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Mustaqillik Ideology Tested: Nation-State Building in Uzbekistan and Related Security Challenges

Introduction

This contribution focuses on the consequences for Uzbekistan of NATO's impending withdrawal from Afghanistan, which is slated for completion by the end of 2014 and creates new challenges for Uzbekistan, its security, and its sovereignty. The author believes that Uzbekistan should seek solutions above all by not joining an arms race, but rather by advancing a domestic nation-state-building agenda (one which is far from being complete). This agenda should be implemented in accordance with lessons drawn from the history of modern nation states, which have built strong foundations by transcending ties of locality and kinship to create a universalism based on the political and civic association of free citizens, who are ready to stand and defend not only their local communities but the polity they identify with. From this position, the paper assesses Uzbekistan's current ability to withstand external challenges posed by the uncertainty of its relationship with Afghanistan in the post-2014 era. It compares the military capabilities of the two nations, and concludes that the loyalty of Uzbekistan's citizens, which can only be ensured by democratic means, is no less important than its military capacity.

Post-Soviet Nation-State-Building Projects

Present-day Uzbekistan is a sovereign state; however, it is not yet a modern nation state in the full sense of the word. Although political independence was achieved in 1991, this was not due to Uzbekistan's own struggle for national liberation. It was taken for granted when the Soviet colossus was already lying in ruins, destroyed by national and pro-democracy movements that existed largely in the western part of the Soviet empire. The president of the Uzbek SSR, Islam Karimov, and his circle only raised the banner of independence when the power of Moscow over the national republics was rapidly fading and the putsch against Gorbachev in August 1991 had been quelled.¹ Real political independence was achieved following the Belavezha Accords, which were signed by the leaders of the three Slavic Soviet Republics in De-

¹ The putsch was undertaken by a number of high ranking Soviet officials and generals while Mikhail Gorbachev, the General Secretary of the Central Committee of the CPSU and President of the Soviet Union, was on vacation in Foros, Crimea. It was put down by forces loyal to Boris Yeltsin and Mikhail Gorbachev.

ember 1991. In fact, Uzbekistan's political elite and civil society had something of a free ride on the currents of perestroika that resulted in the dismantling of the communist system. A domestic movement for national independence did exist in Uzbekistan, emerging in 1990-1991, and was represented mainly by a small opposition party, *Erk*. But that movement was not strong enough to push the republic's leadership to take decisive action, nor to create a critical mass for regime change. The nationalist demands of the political opposition focused mainly on the recognition of Uzbek as the state language. These demands were easily accepted by Karimov, who blessed, without jeopardizing his own power, the adoption of a law to that effect in October 1989. As a result, the nationalist aspirations of the domestic opposition were largely satisfied, and the nationalist-minded section of the population was won over by the ruling regime. Political independence was thus acquired, but the political regime remained almost unchanged.

Karimov was quick to accommodate independence not only as Uzbekistan's new political status but also as a new state ideology, the philosophy of *mustaqillik*. It is notable that the word *mustaqillik* (sovereignty, independence) was preferred to *ozodlik* (freedom), as this indicates the orientation of Uzbekistan's development, the alternatives being the sovereignty of the ruling regime and the freedom of the citizens. Uzbekistan quickly created and adopted new symbols of sovereignty, such as a flag, emblem, and anthem; streets and some state institutions were renamed to reflect national history and to celebrate national heroes of the past. Uzbekistan's history was rewritten to eliminate vestiges of the communist past, celebrate a glorious historical legacy, and embrace a new sense of national identity that could be traced to the distant past. Interestingly, the concept of Uzbek ethnogenesis and national history outlined by the Soviet historian Alexander Yakubovsky in 1941,² which was used to justify the creation of the Uzbek SSR as part of the Soviet Union, was largely unaffected.³ The officially endorsed historical doctrine negatively reinterpreted the period of rule by the Russian Empire and the Soviet era exclusively as a colonial era, with no recognition of the efforts by the Soviets to modernize the economy and society.

