



Drug-trafficking in Central Asia

by Sébastien Peyrouse

The recent elections in Afghanistan have witnessed a revival of the international community's interest in the country. The worsening of the security situation in Pakistan, which is currently the real sanctuary of international terrorism, has made Central Asia a necessary access point in order for International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) materials and forces to enter Afghan territory.

The recent elections in Afghanistan have witnessed a revival of the international community's interest in the country. The worsening of the security situation in Pakistan, which is currently the real sanctuary of international terrorism, has made Central Asia a necessary access point in order for International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) materials and forces to enter Afghan territory. The only safe zone for the allied forces in Afghanistan is actually in the country's north, which is dominated by the Northern Alliance of the late Ahmad Shah Massoud, an ethnic Tajik. Of the four major roads leading to Kabul, only the northern one crossing the Panshir valley is secure for ISAF forces. It would be wrong, however, to look at the Central Asian states only in terms of constituting Afghanistan's "Near Abroad": the states of the region must also be examined from the viewpoint of their domestic situations. Their long-term destabilization would be harmful to Western interests, not to mention to those of the Russians and the Chinese. And yet the "Afghan cancer," which is corrupting the whole of the region, is exacerbating the inability of states in the region to combat the poverty of their populations, thus undermining their stability. The sole exception is Kazakhstan.

Until the end of the 1990s, Central Asia served primarily as a transit region for world drug-trafficking. This situation has steadily worsened, furthermore, and today the five states are also sites for the production, transformation, and consumption of drugs. The disappearance of the Soviet Union enabled the development of commercial rationales, stimulating the commercialization of drug production, which until then was limited to traditional usage. The region's entry into the drug-trafficking scene was accelerated by the civil war in Tajikistan (1992–1996), as the

Islamic opposition was involved in trafficking to finance many of its activities. The war permitted organized criminal organizations to take over sets of integrated activities: transport networks, chemical and pharmaceutical products, money-laundering companies, and banks. Today Central Asia ranks as the third largest opium export zone after Iran and Pakistan, accounting for close to a third of the flows. In 2008, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) estimated that 121 tons of heroin and 293 tons of opium had passed through the region that year, but the numbers are probably higher still. The principal regions of production are still situated in the south of Afghanistan, but its provinces bordering regions of the former Soviet Union, such as Badakhshan, Balkh, and Badghis, have seen a rapid increase in the production of drugs.

Because many points of passage are hidden high in the mountains and are difficult to control, it is possible to circumvent each of the three main border posts with Afghanistan, namely Nizhni-Piandzh in Tajikistan (route Kabul-Dushanbe), Kushka in Turkmenistan (route Herat-Ashgabat), and Termez in Uzbekistan (route Mazâr i-Sharif-Karshi). A first bypass route, the so-called southern route, links Afghanistan to Turkmenistan, either directly or by passing through the south of Uzbekistan. It then goes either through the Caspian Sea to the Caucasus, from which point the drug is redirected toward the ports of the Black Sea en route to Turkey, or toward Russia via the Ustyurt Plateau, which is very scarcely populated and barely monitored. A second route, the northern one, transits through Tajikistan, in particular through Khorog, the capital of the autonomous region of Badakhshan, then continues on to Osh, the principal town of the Fergana



Valley and the largest redistribution center of Central Asia. Once in Osh, the flows divide into two separate routes. The one that passes through the Uzbek part of the Fergana Valley, traversing the town of Kokand en route to Tashkent and then to Chymkent, in Kazakhstan, is increasingly less used due to the growing isolationism of the Uzbek regime and the closure of the borders. The second, which goes through Bishkek and Almaty before traversing the whole of Kazakhstan on the way to Siberia, is in full development because it is by far the least monitored on the Kyrgyz-Kazakh and Kazakh-Russian borders.

Central Asia

Similar to the tribal zones of Pakistan, Central Asia is also witnessing a rapid development of transformation laboratories, enabling the amassing of enormous profits locally before stocks are freighted to Russia and Europe. More than thirty opium transformation laboratories, each capable of producing twenty kilos of heroin per day, are reportedly in operation along the Afghan-Tajik border, as well as around Pendjikent, on the road leading to Samarkand. In Uzbekistan, the laboratories are situated between Samarkand and Karshi, the latter being one of the major towns for the redistribution of drugs in the region. In Kazakhstan, the laboratories are situated close to the Chinese border in the region of Taldy-Kurgan, others are situated in Kzyl-Orda and along the Syr-Daria – the shortest route to Central Russia – and of course around Chymkent, a transit center from the Uzbek capital. In Kyrgyzstan, they are principally to be found in the region of Issyk-Kul in the towns of Karakol and Rybache, once more close to the Chinese border. The explosion of trade with China in fact plays a major role in the development of these laboratories, since the Chinese chemical industry is the main provider of the chemical products required for the transformation of heroin into opium, in particular anhydride acetic. Central Asia is therefore situated at the juncture of two flows, one comprising the raw product, that is opium from Afghanistan, and one comprising the chemical derivatives required to treat it, originating in China.

