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AFGHANISTAN AND REGIONAL SECURITY: PERSPECTIVES FROM RUSSIA, CENTRAL ASIA, AND CHINA

SPEAKERS:
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Shairbek Jurayev- Chair and Assistant Professor, Department of International and Comparative Politics, American University of Central Asia

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REMARKS

Concerns were high at Thursday’s forum on Afghanistan among experts presenting the Russian, Chinese, and Central Asian perspective for US and NATO presence in Afghanistan. Along with Iran, Afghanistan dominates US foreign policy concerns, and the Obama Administration is currently reviewing its strategy for more effective ways of coping with the challenges in both of these countries. Panelists at the CSIS discussion expressed a consensus view that the US lacks a coherent regional strategy to Afghanistan, and current policies do not pay adequate attention to the region’s need for economic development.

Pavel Baev
Mr. Baev’s comments were divided into two categories: the internal developments in Afghanistan and the external factors that weaken attempts to stabilize the region. The internal situation in Afghanistan exposes a central government subordinated to the power of its provinces. And the recent elections in Afghanistan confirm what Baev views as, “Two steps back for the Afghani government.” Externally, tension is high in Central Asia, most notably in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, which restricts the level of cooperation that these countries can engage Afghanistan on.
Mr. Baev’s principal concern with the Northern Distribution Network (NDN) is that it will contribute to the internal divide of Afghanistan and render Kabul unable to control what happens next. This uncertainty in Afghanistan makes Russia skeptical of the stabilizing efforts by the West.

EKATERINA STEPANOVA
Recent US-Russia relations reached a low point following the Georgian conflict last year. With the new US administration, Russia has effectively “instrumentalized” upgraded cooperation with the US and NATO on Afghanistan to improve its relations with the West. However, within this policy framework, bilateral relationships between Russia and Afghanistan, and Russia’s external posture in that respect remain, as Ms. Stepanova commented, “merely a derivative of US-Russia relations.” The agreement on the US military transit reflects this “instrumental” Russian approach, centered on broader Russian-Western relations and pursued for reasons unrelated to Afghanistan.

For Russia, the most serious threat emanating from Afghanistan is the outflow of opiates which poses a major threat on “human security” in Russia. In order to reduce the opium economy in Afghanistan two basic conditions must be met. On the economic level, market conditions should favor a decline of opiates—presently, the undersupply of food and wheat and the decreasing level of food security in the world, coupled with the oversupply of opium, have produced a market correction favorable to a certain shift from opium to wheat cultivation. On the political-security level, the single most important condition is the improved general functionality of the state. This includes at least minimally functional governance in the main drug-producing areas that could guarantee basic services and law and order to the local population and ensure at least non-confrontational attitudes on the part of this population. This condition is essential for any counternarcotics measures to become effective. Such functional governance in these primarily Pashtu areas is unlikely to be established in the context of the ongoing, and intensifying, armed confrontation with the main and the most powerful Pashtu force—the Taliban.

The narrow window of opportunity for market correction, favoring a modest decline in opium cultivation and production in Afghanistan, warrants swift action by the actors already in place in the region. This approach will help identify a way to ensure functional governance in areas torn by drugs and conflict, if not by the success of a decisive counterinsurgency than by other means, including stable ceasefires. The major challenge for Russia is finding a more even balance between its genuine interests in Afghanistan, namely the reduction of the opium economy (where progress is unlikely in the context of continuing armed confrontation)—and the “reset” dynamic of Russia’s newly improved relations with the West, inspired by Russian support of the US-NATO counterinsurgency campaign.

SHAIRBEK JURAEV
The current Central Asian perspective on Afghanistan reveals a weaker approach. Yet there is a serious political threat lingering for Central Asia without their proactive commitment. Mr. Juraev expressed hope in the best possible solution for Afghanistan, but Central Asia’s
prescription will be less forthcoming as Afghanistan has never commanded serious interest from Central Asian nations. There is however, a lack of confidence that the Taliban will be defeated, leaving Central Asia to deal with the aftermath of NATO in Afghanistan. Mr. Juraev shared similar sentiments with his Russian counterparts stating that the bilateral relationship of Central Asian countries with Afghanistan is secondary to the US policy toward Afghanistan.

However, Central Asia remains hopeful for greater economic cooperation with Afghanistan on border issues and concerns over water supply. To this end, Central Asia seeks more active involvement in Afghanistan and awaits further articulation on specific ways of doing so.

Another reason why it is critical for the US to broaden their approach in Afghanistan is because the same threat they seek to eliminate in Afghanistan permeates Central Asia. Pushing for democracy and military presence in Afghanistan will inevitably produce different results—a miscalculation on Washington’s part in the past.

ALEXANDER COOLEY
Mr. Cooley presented a more pessimistic view of the challenges for the Northern Distribution Network, positing that, “The US military lacks authority in Central Asia.” Military presence within the host countries of NDN becomes a balancing act for economic gain. The level of corruption in this region is getting worse and perverting chances for greater rule of law and transparency in Central Asian Governments. Thus, defining the strategy of the Northern Distribution Network (NDN) becomes increasingly relevant. Since the NDN must generate a real economic buy-in from host countries, and contribute to the creation of a system with competitive contracts and bidding and proves that the US is not merely trying to colonize Central Asia.

Mr. Cooley’s assessment of the Northern Distribution Network suggested that matters would not worsen, but would not improve either. However, the NDN runs the risk of further eroding the capacity of the state and makes Central Asia an arena for powerful “rent seekers” to control the region. Whether a militant backlash from extremist groups like the IMU would ensue, helps us speculate about the vulnerabilities of the project. Naturally, a supply chain linked to unpopular governments would be an attractive target for these groups, so it is critical for the United States to prove that partnerships in Central Asia are not a side-show to Afghanistan.

ELIZABETH WISHNIK
“Afghanistan is the missing piece of the Central Asian strategy for China,” commented Ms. Wishnik. China’s interest in Afghanistan is to frame Central Asia and Afghanistan as a regional complex. Additionally, the worsening situation in Pakistan evidenced in the 2008 kidnappings of Chinese citizens heightens Chinese concern about the escalation of terrorism, particularly in the neighboring Xiangjiang province.

Despite the situation in Pakistan, Afghanistan is regarded as a major resource opportunity for China. With more than $3 billion already invested in projects as diverse as coal, transportation
and copper mining, and with the proper infrastructure in place, China can look to Afghanistan and Central Asia for its own energy security. Advancing development initiatives in Central Asia requires proper assessment of the demographic and social dissonance in the region. But, China has continued to look at NATO and the Northern Distribution Network as a means of emphasizing its own interests in building infrastructure that can strengthen their economic ties to Central Asia.

In order to advance Afghanistan’s status in the global community, it is necessary to situate NDN within the context of a broader stroke by neighboring allies, working together with China and Russia to achieve regional stability in Central Asia. The routes of NDN and the links sponsored by the Asian Development Bank, Japan and Russia, forms a network of roads and transport that improve the level of trade, the amount of transport, and the economic welfare of countries resurrected by this “Modern Silk Road.”

Following the presentation, discussion surfaced on issues related to Central Asia’s capacity to handle the possible movement of fighters, likely local Islamic groups that could upset regional security and undermine the role that government holds throughout Central Asia. Our experts called attention to these concerns within their closing remarks, recommending that the US take a lead role on commitments to greater Central Asia. To formulate a strategy that withstands the criticism of a “US cut-and-run” in Afghanistan, regional cooperation must be at the forefront of US foreign policy to achieve the goal of long term sustainability therein.