

# **NATO Supply Lines in Central Asia: Expanding the Scope of Conflict?**

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The Afghan theater appears set to witness a series of decisive battles. The coalition forces are preparing for a fresh round against the Taliban and other insurgents and the United States has announced an upsurge of troops in Afghanistan. With the fresh deployment of an additional 17,000 troops, the number of US troops will be increased to around 50,000 while the Taliban have countered the American move by uniting their forces on both sides of Pak-Afghan border. Previously, Taliban groups of the Pakistani tribal areas were scattered though nominally under the Tehrik-i-Taliban (TTP) umbrella. Some factions of the Pakistani Taliban have been more focused on attacking the Pakistani state, society, and the security forces while others have concentrated on Afghanistan. The Baitullah Mehsud-led TTP has been the most lethal group and placed considerable emphasis on waging “jihad” against Pakistan. On the contrary, Taliban factions under Mullah Nazir and Hafiz Gul Bahadur, both of whom wield significant power and influence, were not in favor of carrying out attacks in Pakistan. Therefore, Mullah Nazir never became a full participant in the TTP and Hafiz Gul Bahadur distanced himself from Baitullah Mehsud after the TTP’s activities in Pakistan were condemned by the Afghan Taliban Supreme Commander Mullah Omar. Hafiz Gul Bahadur also announced the creation of a new parallel organization, the Muqami Tehreek-e-Taliban (MTT), or local Taliban.

In February 2009 differences were resolved (at least temporarily) between Baitullah Mehsud, Hafiz Gul Bahadur, and Mullah Nazir and they jointly announced the formation of the Shura Ittehad-ul-Mujahideen (The Alliance of Mujahideen). According to the reports, Mullah Omar played an important role in merging the Taliban factions together in Pakistan’s Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and first sent an envoy to the MTT and then wrote a letter to the TTP urging its leaders to immediately cease attacks on the Pakistani security forces and concentrate their resources on the fight against American and NATO forces inside Afghanistan.<sup>1</sup> The timing of the Taliban’s unity move appeared to be linked to the expected arrival of 17,000 more US troops in Afghanistan. A military upsurge in Afghanistan would also require additional supplies and logistics. Therefore, a diversification of supply routes into Afghanistan is understandably being sought by the US and NATO in order to ensure sustained supplies for their troops. However, the troop upsurge in Afghanistan is not the only factor which prompted Western strategists to search for new supply routes.

The main supply route through Pakistan has been under serious threat since December 2008 when Taliban militants mounted sustained attacks on NATO supply lines passing through Pakistan. According to some estimates, Taliban militants have torched more than 500 vehicles carrying supplies for allied troops. Similarly, more than 80 drivers involved in transporting NATO supplies have been killed. The Taliban have used multiple tactics to disrupt the main supply route through Pakistan. For instance, overnight raids and rocket attacks on the terminal, threatening and targeting the business outfits involved in the transportation of NATO’s logistics, and blowing up bridges which connect Pakistan with Afghanistan have all been witnessed. However, despite protracted attacks Pakistani security forces must be commended for having prevented a larger scale and strategically

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<sup>1</sup> Mazhar Tufail, “Mullah Omar orders halt to attacks on Pak troops” *The News*, Lahore, 24 February 2009  
<http://www.thenews.com.pk>

significant attack on NATO's supplies into Afghanistan. A US military spokesman was quoted as saying the losses were "militarily insignificant" and would have only "minimal effects on our operations."<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, at a time when NATO's main supply route through Pakistan is under threat, the US and NATO have intensified their efforts to seek alternative routes through the Central Asian states of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan.

