

# **Eurasia's Cross-Border Threats**

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## **Eurasia After the Cold War**

Many nations hoped that the end of the Cold War and the bipolar epoch dominated by the Soviet Union and the United States would open up new opportunities to rebuild the world on the basis of general human values and interests. It seemed that the international community had a unique historical chance to form a new global order based on just legal principles and to herald a new era that would be free from the past's legacy of antagonism.

The course of international developments was indeed greatly impacted by the end of the bipolar system. States found themselves more vulnerable and less protected against the old threats and confronting new ones. Crucially, they did not create adequate mechanisms to ensure international stability in the face of the threats and contradictions of this new order of international relations.

In fact, threats to security may even be greater in this era of increased interdependence among states. The stability of many countries and whole regions has been shaken by conflicts laden with interethnic and interconfessional tensions, religious extremism, and aggressive separatism. The danger of the proliferation of nuclear and other types of weapons of mass destruction—as well as of their means of delivery—is particularly menacing. The gap between poor and rich countries continues to widen. The narcotics trade has grown, as has organized crime, which has increasingly crossed national borders and assumed truly global proportions.

In this new era, Eurasia has become the key arena of international politics by virtue of both its geographical significance in the modern world and the role that it will play in determining the shape and contours of future scenarios. The transformation of the international order has contributed to the evolution of new security concepts that are significantly different from those that defined the Cold War. The new global order is characterized by a significant expansion in the range of [security threats](#), changes in the identification of security objects, and shifting approaches to the choice of

means to confront [contemporary threats](#). All of these concepts apply to the unstable but crucially important region of Central Asia.

## **Paradigm Shift**

Before the age of increasing global interdependence and the growing influence of various international actors and associations that began in the early 1990s, the concepts of the traditional state and its sovereignty in the realm of security dominated the international system. The U.S. and Soviet superpowers played out their confrontation, the key aspects of which were the policy of containment and the problem of the balance of power. In principle, security policy was based on three premises: security problems were addressed by state activities, mostly by state military preparations and plans; state security was understood as the security of the whole society; and security problems were primarily solved by military means at the national level and by unions at the international level.

The end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet system changed the agenda in international relations. Now, security policy has become multidimensional and focused on the vital issues of territorial integrity and border security, combining in the process both the internal and external security issues of any given state. Cross-border threats are not necessarily directed against the state, but they have the potential to destabilize the political situation within a country and impact interstate relations.

For a period of time, the West in general—and especially the United States—did not pay serious attention to the development of these new cross-border threats. In particular, it did not sufficiently consider the analysis of new conceptual approaches to the development of international terrorism and its potential threat to the national security until September 11, 2001. Now, it is becoming clear that the expansion of cross-border threats is dangerously increasing the level of uncertainty almost everywhere.

The emergence of these threats is closely linked to a number of factors, including:

- an increase in poverty and its associated problems, such as increased migration flows, including illegal immigration and human trafficking;
- the internationalization or globalization of terrorism and ethnic conflicts;
- the development of different types of criminal activities, particularly drug trafficking and cross-border arms transfer;
- the emergence of underground shadow economies or gray markets with illegal capital flow and money laundering operations;

- the use of advanced information technology, Internet, and social media networks as tools to recruit or indoctrinate new followers of destructive ideologies;
- the illegal transfer of lethal weapons on global scale;
- the widespread violation of national sovereignty by some regional and global powers, including the United States;
- the impacts of climate change and global warming on water and food security and the ensuing regional and global crises.

## **Roots of Central Asian Conflicts**

Early in the twentieth century, countries in Central Asia became increasingly pivotal in geopolitics due to their prime location. In the process, they found themselves in the middle of a rivalry between influential powers. Global and regional actors vying to gain a foothold in the region began exerting tangible pressure on the process of geopolitical formation in Central Asia. Researchers trace the roots of some of the region's conflicts back to this period.

The Soviet Union committed major mistakes in the region back in the early 1920s when it drew artificial administrative and territorial borders of Central Asian states. The Soviet regime paid scant attention to the historical past of the region in doing so. After the process of creating the Soviet Socialist Republics in Central Asia was completed by 1936, it became evident that peoples' rights had been infringed upon in the divisions. The borders of the majority of the independent states of the former Soviet Union were established arbitrarily, without taking into account the peoples and tribes living there, so many ethnic tribes were artificially divided by state borders.