However, in spite of a critical attitude towards the Soviet legacy, the Karimov regime has done nothing to challenge the very ethnocentric construction of the Soviet national republics, which formed statehood around a single, and often constructed, titular nationality. The role of ethnocentrism as a key principle of nation-state building remained untouched in most post-Soviet states, continuing largely unchanged the framework of nationalities policy adopted in early Soviet times. The reason for this continuity of certain Soviet policies is that they perfectly serve the legitimization of post-Soviet

2 Cf. Aleksandr Yakubovsky, *K voprosu ob etnogeneze uzbekskogo naroda* [On the Question of the Ethnogenesis of the Uzbek People], Tashkent 1941.

3 Cf. Alisher Ilkhamov, Iakubovskii and Others: Canonizing Uzbek National History, in: Florian Mühlfried/Sergey Sokolovskiy (eds), *Exploring the Edge of Empire: Soviet Era Anthropology in the Caucasus and Central Asia*, Münster 2012, pp. 237-258.

authoritarian regimes. The courting of nationalist-minded populations of titular nationalities has helped these regimes cling to power and win the time to consolidate their rule under new circumstances. Previously the First Secretary of the CPSU's local branch, Islam Karimov did not hesitate to abandon his communist background and acquire a new title as the president of a sovereign state. In his new position, he concentrated unprecedented power and privileges in his hands, much more than he (or any other local party boss) used to enjoy as First Secretary during the Soviet period, when their powers were limited by Moscow. Other state institutions, including the parliament, which became the bicameral *Oliy Majlis*, and the judiciary, remained, like their Soviet predecessors, largely decorative institutions totally controlled by the executive government and with little leverage to influence government policy at both macro and micro levels of the state hierarchy.

Unlike the national republics in the western part of the Soviet Union, where real regime change occurred, the Communist Party elite in Uzbekistan, with Karimov at the helm, has almost totally reasserted its full political and administrative control over the country. Almost nothing has changed in Uzbekistan in terms of political culture and methods of governance: One despotic regime was replaced by another, and most reforms undertaken in the country in the post-Soviet period have been merely decorative, masking ongoing political and institutional stagnation.

What has changed, however, is the nature of Uzbek nationalism. Having been restrained, during the Soviet period, by the ideology of internationalism and Moscow's control of key aspects of internal politics, nationalism has now morphed into the cornerstone of the new statehood. Now that these checks and balances have been shed, ethnocentric nationalism has become a key principle of the nation-state-building project adopted by post-Soviet authoritarian regimes like the one in Uzbekistan. This project is nurtured significantly by various historical mythologies – teleological in nature – as the means of legitimizing new nation states.⁴ This prompts us to evoke the contrast made by Jürgen Habermas of two different poles of nationalism, one civic, based on the supremacy of a demos of free citizens, the other ethnic, appealing to the common ethno-cultural roots of a given nation. “The nation is Janus-faced“, he writes. “Whereas the voluntary nation of citizens is the source of democratic legitimation, the inherited or ascribed nation based on ethnic membership (*die geborene Nation der Volksgenossen*) secures social integration. *Staatsbürger*, citizens, constitute themselves as a political association of free and equal persons by their own initiative; *Volksgenossen*, nationals, already find themselves in a community shaped by a shared language and history. The tension between the universalism of an egalitarian legal

4 See on this subject Alisher Ilkhamov, Post-Soviet Central Asia: from nationhood mythologies to regional cold wars? In: Irina Morozova (ed.), *Towards Social Stability and Democratic Governance in Central Eurasia: Challenges to Regional Security*, Amsterdam 2005, p. 82-102.

community and the particularism of a community united by historical destiny is built into the very concept of the national state.”⁵

In the case of Uzbekistan, we find mostly the second, ethno-culturally determined kind of nation-state, and the unity provided by a free citizenry is largely missing, leaving Uzbekistan’s society lacking social cohesion and the sense of a single community. This one-sided national development at least partly explains why this country faces challenges in becoming a modern nation state: It is far from being a civic nation. As a result, Uzbekistan remains affected by an authoritarian nationalism that persists by supporting, and sometimes manipulating, ethno-cultural sentiments, a sense of common history, by reproducing and creating national symbols, and fostering patriotic education, but which castrates all kinds of civic freedoms. The authoritarian type of nationalism also fails to guarantee the rule of law, without which the citizens cannot feel themselves equal before the law and means that ethnic minorities are discriminated against in the exercise of their individual and communal rights.