Though many Central Asian states are being persuaded to provide alternative supply routes, Tajikistan will be the most significant in this regard. While other Central Asian states have only agreed to allow non-lethal goods, the Tajikistan route is being envisioned to transport military items. The question arises as to whether the alternative routes through "stans" are viable. With the help of already existing networks of Islamist militants in Central Asia, the Taliban would not hesitate to target NATO's supply lines passing through volatile Central Asian states. Ultimately, the battleground would be extended. Are the Central Asian states capable enough to deal with a highly sophisticated, organized, and motivated network of Islamist insurgents? In view of the global economic crisis, do NATO and the US possess enough military and monetary resources and the will to engage the Taliban, Al-Qaeda and their allies beyond Afghanistan? Even if Western troops have been deployed in the Central Asian states to safeguard shipments through roads, will Russia allow NATO's operational extension in its backyard? While multiple lines of re-supply are desirable, depending largely on Central Asian states would be strategically and tactically unwise. In fact, northern routes are not simply longer but are also more expensive and still largely under Russian influence. As such, they can quickly develop acute vulnerabilities after becoming operational. Some possible outcomes of the West's move to divert supply lines through Central Asia need to be explored in order to ensure long term stability and security in the region.

### **Expanding the Conflict Zone**

The Central Asian region has been a home to various indigenous radical Islamist movements such as Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM), Islamic Jihad Union (IJU) and the Islamic Movement of Tajikistan (IMT). In the recent past, external group like Hizb-ut-Tahrir (HT) have also been able to consolidate their footholds in the region. HT is a proscribed entity in many countries. The group is accused of terrorist activities in Central Asian Region.

Militant groups in Central Asian States maintained strong relationships with the Afghan Taliban and Al-Qaeda and after bin Laden moved back to Afghanistan in May 1996. Al-Qaeda has not only sent combat veterans to assist Islamist groups fighting in the region but also provided training facilities to their Central Asian comrades in Afghan camps.<sup>3</sup> However, after "Operation Enduring

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<sup>2</sup>U.S. calls attacks on NATO military depots in Pakistan "insignificant", [http://www.thaindian.com/newsportal/india-news/us-calls-attacks-on-nato-military-depots-in-pakistan-insignificant\\_100128722.html](http://www.thaindian.com/newsportal/india-news/us-calls-attacks-on-nato-military-depots-in-pakistan-insignificant_100128722.html)

<sup>3</sup>Michael Scheuer, "Central Asia in Al-Qaeda's Vision of the Anti-American Jihad, 1979-2006", *China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly*, Volume 4, No. 2, 2006, p. 7.

Freedom” in Afghanistan by the coalition forces, these groups were forced to leave Afghanistan and find new sanctuaries in FATA where they established contacts with a new brand of Pakistani Taliban.

Considering the expected escalation of the conflict, the Taliban and Al-Qaeda could fairly easily exploit their strong links with Central Asian militant groups to expand into that region. The most critical point of failure in the system would be Tajikistan, which will be used for the shipment of military supplies into Afghanistan. An expected alliance of the battle hardened militants of Al-Qaeda, Taliban (both Afghan and Pakistani), and indigenous Tajik groups would easily outnumber the Tajik military, which only consists of around 8,800 troops.<sup>4</sup> Uzbekistan, which maintains a comparatively large army with approximately 53,000 active troops, would face a revival of the most lethal militant group in Central Asia, the IMU. It is worth mentioning here that the Central Asian militants were heavily involved in operations against the United States in 2001.<sup>5</sup> Chechen and Uzbek fighters, for example, fought in a stubborn and disciplined fashion against Northern Alliance forces in northern Afghanistan as well as against U.S. forces in the south and during “Operation Anaconda.” In addition, Pakistan’s army has suffered considerable casualties battling Chechens, Uzbeks, and Uighurs since 2003 when it began operating against Al-Qaeda and Taliban forces in Waziristan.<sup>6</sup> How long the ill-equipped Central Asian militaries, with no experience of conventional or unconventional warfare, will be able to stand against battle-hardened, well-trained, well-organized, and ideologically motivated Islamist militants is a critical question. Similarly, if the unrepresentative governments of the Central Asian states agree to provide alternative routes for NATO’s supply lines into Afghanistan, the Islamists would undoubtedly seek to capitalize on this move to bolster popular support. Once the governments approve NATO supply lines, the Islamist militants would exploit this decision and attempt to brand their regimes as “anti-Muslim” and playing a role in the “Western crusades against the Muslim brethren in Afghanistan.” Al-Qaeda and the Taliban have frequently espoused this type of rhetoric in Afghanistan and Pakistan to forward their agenda and to gain popular support.