In addition, many peoples and tribes with enmity toward each other were thrown together within one state. For example, this sort of interclan struggle occurred in Tajikistan, the only non-Turkic-language state in Central Asia, where the tensions escalated into a civil war that lasted from 1992 to 1997. The bitter confrontation was between clans from the Leninabad and Kulyab regions, which traditionally dominated the power structure in Soviet Tajikistan, and clans from Garm and Gorno-Badakhshan, which began to exert their claim to power after the fall of the Soviet Union.

The civil war in Tajikistan ended with a general agreement on the establishment of peace and national accord, but tensions and armed clashes persisted in the following years. The process of reconciliation was impeded by the rivalry between clans and regions of [Tajikistan](#), interethnic frictions, and ideological differences between the government and the opposition.

The vestiges of these tensions, along with many other factors, have kept Tajikistan—and especially its Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Province—fragile. Instability in this area may have dire consequences for the region. The restive Gorno-Badakhshan Province has direct access to the Wakhan Corridor, a small but geostrategically important piece of land used by religious insurgent groups, such as the Haqqani Network, the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan, Lashkar-e-Taiba, Tablighi Jamaat, the East Turkestan Islamic Movement, and others in Northern Waziristan. An open and porous Tajik border along this corridor could turn it into a serious headache for almost all Central Asian countries. Indian scholar Subhash Kapila has elaborated on the [importance of the Wakhan Corridor](#).

Interclan relations have played a determinant role in the other Central Asian republics as well. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the formation of independent states, the clans began to pursue their ideological and political aims under the slogans of national independence and resurrection.

Tensions between clans are still preventing peace in Kyrgyzstan. The Kyrgyz ethnic group, on behalf of which the country was named, remains a minority in the most fertile regions of the country. In June 2010, ethnic tensions between the Kyrgyz and the local Uzbek population in Ferghana Valley erupted into a bloody conflict. According to Russian scholar Irina Zwyagelskaya, the Ferghana Region has become a twisted ethnic knot, complicated by the borderline and a territorial dispute over a strip of land between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, the Isfara District.

Here, the ethnic knot is compounded by the existence of transborder ethnic groups, divided by arbitrarily outlined borders and enclaves. According to expert data, 56.2 percent of all ethnic Tajik in Central Asia live in the Uzbek provinces of Surkhandarya and Kashkadarya, which also border Tajikistan and Afghanistan.<sup>1</sup>

Elsewhere in Central Asia, a considerable number of Uzbeks live in the south and southwest of Kazakhstan. In the Shymkent Region of Kazakhstan, which borders Uzbekistan, Uzbeks made up 42 percent of the population in the 1989 census. At the same time, most Kazakhs living in Uzbekistan inhabit the regions bordering Kazakhstan. The majority of [Kyrgyz in Uzbekistan](#) (75.3 percent) live in the Ferghana Valley, and a majority of Turkmen living in Uzbekistan (49 percent) live in the Karakalpakstan, Surkhandarya, Bukhara, and Khorezm Regions.

These sorts of ethnically mixed populations determine to a considerable extent the specifics and complexity of interethnic relations, which may be fraught with danger. Certain unfavorable internal or external circumstances

may aggravate the resulting domestic political situations and serve as pretexts for conflict.

However, interethnic complexities are not entirely to blame for conflicts in Central Asian states. The difficulties of transition experienced by all Central Asian states unsettled their ultimate socioeconomic, political, legal, ecological, and other situations. In addition, the existence of foreign Islamic fundamentalist centers that train combatants and recruits from the local populations and of underground religious extremist groups further added to the porousness of borders. All these factors are evidence of the complexity of the social and political situations throughout Central Asia.

### **Potential for Broader Destabilization**

In this respect, the sociopolitical and interethnic situation in Central Asia as a whole cannot be described as stable. Any number of situations—the failure of socioeconomic reforms in any of the regional countries, a rise in interethnic tensions, an increase in the influence of different extremist groups—could give rise to new hotbeds of interethnic, interconfessional, or interstate conflicts.

Conflicts of this nature can lead to almost all other types of established security threats. For example, the problem of refugees and asylum seekers fleeing such conflicts may pose a threat of social instability in one or more state. A massive flow of refugees may lead to social tensions in host countries, which may become a destabilizing factor. In addition, the economic difficulties associated with an influx of refugees may accentuate internal political crises. Tensions between refugees and the local population in many cases result in citizens' dissatisfaction with the state's decision to accept refugees. This discontent, in turn, can be used by various political forces to their own advantage, which has had a negative impact on the domestic situation across Central Asia in general.