Nation-State Building and Security Challenges

The question of whether the nation-state-building project of a particular country is complete relates directly to security and the ability to endure external challenges, to the ability to compete with other nations for political and economic influence, and to a country’s position in the global hierarchy of nations. These abilities rely on two important aspects of a nation state: (1) the way it secures legitimacy and the loyalty of its citizens and (2) the creation of a political centre. Here again we find a stark distinction between modern states and “coercive-intensive” nations, such as Uzbekistan. While authoritarian regimes claim their legitimacy mainly by manipulating ethno-cultural sentiments and securing the loyalty of the population by means of coercion and fear of repression, in modern nations, the “loyalty of citizens became something that had to be won” by the state by representing their interests.⁶ Authoritarian regimes cannot rely on the loyalty of their populations in crises. On the contrary, such societies are prone to uprisings and upheavals, as the “Arab Spring” has recently demonstrated.

The advantage of modern states is also that regular elections result in the emergence of a political centre that each mainstream political party fights to control. The existence of such a political centre, which is a result of a stochastic process (and the struggle to control which determines the machin-

5 Jürgen Habermas, The European Nation-State: On the Past and Future of Sovereignty and Citizenship, in: Jürgen Habermas, *The Inclusion of the Other: Studies in Political Theory*, Ciaran Cronin and Pablo De Greiff (eds), Cambridge, MA, 2000, p. 115.

6 David Held, the Development of the Modern State, in: Stuart Hall/David Held/Don Hubert/Kenneth Thompson (eds), *Modernity: an Introduction to Modern Societies*, Cambridge 1995, p. 71.

ations of almost every democratic election in the contemporary world) and cannot be determined from above, serves as a guarantor of the regime's stability and its resilience in the face of internal and external pressures.

Thus, social cohesion, the stochastically created political centre, and democratically secured political legitimacy are not only important for the social and political stability of a given nation, but also contribute to its external security. Drawing lessons from the history of wars in early modern Europe, David Held made an interesting observation: "It is a paradoxical result of the waging of war that it stimulated the formation of representative and democratic institutions", he writes. He also notes the existence of "a direct connection between, for example, the extension of the universal franchise and the emergence of modern infantry armies". If war "gave democracy an impetus within particular nation-states, the rights and principles of democracy were often explicitly denied to those who were conquered, colonized, and exploited by powerful nation-states", Held concludes.⁷

Uzbekistan has had little chance to demonstrate that it is capable of defending itself from serious external threats to its sovereignty. The country has never been involved in significant conflicts with foreign states or international terrorist groups. The key exceptions were two, ultimately unsuccessful, armed incursions by the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) in 1999 and 2000.⁸ In 1996, Uzbekistan also found itself facing a security threat on its southern border when the Taliban took control in Kabul. The threat had two aspects: First, the Taliban regime offered a safe haven for the IMU; and second, the Taliban and their imposition of a strict regime based on Sharia law across Afghanistan could have affected the spread of Islamic fundamentalism at least among some categories of Uzbek Muslims.

The US-led military operation in Afghanistan that began in 2001 prompted the IMU to join the Taliban-led military campaign against the US and NATO. This turn of events, and the losses the IMU suffered in US bombing raids on its positions in late 2001, were a relief for President Karimov. But the remaining IMU forces retreated to the Pashtun tribal belt along the Pakistani-Afghan border, which also became a stronghold for Taliban forces. Thereafter, the IMU seems to have gradually restored its military capability, at least in part, enjoying the support of both Al-Qaeda and the Taliban. However, in 2011, due to its deteriorating relationships with tribal leaders in North and South Waziristan, the IMU was forced into partial retreat within Afghanistan.⁹ This almost coincided with the Obama administration's decision to withdraw the bulk of US troops from Afghanistan by the end of 2014, followed by a similar decision by other NATO countries. This means that the Karzai regime in Kabul, which is affected by widespread cor-

7 Ibid, p. 79.

8 Cf. Marika Vicziany/David P. Wright-Neville/Peter Lentini, *Regional Security in the Asia Pacific: 9/11 And After*, Cheltenham 2004, pp. 116-117.