The Obama administration would be wise to avoid President Bush’s mistake of supporting unrepresentative and authoritarian regimes in Central Asia. Such support will have blowback effects in the form of growing anti-US sentiments and sympathy for extremist groups. The U.S. has already seen the negative consequences of support for repressive regimes in places like Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan where, right or wrong, everyday citizenry have come to see American backing as key to the survival of their unpopular governments. By blindly backing authoritarian regimes without encouraging more representative governance and reform, the U.S. risks playing an inadvertent role in further destabilizing Afghanistan’s neighborhood and increasing the number of enemies that Washington faces. Much like what has been seen in the Middle East, regional and transnational terrorist groups will take advantage of this popular anger and disenfranchisement to recruit and increase their operational capabilities. This will

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<sup>4</sup> The Military Balance 2009, International Institute of International Studies, London, January 2009.

<sup>5</sup> Michael Scheuer, 2006

<sup>6</sup> Ibid

not only undermine American interests, but also irreparably weaken the very regimes that America sought to prop up as bulwarks against the type of Islamic extremism being advocated by Al-Qaeda.

### **The Afghan-Tajik Border**

In the last decade or so, identifiable minor and major routes of drug trafficking have developed through the Central Asian states, altogether comprising the “northern route.” In Tajikistan the known routes tend to be smaller, more numerous, and chaotic compared to other states of the region. The Kyrgyz State Commission for Drug Control identified four major routes passing through Osh, Batken, Altyn-Mazar, and a route close to the Tajik city of Khojand. Meanwhile, in Uzbekistan, the cities of Termez, Tashkent, Samarkand, and Syrdarya lie on the major transit routes while in Kazakhstan, drugs from Afghanistan are transported via Almaty, Shymkent, Georgievka, and Astana.<sup>7</sup> Given the sheer number of potential routes combined with terrain that is difficult to patrol even with adequate resources, which is clearly not the case, the Afghan and/or Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) or like-minded groups are not likely to have much difficulty crossing into Tajikistan to attack and loot NATO supply lines. Further, once in Tajikistan they could use these already-established smuggling routes to spread instability throughout Central Asia, especially via the volatile Fergana Valley and Uzbekistan given recent developments such as Karimov’s crackdown on what his regime refers to as Islamic militants and the negative fallout that this has caused.

Drug smugglers in Tajikistan’s southern Shurobat region use the most violent techniques in crossing the Afghan-Tajik border. They are also the most organized as compared to similar groups in the Pamir or Khatlon regions. Groups of smugglers tend to consist of ten to one hundred people with strictly divided functions among them. For example, there are couriers who carry drugs, observers who watch to see if the area is free from border guards, associates who are in charge of information exchange between group members, and militants who provide armed protection if necessary. Put simply, smugglers are organized into armed groups with well-defined internal structures and in the event of an armed confrontation with border guards, such groups can defend themselves. Further, once drugs are trafficked across the Afghan-Tajik border, smugglers are likely to have some connections with local or regional law enforcement agencies.<sup>8</sup> This reality is highly problematic for NATO in that not only is illicit cross-border smuggling already a well-established business, these syndicates have penetrated the Tajik government and security apparatus. They also have long-established ties with the Afghan Taliban and the TTP stemming from the latter’s heavy involvement in the drug trade as the northern route leads to the lucrative markets of Russia and Europe. In addition, these groups have the ability to outgun the poorly armed and equipped Tajik security forces and given the large amounts of financial resources that both Taliban groups have at their disposal, these syndicates would benefit immensely. Though many profits will be pocketed by

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<sup>7</sup> Erica Marat, “The State-Crime Nexus in Central Asia: State Weakness, Organized Crime, and Corruption in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan”, *Silk Road Paper*, Central Asia-Caucasus Institute and Silk Road Studies Institute, 2006(a).