Increased refugee flow also poses a threat to national security because conflicting parties may try to use the situation to exacerbate and aggravate tensions. For example, there is a chance for conflicts to be aggravated by armed groups joining the flow of refugees and using the new territory in the host country to establish paramilitary training camps for militants or weapon stockpiles. One of the dangerous aspects of this trend is the fact that such actors may not be states interested in continuing the conflict in hopes of weakening their opponents. Extremist groups and other nonstate actors are equally interested in maintaining such tensions, seeking to use them as "cover" for their activities.

The current situation in Iraq and Syria clearly illustrates this point. The arrival of more than 150,000 [Syrian refugees](#), mostly Sunnis, in Iraq has proven “a tricky question for Iraq's Shi’ite-led government, which fears Sunni Islamist fighters seeping back across the border from Syria’s conflict to worsen Iraq’s own increasingly sectarian violence.” In addition, Iraq worries that towns on the Syria-Iraq border held by rebels will become bases for Sunni Islamist insurgents and members of al-Qaeda to launch attacks in Iraq.

Recent events in the Middle East, especially in context of the Arab Spring, have illustrated the ways in which interstate relationships and cross-border security threats can spread social tensions and instability throughout the region and possibly create an explosive situation. In the vast majority of former Soviet states, including Russia, this model seems extremely relevant.

This situation was exacerbated by the significant geographical spread of conflict-prone areas in the Middle East, and there are a number of similarly unstable regions in Russia. The North Caucasus, for example, is characterized not only by long-lasting and ineffective military operations in Chechnya but also by multiple other points of potential conflicts, such as separatist movements in Karachay-Cherkessia, Kabardino-Balkaria, and Dagestan; remaining tensions surrounding the 1992 Ossetian-Ingush conflict; and the problem of Lezghin separatist groups on the border of Azerbaijan. A number of potential conflict points are also located on the border of Russia and Kazakhstan.

In addition, many long-standing, sporadic conflicts are located in Central Asia. There are long-running conflicts in Kurdistan and Afghanistan; unsolved Indo-Pakistani and Indo-Chinese border disputes; and a potential conflict zone in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region in northwest China. Under certain adverse conditions, each of these hotspots could erupt into armed clashes.

Increased instability in the North Caucasus or Central Asia would negatively impact the situation in neighboring countries. A good example is the situation in China’s Xinjiang Uyghur Province: many Uyghurs live in bordering Central Asian countries, where a number of separatist organizations, including some illegal ones from Uyghur areas of China, are operational. These political forces wish to reinforce the idea of a creating a separate Uyghur state—recreating East Turkestan—and appeal to people from that platform.

## **A Legacy of Conflict**

Border conflicts already existed in many nations that make up the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS)—a regional organization of former Soviet republics—during the last years of Soviet power. Highly complicated situations erupted in Moldova, Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia, Ossetia, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan as well as in many other potential conflict areas. Indeed, it seems that practically all internal borders of CIS states have had disputed boundaries.

In some cases, direct conflicts erupted even during the Soviet years, such as the large-scale, violent riots between ethnic Uzbeks and Kyrgyz that occurred in the cities of Uzgen and Osh in the territory of the Kyrgyz Soviet Socialist Republic in June 1990. Leading American expert on Central Asia Nancy Lubin and some of her colleagues have noted similarities between a series of pogroms against Meskhetian Turks in the Ferghana Valley that happened in 1989 and riots against Armenians who had recently been deported from Nagorno-Karabakh to the Tajik Soviet Socialist Republic in 1990.<sup>2</sup>

In addition, most of the countries had ethnic problems that could easily have become full-blown conflicts, such as in the case of the Talysh separatist movement in southern Azerbaijan. In some cases, a latent danger of conflict escalation may lurk in the unresolved problems of the Russian-speaking population. A case in point is Kazakhstan, and separatism in Azerbaijan and Tajikistan is also a relevant problem. In general, there were about 100 conflicts and potential conflict points in the mid-1990s in the southern and Asian parts of the former Soviet Union, including the North Caucasus and Transcaucasia.<sup>3</sup>

As for Russia, the experience of armed conflicts in the post-Soviet space confirms that the negative consequences of these clashes—such as refugees, uncontrolled transfers of weaponry, and human and narcotic trafficking—become a great headache for Russian authorities at all levels of government and society. Russia has mismanaged various measures with regard to the CIS, including integration processes with former Soviet countries on number of vital issues, such as national identity, dual citizenship, free migration, and temporary job seekers support. These missteps have resulted in violations of economic and human ties and caused suffering to the Russian population living in armed conflict zones. Efforts to disengage and reconcile warring parties without favoring any one of them have frequently put Russia in a difficult situation in which all parties are dissatisfied with Moscow. This reduces Russia's room for maneuver both in its political and other relations with the countries of the CIS, often making the [national interests of Russia](#) dependent on the conflicting parties or personal ambitions of a regional politician.

