

CENTRAL ASIA: Implications of the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan

- Concerns over security and uncontrolled migration have led to inconsistent and uncoordinated reactions from Central Asian governments to the Taliban coming to power in Afghanistan.
- Multiple risks stemming from the uncertain political outlook in Afghanistan are underpinning closer cooperation between the Central Asian countries, Russia and China.

The reaction of Central Asian governments to the fallout of the Taliban's swift ascent to power in Afghanistan has been uncoordinated and inconsistent. For example, Tajikistan, which has a 1357-kilometer-long border with Afghanistan, initially planned to absorb up to 100,000 refugees but later tightened its stance and completely suspended cross-border traffic until 20 September. Tajik President Emomali Rahmon has also suggested that Dushanbe will not recognize the new Afghan government unless it includes the Tajik ethnic minority in the future government of Afghanistan.

Similarly, Kazakhstan has withdrawn its earlier proposal to host thousands of Afghan refugees in public schools and now is only offering to shelter UN officials relocated out of Afghanistan. Kazakh authorities do not have official ties with the Taliban and in the past had supported the NATO-led mission in Afghanistan.

Meanwhile, Uzbekistan has already seen a major inflow of civilian refugees and fleeing soldiers even after the Uzbek military shot down an Afghan plane attempting to enter the country's airspace. As a result, Tashkent has also tightened its border control and is maintaining regular contacts with the Taliban to mitigate potential security risks. The Uzbek government is also showing willingness to host international humanitarian operations from its territory.

In contrast to its regional peers, Turkmenistan appears to be seeking closer ties with the Taliban and has already organized some regional-level meetings. The reasons for this are largely economic: the country exports electricity to Afghanistan and still has hopes to construct a gas pipeline across Afghanistan into Pakistan, particularly after the recent launch of new gas wells at the Galkynysh field.

Multiple risks to Central Asia...

The uncertain political outlook in Afghanistan poses multiple risks to Central Asia. The UN refugee agency has recently warned that around 500,000 Afghans might flee the country by the end of 2021. Faced with such a wave of refugees, Central Asian governments would face multiple challenges of providing (or refusing) humanitarian assistance while maintaining security and popular support at home.

Most Central Asian governments are also acutely concerned about the potential for extremist fighters within their borders to seek common cause with either the Taliban or other Islamic extremist groups. Given its history of grappling with Islamic extremism, Uzbekistan is most vulnerable in this respect. However, difficult socio-economic conditions and pervasive corruption make fertile ground for the spread of extremism across the region. There is also strong public support in Tajikistan for funding or otherwise supporting northern militias in the Panjshir mountains (along the northern Afghanistan border with Tajikistan) to resist the Taliban and provide a security buffer.

Last but not least, the political uncertainty could have economic implications. For example, two-thirds of Kazakhstan's annual flour exports (worth an estimated USD 326mn) go to Afghanistan. A potential collapse of this market could be a notable near-term blow to the Kazakh economy. Also, the Taliban's potential ban on poppy production in Afghanistan could disrupt lucrative drug trafficking operations linked to influential criminal networks across Central Asia.

[...could boost cooperation with Russia and China](#)

Amid the growing risks, all Central Asian countries appear uniform in their willingness to step up their cooperation with Russia and China. Already before the Taliban's takeover of Kabul, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan had conducted joint military exercises with Russia, while China has been long advancing its Belt and Road Initiative in the region. China's Ministry of Public Security, the internal security service, also held joint anti-terrorism exercises with Tajikistan's Ministry of Internal Affairs in August. Moscow, in turn, has recently upgraded its military bases in Central Asia, stepped up the supply of military equipment to the region, and is planning more drills in the coming months.

Further cooperation between Central Asia, Russia, and China will be discussed during the summits of the Moscow-led Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in Dushanbe (Tajikistan) on 16-17 September. In general, Moscow will likely seek to expand its military and political positions in the region, while China's top concern is to prevent Afghanistan from becoming a base for separatist militants from Xinjiang.

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Andrius Tursa

Central & Eastern Europe Advisor
+370 6792 4910
andrius.tursa@teneo.com

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