<sup>8</sup> Marat, 2006(a).

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senior members, a substantial portion can be reinvested thus allowing the syndicates to put down even firmer roots and expand their activities; something that will make them even more difficult to dislodge in the future.

Tajikistan's difficulty in controlling drug trafficking may be explained by the existence of weak institutional features such as the internal organization and loyalties on the part of the border guards and various other law enforcement agencies to certain commanders as opposed to agencies as well as poor personnel training. A problem unique to the Tajik border guards is their lack of even basic communications equipment and there have been reports that border guards feel as if they are at a disadvantage when compared to drug smugglers who operate in small, organized groups and use a range of techniques to cross the border.<sup>9</sup> In addition, cases of corruption have been reported amongst law enforcement agents in Tajikistan which occurs primarily as a result of the bribing of security officials by detained drug traffickers. It is possible to notice differences in the lifestyles of some local officials with some living extravagantly. Not surprisingly, only small drug couriers are captured by law enforcement while drug barons and mafia bosses, who mastermind the trade and receive the largest profit from it, rarely come onto law enforcement's radar.<sup>10</sup>

Given the ties between drug traffickers and militants in this region, there is little to suggest that groups such as the Afghan or the TTP, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), or the Islamic Jihad Union (IJU), would not be able to capitalize on these shortcomings. Local commanders could be bribed and/or threatened into turning a blind eye to border crossings or fighters could simply pass as armed narcotics traffickers. What is especially concerning is the increasing sympathy for Islamic extremism that is being witnessed in southern Tajikistan near the border with Afghanistan. It is from this region that the brutal Tajik civil war began which pitted the Islamist-leaning Garmis of the south against the pro-Communist, Russian-backed Kulabis. During this time, many Islamist fighters were granted refuge in Afghanistan by the Taliban and were permitted to engage in cross-border raids. The relationships that were forged during this time period are not likely to have faded nor has the Taliban's assistance been forgotten. In addition, it is reasonable to assume that the majority of routes that militants used to cross from Afghanistan into Tajikistan during the civil war period are still active.

Drug money has been one of the main sources for the rise of insurgent and extremist groups in the Central Asian region and Tajikistan in particular. Because of this shift in the sources of financing and the guiding motives that changed from state-encouraged ideological mobilization to private interest-driven non-state groups, the nature of post-Cold War conflicts has transformed as well. There are indeed causal links between the drug economy and the armed mobilization of non-state actors that challenge state forces by instigating armed clashes and terrorist attacks against security forces or state structures in Central Asia. For instance, the IMU armed attack on the Kyrgyz border guards on the Kyrgyz-Tajik border in the

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<sup>9</sup> Marat, 2006(a).

Jacob Townsend, "The Logistics of Opiate Trafficking in Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan", *The China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly*, Vol. 4, No. 1, 2006.

<sup>10</sup> Marat, 2006(a).

summer of 1999 was interpreted by many analysts as an attempt to divert attention from drug trafficking routes by instigating a conflict. Similarly, the drug economy was on the rise during the civil war in Tajikistan.<sup>11</sup> These events demonstrate the inseparable nature of narcotics and terrorism in Central Asia, something that is worrying given the near-crisis conditions of the Tajik economy that are coinciding with somewhat of an Islamic revival in the country. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, many extremists view Central Asia as an area with considerable growth potential given its loss of ideology (communism), a very shallow understanding of Islam due to Russian suppression, and local leaders that were incapable of staying ahead of all of these developments. Put simply, many militant Islamist organizations likely view Central Asia in the same manner as an investor views an emerging market.