9 Cf. Militant Islamic Force Signals Return to Central Asia, IWPR Central Asia, 13 October 2010, at: <http://iwpr.net/report-news/militant-islamic-force-signals-return-central-asia>.

ruption and a lack of democratic credentials, and has failed to build sustainable state institutions, will have to deal with the Taliban without the assistance of the Western military forces that have so far assumed responsibility for most military operations carried out in the name of the current regime. Most likely, all parties involved, including the Karzai and Karimov regimes, will have learned the lessons of the Soviets' experience in Afghanistan, and will be perfectly aware of the likely fate of any regime installed there by occupying forces. As for Karimov, he faces the departure from Afghanistan of the US and NATO as a prelude to a new set of troubles in the south that may threaten Uzbekistan's stability and security.

One does not need a crystal ball to predict that, after the withdrawal, the Taliban will remount their attack on Kabul and, after a while, may regain control of the country, as they did several years after the withdrawal of Soviet troops in 1989. If this happens, would Uzbekistan then face a challenge from the Taliban regime? According to prominent Pakistani analyst Ahmed Rashid, the Taliban regime will most likely be preoccupied with Afghanistan's internal affairs¹⁰ and the consolidation of its power. To do this, the Taliban will need to deal with numerous socio-economic problems, issues of national-territorial integrity, and political stability, rather than resorting to any kind of expansionist policy towards their northern neighbours. Nor does Rashid believe that the Taliban will be willing to use the IMU as leverage against Uzbekistan.

However, anything is possible, including an increase in tension between the two countries. An escalation of this kind could, for instance, be triggered by the Uzbek regime's support of the Dostum regime in the north of Afghanistan, which would be seen by the Taliban and many Pashtuns as interference in the country's internal affairs. Indeed, in the past, the Karimov regime has given ample ground for such accusations by supplying Rashid Dostum and his regime with cash, weapons, and supplies. Karimov considered the Afghan territories adjoining to the Afghan-Uzbek border as a buffer zone, preventing the penetration of Islamic radicalism into Uzbekistan. He probably intended to contain the Taliban and prevent hardcore Islamists from approaching the Afghan-Uzbek border.

But should the Taliban reconquer Kabul, they will most certainly turn north against Dostum, whom they most likely regard as one of their worst enemies. He is accused of orchestrating the massacre of around 2,000 Taliban prisoners during their transfer, under the supervision of his people, from Kunduz to the Sheberghan prison in 2001,¹¹ an accusation he has denied.

10 Cf. *Insight with Ahmed Rashid – Pakistan on the Brink: The Future of America, Pakistan, and Afghanistan*, 18 April 2012, Frontline Club, London, at: <http://www.frontlineclub.com/events/2012/04/insight-with-ahmed-rashid---pakistan-on-the-brink-the-future-of-america-pakistan-and-afghanistan.html>.

11 Cf. Heidi Vogt, UN confirms Afghan mass grave site disturbed, in: *USA Today*, 12 December 2008, at: http://www.usatoday.com/news/world/asia/2008-12-12-2525047668_x.htm; see also Carlotta Gall, Study Hints at Mass Killing of the Taliban, in: *The New York*

After his most recent return from exile in 2009, Dostum reportedly made a statement in which he claimed he could “destroy the Taliban and al Qaeda” if supported by the US.¹² At the time of writing, the former warlord held the – largely ceremonial – post of Afghanistan’s Army Chief of Staff in recognition of his influence and the role of the north in providing stability in the country. Dostum is the leader of *Junbish-i Milli*, an organization dominated by Afghan Uzbeks, and one of the leaders of the National Front party, a re-configuration of the former Northern Alliance, which fought the Taliban in the past. Like the Northern Alliance, the National Front represents a coalition of Uzbek, Tajik, and Hazara minorities, with Dostum retaining control of an armed force comprised of ethnic Uzbeks.

