanistan or a regional settlement among countries bordering Afghanistan.

They feel politically slighted by the US and the Kabul government.

Meanwhile the Central Asian states are themselves deeply at odds with each other as they cannot agree on a common plan to protect their region after 2014.

Some are turning back to their old overlord - Russia.

On 1 October Tajikistan's parliament ratified a treaty with Moscow to extend by three decades Russia's bases and troops in Tajikistan.

Russia has 6,000 troops stationed in three cities to defend Tajikistan's 40-mile (64km) border with Afghanistan.

Opium trade

The most vulnerable countries are Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, which share over 1,200 miles (1,900km) of borders with northern Afghanistan.

Tajikistan is already the weakest state in the region, with an untrained army and facing a severe economic crisis - and corrupt state institutions resulting from their involvement in the opium trade coming out of Afghanistan.

For several years the IMU and other groups have been trying to establish a base around the northern Afghan city of Kunduz and the border town of Emam Sahib.

There has been fighting between the IMU and US and German troops who were based in this region, but those troops have now pulled out, leaving the Afghan army in charge.

Wahhabi conversions

Latest reports from the region point to an even more potent threat emanating from Badakhshan province in Afghanistan's north-west.

Up to 500 militants have ousted Afghan forces from several districts in the province and are trying to take control of Iskashim, a key district and town that lies along the Afghan border. It is separated from Tajikistan only by the narrow Panj river which freezes over in winter, making forays into Tajikistan much easier.

The IMU's main base is the district of Warduj, that lies in the centre of Badakhshan where some of the local population have been forcibly converted to Wahabbism - the strict Islamic code practised by the IMU and al-Qaeda.

Badakshan's mountainous terrain, set in the Pamir and Hindu Kush ranges, is to the militants' advantage.

They want to occupy a vast region where the tip of southern Tajikistan, Pakistan's north-western border, and eastern Afghanistan are all in touching distance.

In the north-east is the Wakhan corridor and the border with China, from where the IMU recruit from the local Uighur or Chinese Muslim population.

Much of the area is inaccessible to regular troops - especially the Afghan army which lacks effective air power.

Pakistan remains a crucial source of supplies for the militants, with Pakistani militant groups playing a key support role for the IMU. The IMU in turn pay for the services they receive through the money they earn in drug trafficking.

Al-Qaeda control

The Pakistan-based militants are believed to be from several groups, showing the extent of their interest in the future of Central Asia.

They include the IMU, Pakistani and Afghan Taliban, another Pakistani Punjabi group, Lashkar-e-Toiba, and the Islamic Jihad Union, a group that recruits Turks and European Muslims as well as Central Asians, and is said to be directly controlled by al-Qaeda.

The strategic danger is that the militants are trying to secure the entire north-eastern corridor of Afghanistan - the provinces of Kunar, Nuristan and Badakhshan - before next year so that they can have a major base of operations against the Kabul government.

The IMU under their charismatic leader Juma Namangani launched attacks in three Central Asian states before September 11, but then retreated into Afghanistan, joining up with the Taliban and al-Qaeda.

After Namangani was killed fighting the US invasion in 2001, IMU remnants retreated into Pakistan's tribal areas, from where they have reorganised themselves and operated ever since.

They received large numbers of recruits after the Uzbek government massacred more than 1,000 people in Andijan in the Ferghana Valley in 2005.

Since then IMU fighters have fought with the Afghan and Pakistani Taliban and al-Qaeda against the Pakistan, Afghan and US armies.

Oil and gas wealth

The IMU recruits from all the nationalities in Central Asia as well as Uighurs, Pakistanis, Chechens and other ethnic groups from the Caucasus.

For the first time there are reports of Turkmen and Kazakhs among the fighters in Badakshan. Traditionally these two ethnic groups have not supported militancy.

Despite its partial oil and gas wealth, politically Central Asia remains one of the most neglected regions of the world. The states remain deeply suspicious of outsider intentions.

The Americans are disliked, the Russians are not trusted and overwhelming Chinese influence is feared.

However Central Asia now faces a new threat from Islamic militancy.