### **Trends in Militancy and Organized Crime in Central Asia**

The war in Afghanistan in the 1980s exposed many Central Asians to political Islam and from then onwards many Central Asian religious students enrolled in Saudi-sponsored religious seminaries in Pakistan.<sup>12</sup> Following the withdrawal of Soviet forces and American assistance, Afghanistan plunged even further into internal chaos. Amidst the turmoil, Pakistan supported a group of religious students based in Pakistani Madrassahs, who called themselves the Taliban, to bring order back to the country. The objectives behind this decision were to end the Afghan civil war, secure a pro-Islamabad regime in Kabul that would recognize the Durand Line, and to acquire strategic depth vis-à-vis India. However, proxy warfare rarely works out as planned and Taliban developed their own agenda and refused to withdraw Afghanistan's claims to large swathes of Pakistani territory. Further, blowback from Afghanistan has effectively "Talibanized" parts of FATA and the NWFP and as both the Afghan and the TTP largely support their activities through drug trafficking, they have contacts and infrastructure in Tajikistan. This should concern regional leaders and Western policymakers as history has shown that people tend to trade ideas along with goods. These issues acquire additional urgency given the fractured power structure and weak governance in Tajikistan combined with a collapsing economy.

In Afghanistan and Central Asia, the so-called crime-terror nexus has been eclipsed by the rapidly growing infiltration of state institutions by organized crime. The criminalization of an insurgent movement or the criminalization of a state institution may fulfill the same purpose for a criminal network in that both serve to weaken the rule of law and facilitate the conduct of criminal operations. The criminal involvement of units in a political system is the more effective yet subtle way of going about this aim as it weakens state institutions from within. On the other hand, the criminal involvement of insurgent and terrorist groups is a more violent and direct way of reaching the same goal; weakening the state and its rule of law by directly targeting its institutions and sewing unrest to the point of even denying the state control over portions of its own territory. In places where the interests of organized crime are powerful and states are less strong, one or possibly

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<sup>11</sup> Marat, 2006(a).

<sup>12</sup> Svante Cornell and Niklas Swanstrom, "The Eurasia Drug Trade – A Challenge to Regional Security", *Problems of Post-Communism*, Vol. 53, No.4, July/August 2006.

both of these processes are likely to occur. Further, the strength of the state and the external circumstances surrounding a given region/country are likely to determine the extent to which these two phenomena occur. Nonetheless, interactions between crime and insurgencies have been witnessed on practically all continents.<sup>13</sup>

On February 2, 2008, Colonel Oleg Zakharchenko, one of Tajikistan's most decorated officers and commander of the Police Special Purpose Unit (OMON), was killed in a firefight between OMON and members of another police unit in Garm, a civil war stronghold of the United Tajik Opposition (UTO) roughly 185 kilometers from Dushanbe. The other unit, the Regional Directorate for the Fight Against Organized Crime, which is usually referred to by its Russian acronym RUBOP, was led by Colonel Mirzokhudja Akhmadov, a former mid-level opposition commander during the civil war. Dushanbe's control over Garm has been weak since the end of the conflict and the official explanation from the Interior Ministry was that Zakharchenko and the others were in Garm for a meeting regarding the local police. The ministry alleged that they came under fire from Akhmadov's men as they approached the police building thus seeming to suggest that the shooting was a misunderstanding. However, one senior presidential advisor stated that the motivating factor was a dispute between two police officers over matters pertaining to organized crime. In addition, others claim that the shooting was part of a quiet mopping up operation of the few remaining opposition commanders still in positions of authority that had gone wrong.<sup>14</sup>