Armed conflicts near the Russian borders in CIS countries have the ability to pull in actors from other countries, either overtly or covertly. They thus become potential embryos of international military and political problems. The longer such conflicts remain unresolved, the more they become a breeding ground for professional soldiers who know nothing but war. These individuals are becoming a threat in conflict-ridden territories of Russia such as Chechnya and Dagestan.

In a broad international political context, armed conflicts in the former Soviet space illustrate one aspect of the emerging Western concept of security, which puts the society—represented by an individual or a group—and not the state at the center of security concerns. According to this concept, the task of providing security extends beyond the state framework (the border) and includes regional and international structures at various levels for cooperation. This understanding therefore expands the boundaries of the solution to security questions beyond the exclusive jurisdiction of the state.<sup>4</sup>

Such a general, abstract formulation of the problem acquires a specific resonance when applied to former Soviet nations' relations with the West. Often Western actors consider issues of refugees, human rights violations, and freedom of press from the perspective of double standards and use them to exert pressure on the former Soviet states. This is done in the context of confrontation between new geopolitical players and global powers seeking control over vital energy resources and strategic transportation corridors in an attempt to ensure their dominance and supremacy.

### **Addressing Emerging Threats**

Armed conflicts in the world in general and in the post-Soviet space in particular are closely related to one of the greatest contemporary threats—international terrorism. In addition to this security challenge, which has assumed a truly global character, the increasingly international activities of criminal syndicates have emerged as another factor that is highly relevant to other post-Soviet countries. This threat is often understood as separate from the dangers of ethno-religious conflicts and international terrorism and underestimated in comparison with them. In reality, however, all three threats are closely associated.

The dangerous activities of criminal syndicates during periods of state weakness, including the transition period of restructuring social relations, led to the genesis and growth of criminal communities. In some countries, these communities not only use existing hostilities but also provoke new armed conflicts to further their own interests. Criminal syndicates do not seek the

destruction of the state. Instead, they aim to imbed themselves into the state machinery and political structures. Successfully developing the economy with a corrupt administration is the best option for them.

The accelerated internationalization and criminalization of illegal trade, much of which is occurring thanks to arms and drug trafficking syndicates, is contributing to regional destabilization. Crucially, the activities of [criminal syndicates](#) dramatically

increase in periods of economic liberalization and "openness," such as during the 1990s in Russia, Central Asia, and India.

If they are not adequately and quickly neutralized, this and other threats of the post-Soviet world, which is characterized by numerous and various contradictions, may lead to lingering resistance and armed violence. The potential of conflicts in Central Asia is to a considerable extent connected to these countries' weak political and social bases, their power systems and internal links, the economic pillars of Central Asian society, the values of the population, and other aspects of life. As a result, there has been resistance between different Central Asian forces in nearly all of their mutual relations. This in turn led to a general imbalance in the regional security system.

### **Toward a Regional Solution**

Afghanistan and its neighboring Central Asian territories will remain conflict prone and internally unstable, especially at their sensitive and almost open borders, until mutually acceptable patterns of coexistence are found that bind them to one another through historical, economic, cultural, and psychological ties.

For this reason, the task of establishing effective systems of collective measures is crucial, as it is a reliable mechanism to ensure the balance of power at regional and global levels. It will require the establishment of a system of regional cooperation and integration in almost all vitally important areas of Central Asian countries' development.

<sup>1</sup>«Региональная безопасность и сотрудничество в Центральной Азии и на Кавказе». Сборник статей. М., Центр исследований проблем мира и развития «Форум», 1999, стр.253.

<sup>2</sup> Nancy Lubin and Barnett R. Rubin, *Calming the Ferghana Valley: Development and Dialogue in the Heart of Central Asia* (New York, The Century Fund, 2000).

<sup>3</sup> Георгий Милославский. Закавказье и Центральная Азия в середине 90-х годов: Новая геополитическая ситуация и проблемы безопасности. Россия и мусульманский мир. 2006, N 6.

<sup>4</sup> James N. Roseneau, "Turbulence in World Politics: A Theory of Change and Continuity" Princeton University Press (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1990); Barry Buzan, *People, States and Fear: An Agenda for International Security Studies in the Post-Cold War Era* (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991).