In light of the US and NATO withdrawals, one would expect all the parties in Afghanistan that oppose the Taliban to come together. In reality, something different is happening. The latest developments indicate growing tensions between Dostum and the regime in Kabul. He and his loyalists are accused by the government in Kabul of disrupting oil exploration by China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC)¹³ in the Amu Darya basin, in territories controlled by Dostum. His people are allegedly extorting part of the oil revenues from the Chinese, prompting the Afghan Attorney General to launch a probe. There are also allegations that Uzbekistan is behind Dostum’s efforts to prevent oil extraction near its borders.¹⁴ These developments highlight growing tensions between Kabul and Tashkent. It is likely that they would escalate further with the return of the Taliban.

The Taliban may find a number of other points of friction with the Karimov regime, including Uzbekistan’s claims to the water resources of the Amu Darya basin¹⁵ and the fact that Uzbekistan hosts NATO bases. It is evident that the main function of these bases is to prevent the Taliban from returning to power, and the Taliban are likely to get angry at the role played by Tashkent. If, in spite of efforts by the US and NATO, the Taliban manage to reassert their authority in Afghanistan, their leaders may resort to their own kind of containment politics, aimed at discouraging Uzbekistan from acting against the interests of Afghanistan (as they are understood by the Taliban). The Taliban’s most effective strategy would be to challenge Uzbekistan’s

Times, 1 May 2002, at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2002/05/01/world/study-hints-at-mass-killing-of-the-taliban.html>.

12 Afghan warlords will fight if U.S. gives weapons, in: *The Washington Times*, 22 September 2009, at: http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2009/sep/22/afghan-warlords-will-fight-if-us-gives-aid/?feat=home_headline.

13 Cf. Hamid Shalizi, *Afghans say former warlord meddling in China oil deal*, Reuters, 11 June 2012, at: <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2012/06/11/uk-afghanistan-dostum-idUKBRE85A15X20120611>

14 Cf. Uzbekistan attempt to stop oil project in Amu River, in: *Khaama Press*, 25 June 2012, at: <http://www.khaama.com/uzbekistan-attempt-to-stop-oil-project-in-amu-river-944>.

15 According to water-management experts Walter Klemm and Sayed Shobair, Afghanistan contributes 22,000 million cubic metres of water to the Amu Darya basin, but consumes only 5,000 million. Uzbekistan contributes 5,000 million but consumes 33,000 million cubic metres, see: http://www.cawater-info.net/afghanistan/pdf/fao_report_2010_r.pdf.

relationship with Dostum by supporting Uzbekistan's own Islamic opposition, principally the IMU.

Challenges to Uzbekistan's Sovereignty

While the outlined scenario is not imminent, it cannot be ruled out. Uzbekistan should therefore try its best to live in peace with its southern neighbour, regardless of what party is in power there. It should also be prepared to face any turn of events, including the escalation of a conflict between the two nations.

In the worst case scenario, it is not obvious who and what would guarantee Uzbekistan its security and national sovereignty. Would the Karimov regime continue to rely chiefly upon global and regional powers, such as Russia and the US?¹⁶ Given President Vladimir Putin's aspiration to create a Eurasian Union of ex-Soviet republics,¹⁷ if it were to rely upon Russia, Tashkent would be expected to concede at least part of its sovereignty. That would downgrade the country's status, recalling the way the Bukhara and Khiva Khanates ceded their prerogative to set their own foreign policy to the Russian Empire in the 19th century.¹⁸ Seeking to avoid just such a fate, Karimov suspended Uzbekistan's membership of the Moscow-controlled Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) in June 2012,¹⁹ and has once again embraced a strategic partnership with the West and NATO. It is likely that Karimov received assurances that the US would not support a colour revolution in Uzbekistan, as well as remuneration in the form of lucrative procurement and rental contacts.