President Rakhmon claims that there are regular clashes with security forces and gunmen from the IMU, whose fighters are believed to intermittently operate in Tajikistan. This is problematic given the increased traction that Salafist ideology is gaining amongst Tajikistan's young Muslims even though the practice and preaching of Salafism was banned in January 2009. Islamists could pose a major problem for the regime if power structures begin to fracture though serious threats also emanate from power struggles within the regime itself. The Rakhmon regime could collapse on short notice because the institutional structures which tend to support any political regime are lacking in Tajikistan. One of the primary reasons that it has not collapsed so far is that it has yet to be hit by a major crisis or catastrophe of sufficient magnitude.<sup>15</sup> A major attack or a series of consistent attacks on NATO supply lines, which could deprive the state of badly-needed revenue or, more cynically, a source for personal profit, may precipitate a crisis that could lead to more acute regime instability or even outright regime collapse. The unrest that would accompany either event would serve as a boon for militants in South and Central Asia and given the evolution of these groups regarding their strategic thinking, such a scenario has undoubtedly been discussed.

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<sup>13</sup> Svante Cornell, "The Narcotics Threat in Greater Central Asia: From Crime-Terror Nexus to State Infiltration?", *China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly*, Vol. 4, No. 1, 2006.

<sup>14</sup> International Crisis Group, "Tajikistan: On the Road to Failure", Asia Report No. 162, February 12, 2009, Dushanbe.Brussels.

<sup>15</sup> International Crisis Group, 2009.

There is still believed to be tension between Rakhmon and warlords from the Popular Front of Tajikistan (PFT) and the United Tajik Opposition (UTO). Relations have also been strained between the government and Tajikistan's most prominent opposition party, the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT). Though a legal party, several of its members have been arrested and imprisoned on seemingly dubious charges. Further, while pressure on the IRPT continues, more radical supporters of political Islam seem to be emerging in illegal groupings.<sup>16</sup> When groups go underground and operate outside of the established political process, they tend to become more radical. Within the legitimate political sphere, hard-line religious parties have to make inevitable compromises and tone down their rhetoric in order to avoid alienating potential allies or risk failing to achieve their core objectives. However, without these inhibitions fringe groups or even the IRPT have the potential to become a greater threat to the Rakhmon regime and to highlight a perception of weakness to Tajiks as well as the international community. Western governments are under no illusion about the true nature of Rakhmon's administration and his willingness to allow NATO supply lines to run through his country is one of his few sources of legitimacy. If this is compromised, a raft of unfavorable scenarios could unfold in Tajikistan, all of which could create a political vacuum that might be filled by an extremist element thus facilitating further Talibanization in the region.

### **State Weakness in Tajikistan**

The civil war (1992-1997) made Tajikistan economically and politically one of the weakest states in the post-Soviet space. Civil war field commanders with strong military authority and access to weapons were the most common actors to gain local authority in rural areas due to their ability to broker drug deals between Afghan and Tajik drug producers and traffickers as well as interested parties outside of Central Asia.<sup>17</sup> These dealings undoubtedly brought them into contact with what is now the Afghan Taliban and other like-minded groups and as the drug business continues relatively unabated, these ties endure. Southern Tajikistan is essentially a series of local fiefdoms thus making any Dushanbe-directed border control difficult. Further, Tajikistan's extremely limited economic capacity in the early 1990s and a virtual absence of state-controlled armed forces after the fall of the USSR brought about a swift criminalization and militarization of non-state actors. While Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan were able to develop stronger mechanisms to administer national borders and territory in response to these activities, Tajikistan lacked even the basic instruments to function independently from the Soviet Union as a sovereign entity.<sup>18</sup> Unfortunately, this assessment is still largely accurate today and as the fundamental factors that have led to these developments remain, this reality is also unlikely to change.

The fundamental political dynamic in Central Asian states, such as Tajikistan, is between the president and largely unseen local and regional power

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<sup>16</sup> International Crisis Group, "Tajikistan's Politics: Confrontation or Consolidation?", Asia Briefing, May 19, 2004, Dushanbe/Brussels.

<sup>17</sup> Erica Marat, "Impact of Drug Trade and Organized Crime on State Functioning in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan", *China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly*, Vol.4, No.1, 2006(b).