The region is becoming a production area. In Kyrgyzstan, the Chui Valley reportedly yields close to five million tons of cannabis, able to produce close to 6,000 tons of hashish, and more than 2,000 hectares of opium poppies that can yield 30 tons of opium per year. The

other states have also seen mafia networks set up in the modest production of hashish and opium poppies, principally for the domestic market. The drug-trafficking that passes through Central Asia is principally aimed at the Russian and Western European markets, but it also appears increasingly to be seeking out the Chinese market. One third is supposedly destined for domestic usage, with Central Asia accounting for more than half a million drug users. In Kazakhstan, cases of drug addiction are rising quickly, in particular among the youth. The number of drug addicts is said to have risen to 200,000, of which two thirds are reportedly less than 30 years of age. A survey conducted in 2003 in Tajikistan showed that it has between 55,000 and 75,000 drug addicts in the country, 80 per cent of whom are on heroin. The figures are similar for Uzbekistan, where, since 2004, a branch of the Center for Disease Control (CDC) has been conducting an epidemiological monitoring in five pilot regions (Andijan, Samarkand, Surkhandaria, Tashkent, and Bukhara), as well as in the towns of Tashkent and Yangi-Yul. According to UN the number of drug addicts has risen to about 200,000 in Uzbekistan, and to around 100,000 in Turkmenistan. In the past, drug addiction was considered to be something of an urban evil, yet at present close to half of all drug users are to be found in rural areas. The low cost of heroin in Central Asia (less than US\$ 10 per gram in Tashkent, for example) greatly facilitates this spread.

Russia

For Russia, the security of the southern borders of Central Asia is essentially viewed as a question of homeland security: the 7,000 km common border between Russia and Kazakhstan, running through the steppes, are practically impossible to secure, making it necessary to monitor clandestine flows upstream, as it were. With the exception of the Altay region, which is very mountainous, it would appear that two thirds of all drug-trafficking bound for Russia passes directly through existing border points, via road or railway. That no effort is made to bypass these points is indicative of the degree of existing corruption. Three major axes have formed: one between Atyrau and Astrakhan, that serves the whole Volga and North Caucasus regions; another between the provinces of Aktiubinsk and of Kustanay bound for Saratov, Samara, Orenburg,



and Cheliabinsk, which serves Central Siberia, the region with the largest numbers of heroin users in Russia; and another between Pavlodar and Ust-Kamenogorsk that continues to Omsk, Tiumen, and Novosibirsk.

The actors involved in drug-trafficking fit into two categories – local actors and international actors. The local actors are often established on a national basis and are supported by clan or ethnic networks. In this way, Uzbek, Kyrgyz, Tajik, etc. mafia groups operate with Afghan networks as a model, borrowing their local strategies. Accordingly, the Uzbeks and Tajiks take advantage of their close ethnic links with the Uzbek and Tajik populations in Afghanistan. This points to the formation of zones of influence where each group is specialized in a part of the traffic. These local mafias establish connections with state employees, in particular with the customs officers. However, the large-scale distribution is the preserve of much better organized transnational organizations, which often involve several types of criminality. They collect not only taxes from the farmers and the small local traffickers, but they also control all production facilities. The local populations are therefore hostages to drug-trafficking: they produce the drugs in their raw state, in the least financially profitable form, and serve above all as couriers, an activity that, again, is poorly paid and very dangerous, and is often undertaken by women and children who are not aware of the risks; since 1999, one fifth of those sentenced in Tajikistan for drug-trafficking have been women. These drug-trafficking operations are in fact embedded in the social structure of these countries. They make use of populations with no other economic alternatives, and also incite the development of injectable drug use in vulnerable populations that have come to constitute veritable “risk groups.”

The Islamist movements also profit from this revenue source. The Uzbekistan Islamic Movement, for example, attracted attention after moving great quantities of raw opium into Tajikistan, to its border bastions with Kyrgyzstan. The implication seems to be that opium refining and transformation into heroin have become financial activities in themselves and are no longer simple supplements to trafficking revenues. Several observers note that the incursions of the Uzbekistan Islamic Movement in the Batken region in 1999 and 2000 were a response to the Kyrgyz government’s relative success in monitoring more closely the major drug-trafficking route from Khorog to

Osh. These operations reportedly served also as a cover for other simultaneously undertaken missions, in particular transfers of large quantities of opiates via other routes.

Crucial Securitization

Central Asia shares a 2,400 km long border with Afghanistan (the border between Afghanistan and Tajikistan alone is close to 1,400 km), principally in mountainous areas. This makes border securitization crucial but also complex. It is estimated that only three per cent of the stocks are seized by Central Asian customs services. The shadow economy, essentially drug-trafficking, reaps more revenue than the official economy in Central Asia and serves, in part, to finance the ruling elites. Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, and even more so Tajikistan, can in fact be classified as quasi drug-states: a number of state representatives, at each administrative level, from directors of kolkhozes to regional authorities and the highest ranking state officials (i.e. the presidential families), are directly involved in the drug trade. It has corrupted entire state functions, in particular customs officers and the police corps. The real problem of waging an effective struggle against the drug trade is revealed by the fact that both the political leadership and Islamist circles, ostensibly wholly opposed to each other, are totally interdependent and receive considerable revenues from similar sources and markets. The international community will have difficulties in proposing effective measures against the drug trade as long as the authorities responsible for implementing such measures are themselves a part of the trade.

Central Asia is bound to become an active theater of world politics in years to come. The domestic situations of the Central Asian states will reverberate throughout the entire region, not least in Afghanistan. But they could also have a negative impact on Pakistan, Iran, Chinese Xinjiang, and Russia. “Losing” Central Asia would be detrimental for all world powers. Even if Washington’s relationships with Uzbekistan and Tajikistan continue to be difficult, no serious consideration of the future of Afghanistan and Pakistan can be undertaken without taking Central Asia into account. The acute need for re-engaging with this part of the world does not just concern the economic stakes of controlling the region’s resources; the future of these countries is of interest to all the great world and regional powers. And not only do the world



capitals welcome the prospect of developing long-term goals for stability (border securitization, fighting against poverty, etc.) through global cooperation between actors including the U.S., the European Union, Japan, Russia, China, and India; the local Central Asian elites strongly desire it as well.

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