This rapprochement with the West opens a Pandora's box of risks. Western military bases on Uzbekistan's territory will likely infuriate the Taliban, and will subject the country to terrorism or hostilities from them and their proxies. For the West, the militarization of Uzbekistan may become an embarrassment, akin to what happened in Egypt, where the US heavily invested in the non-democratic Mubarak regime for similar pragmatic reasons, which was toppled by its people in 2011.

16 As for China, it is unlikely to take sides in any conflict, as it has interests in both countries.

17 Cf. Putin calls for "Eurasian Union" of ex-Soviet republics, *BBC News Europe*, 4 October 2011, at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-15172519>.

18 Both khanates were forced to accept the status of protectorates of the Russian Empire and to give up their right to define their own foreign policy.

19 Cf. Uzbekistan suspends its membership in Russia-dominated security grouping of ex-Soviet nations, Associated Press, published in *The Washington Post*, 28 June 2012.

Assessing Uzbekistan's Capabilities to Face External Conflicts

An alternative to Uzbekistan's submission to patron states, one that would allow it to retain full sovereignty, would be to build its own capacities to withstand serious external threats and challenges. Here, it is once again important to stress that military and civil capacities are equally important for Uzbekistan's security.

First, let us consider how Uzbekistan's military capabilities compare to those of Afghanistan. Upon first glance, the situation does not look too bad for the former. In 2010, Uzbekistan's military forces had total manpower of 48,000.²⁰ The Uzbek army is relatively well equipped, armed mainly with weapons left in Uzbekistan after the collapse of the Soviet Union. According to the London-based International Institute for Strategic Studies, in 2010 there were 340 tanks (and a further 2,000 units in storage), 399 tracked (BMPs) and 309 wheeled (BTRs) mobile armoured vehicles, as well as 523 artillery and mortar units of various types.²¹

Uzbekistan's air force has 49 tactical bombers: 26 SU-17s and 23 SU-24s, and two fighter regiments, the first consisting of 20 SU-25 attack planes and the second of 30 MiG-29 fighters and 25 multipurpose SU-27 fighters. The Uzbek air force possesses 41 transport aircraft and 110 helicopters.²² For the training of officers from all branches of its military forces, Uzbekistan has four military colleges and an academy.²³ According to the CIA World Factbook, Uzbekistan had a military budget of 3.291 billion US dollars in 2010, calculated in terms of purchasing power parity (PPP – 1.422 billion, calculated in terms of the foreign exchange rate).²⁴

Afghanistan's National Security Forces (ANSF) had a strength of 164,000 in 2011²⁵ (more than three times that of Uzbekistan), and this is expected to increase to 240,000 by 2014, with reserve capacity to be increased in addition.²⁶ The army suffers from a lack of basic skills, as roughly 86 per

20 Cf. Natsionalnaya Oborona, "Nejtralizovat' i dat' dostoinyi otpor" ["Neutralize and Deservedly Repulse"], March 2012, at: <http://www.oborona.ru/includes/periodics/geopolitics/2011/0516/21276148/detail.shtml>.

21 Cf. The International Institute For Strategic Studies (ed.), *The Military Balance 2010*, London 2010, p. 373.

22 Ibid.

23 Cf. Voennyi Informator, *Vooruzhennyye sily Uzbekistana* [Armed Forces of Uzbekistan], at: <http://www.military-informant.com/index.php/force/382-uzbekistan.html>.

24 Cf. Central Intelligence Agency, *The World Factbook*, Central Asia, Uzbekistan, at: <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/uz.html>.

25 Cf. Cheryl Pellerin, *Afghan Security Forces Grow in Numbers, Quality*, U.S. Department of Defense, American Forces Press Service, 23 May 2011, at: <http://www.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=64044>. According to other sources, however, the Afghan military has a total strength of 300,000. See CJ Radin, *Funding the Afghan National Security Forces*, in: *Threat Matrix, A Blog of The Long War Journal*, 16 September 2011, at: http://www.longwarjournal.org/threat-matrix/archives/2011/09/funding_the_afghan_national_se.php.