<sup>18</sup> Marat, 2006(b).

brokers and despite being an authoritarian regime, Tajikistan is grossly under-governed.<sup>19</sup> While consistently being ranked as one of the most corrupt countries on earth, in Tajikistan the economy of drugs and arms has merged into one market and there are numerous combinations in which drugs and arms are exchanged between religious militant groups in Central Asia and their counterparts in Afghanistan.<sup>20</sup> These established linkages and a decentralized power structure in Tajikistan is conducive to cross-border militancy and in the event of a spike in attacks on NATO supply lines in the country, Dushanbe is unlikely to be able to provide a Pakistan-style response.

Tajikistan's elite appear to be driven by self-enrichment and this has led to a chronically weak administration and an executive structure that is extremely vulnerable to even a minor crisis. Further, geographical regions with little to offer financially are largely left alone and when it comes to basic services, the population is largely on its own.<sup>21</sup> Further, a strong, yet decentralized authority of the military structure in Tajikistan inhibits economic development as large state expenditures are spent on maintaining the military at the expense of other state sectors such as education, health care, and agriculture. The inability of the state to provide professional training or civilian employment to former militants after the end of the civil war forced many to seek labor jobs overseas. Mostly because of the official dominance of military structures in the management of national borders and loose regulations on import and export, Tajikistan has the highest prices for imported goods even though it is the poorest state in the region. In addition, since the early 1990s the gap between the wealthy class of society and the population living in extreme poverty is easily the widest in the post-Soviet space. Also, overseas remittances tend to fill the gap of social welfare that the Tajik government is not able to provide to its own citizens and nearly every household in Tajikistan relies on family members working overseas, particularly in Russia.<sup>22</sup> However, as the global crisis continues, many overseas Tajik workers are losing their jobs and returning home and some have suggested that Tajikistan could see up to half of its GDP disappear.<sup>23</sup> A mass return of migrant workers, some of which are former militants, could prove to be a nightmare for Tajikistan's stability and the safety of NATO supply lines as this would occur against a backdrop of already-existent economic hardship, poor or limited governance in many parts of the country, Taliban infiltration, and increasing sympathy for Islamic extremism. All of this plays in the favor of militant groups seeking to gain influence in Tajikistan as these disaffected unemployed could be more receptive to the message of extremist groups and would possibly tolerate their presence in Tajikistan if they were attacking the supply lines of a "foreign occupier."

Hizb-ut-Tahrir, which claims to be a peaceful organization, has also been maintaining its activities in Tajikistan thanks to funding from drug trafficking. Religious values are important in the movement's recruitment process but its

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<sup>19</sup> S. Fredrick Starr, "Clans, Authoritarian Rulers, and Parliaments in Central Asia", Silk Road Paper, Central Asia-Caucasus Institute and Silk Road Studies Program, 2006.

<sup>20</sup> Marat, 2006(a).

<sup>21</sup> International Crisis Group, "Tajikistan: On the Road to Failure", Asia Report No. 162, February 12, 2009. Dushanbe/Brussels.

<sup>22</sup> Marat, 2006(b)

<sup>23</sup> International Crisis Group, 2009.

leaders utilize religion and illicit business in order to secure the continuity of the movement's existence.<sup>24</sup> The influence of HT has proven to be a harbinger for extremism and its by-product of terrorism elsewhere in Asia with Bangladesh being a recent example. The ambition and scope of Bangladeshi groups such as Jamaat-ul Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB) and Harakat- ul-Jihad-i-Islami Bangladesh (HUJI-B) have dramatically increased alongside HT's expanding presence in the country thus suggesting a strong correlational relationship.<sup>25</sup> As such, HT ideology can be classified as a critical enabler at a minimum and these events in South Asia hold critical lessons for Central Asia, especially a distressed state such as Tajikistan.

HT has been active in the volatile Fergana Valley and amongst Tajikistan's Uzbek population, something that may have led to complacency in Tajikistan with many referring to it as simply an "Uzbek movement." However, in late February and early March 2004, 35 HT supporters, nearly all Tajiks, were arrested in Kulob, a Tajik-majority city. In line with HT's established practice, these individuals were organized into cells of five members each apparently with no knowledge of each other's existence. In addition, the seized literature focused on problems plaguing Tajikistan rather than merely denouncing Uzbekistan's Islam Karimov. Problems discussed included chronic gas, electricity, and water shortages, the plight of migrant workers in Russia, and the government's indifference to the suffering of its citizenry. Like HT cells elsewhere in Central Asia, those arrested in Kulob were mostly in their early twenties and from middle-class families while some were small business owners. It surprised few that Kulob became a new front in HT's recruiting campaign as it faces extreme economic hardship with few opportunities for young people and declining health and educational standards.<sup>26</sup>

### **Pakistan: Still the Best Option**

Though a trust deficit still exists between key NATO states and Pakistan eight years on, the latter is the only country in the region aside from Afghanistan itself that is willing or able to dedicate substantial resources from the security forces to protect NATO supply lines. Despite the fact that NATO involvement in Afghanistan and increased American involvement in Pakistan is not popular amongst everyday Pakistanis, the Zardari regime has a degree of legitimacy as it was elected and follows a period of military rule. Further, while the growth of Pakistani institutions have been stunted due to the overbearing influence of the military and security establishment, they are still sufficiently robust to prevent all-out governmental collapse. In the case of the judiciary, they can even influence government policy. For example, Pakistan's Chief Justice of the Supreme Court Iftikhar Chaudhry pressured the Pakistani government to cease its practice of "forced disappearances" and to release all individuals who were detained unlawfully. This action taken by the Chief Justice of Pakistan demonstrated the efficiency and independence of the Pakistan's critical institutions. However, none of this can be said about Tajikistan or any other Central Asian state.

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<sup>24</sup> Marat, 2006(a).

<sup>25</sup> Interview with a Bangladeshi Security and Terrorism Analyst, April 2009, Singapore.

<sup>26</sup> International Crisis Group, 2004.

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Pakistan has erroneously ceded ground to the Tehreek-e-Nafaz-e-Shariat-e-Mohammadi (TNSM) in Malakand Division, which houses the militant-ravaged Swat Valley, and fighters have taken over many functions of the state, namely the provision of security. Unsurprisingly, this has led to criticism of Pakistan's approach to dealing with terrorism and insurgency but it still must be noted that the security forces remain actively engaged in nearby theaters and struggling against well-entrenched militants in rugged terrain. This is not to suggest that the relative stability that presently presides over Swat is sustainable or that it bodes well for Pakistan's security or for that of the region. Rather, it demonstrates that even if the subject of criticism, Pakistan is still willing to risk the lives of thousands of its own soldiers to ensure its own security and to support the war effort in Afghanistan; a commitment that Washington cannot expect from any of Afghanistan's neighbors. Further, in the case of Iran, any rapprochement is not likely to progress to a point where the Ahmadinejad regime and the clerics in Tehran would allow military supply lines to run across its territory or would use the security forces to defend them. While it is always wise to diversify supply lines, NATO should by no means view Tajikistan and Central Asia as a viable alternative to Pakistan. Because, heavy reliance on Central Asia and Tajikistan in particular, a combination of oppressive, unrepresentative regimes, weak militaries, fragile state institutions, and existing networks of Islamist militants and drug traffickers could pave the way for the Taliban and al Qaeda to penetrate more deeply into Central Asian societies and ultimately dismantle the already-weak state infrastructure. If the battle zone were expanded into Central Asia, NATO and its allies would find itself under strain and at a major disadvantage. Once the situation deteriorates in Central Asia, it would be a difficult, if not impossible, task to manage a conflict theater that extends from FATA to Afghanistan and the other Central Asian states. However, such a scenario is avoidable.

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