26 Cf. BBC News, *Obama 'mulls Afghan army boost'*, 19 March 2009, at: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/7952085.stm>.

cent of recruits are illiterate.²⁷ However, intensive literacy and numeracy courses provided by the NATO Training Mission – Afghanistan (NTM-A) are taking place. Apart from that, an elite corps of nine hundred commandos armed with the latest NATO equipment is being intensively trained by American instructors.²⁸ No less important is that both the Afghan military forces and the Taliban have extensive war experience.

Until recently, Afghanistan's large manpower capacity stood in sharp contrast to its less impressive armaments, technical, and professional capacities. However, the situation is rapidly changing due to extensive US and NATO investment in rebuilding Afghan military forces. The military budget is not transparent, and it is not clear how much the US and NATO are contributing. According to the CIA World Factbook, Afghanistan's military budget in 2009 constituted 1.9 per cent of GDP, which would be 570 million US dollars in 2011 (the last year for which GDP data is available). In all likelihood, this sum represents only internally generated funds and does not include the foreign aid that is being used to build the Afghanistan military forces through the Combined Security Transition Command – Afghanistan (CSTC-A). The latter does not report to the Afghan government, but to the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF),²⁹ and, in particular, to its commander, COMISAF. CSTC-A is an opaque structure, whose website has recently been taken offline. Other sources suggest that with foreign aid, the military budget of Afghanistan reached 11.6 billion US dollars in 2011 (roughly 3.5 times larger than Uzbekistan's current military budget in terms of PPP), an increase from 2.75 billion dollars in 2008.³⁰ The US has reportedly delivered at least, 2,500 Humvees (high-mobility multipurpose wheeled vehicles) to Afghanistan and tens of thousands of M-16 assault rifles and body armoured-jackets.³¹ However, Washington is said to be seeking to reduce its contribution to between two and three billion dollars annually.³²

The Afghan Air Force, which shrank as a result of the long period of civil war, is currently being rebuilt and modernized by the US-led multinational Combined Air Power Transition Force (part of the US-led CSTC-A). As of 2011, the Afghan Air Force had 65 aircraft (in comparison to Uzbekistan's 181), most of which had been refurbished, including 17 US-made C-27A

27 Cf. The Asia Foundation, *The Canadian Press: 86% of Afghan Army Recruits are Illiterate*, 7 June 2011, at: <http://asiafoundation.org/news/2011/06/the-canadian-press-86-of-afghan-army-recruits-are-illiterate>.

28 Cf. Afghanistan online, *Afghan Army Grows by More Than 900 Commandos*, 18 August 2010, at: <http://www.afghan-web.com/military/afghancommandos.html>

29 For details of ISAF's organizational structure, see: <http://www.isaf.nato.int/isaf-command-structure.html>.

30 Cf. CJ Radin, Afghan National Security Forces Order of Battle, in: *The Long War Journal*, 25 April 2011, at: <http://www.longwarjournal.org/oob/afghanistan/index.php>.

31 This data is taken from the Wikipedia article "Military of Afghanistan", which, in turn, cites www.afghannews.net, a now defunct website. See: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Military_of_Afghanistan#cite_note-36.

32 Cf. CJ Radin, *Funding the Afghan National Security Forces*, cited above (Note 25).

Spartan transport aircraft³³ and a number of Ukrainian Antonov AN-32 transporters, as well as several Mi-17 and Mi-24 helicopters. Plans exist to increase the overall number of aircraft to 100, and the US intends to spend around five billion dollars to raise the strength of the Afghan Air Force to around 120 aircraft by 2016. Most Afghan pilots were trained by the Soviets, while aircrew are now being trained by Americans. It was also announced that the Afghan military would be provided with 145 multi-purpose aircraft and 23,000 vehicles. In October 2010, the helicopter fleet reached 31 (compared to 110 in Uzbekistan), and the Afghan Ministry of Defence plans to receive deliveries of another 21 by 2013, bringing the total Mi-17 fleet to 56.³⁴

Table 1. Statistical Comparison of Afghanistan and Uzbekistan

	Uzbekistan	Afghanistan
Population (Uzb. 2011; Afg. 2102, est.)	28,394,180	30,419,928
GDP, PPP US \$bln (2011)	94.04	29.74
Military Budget US \$bln (2011), PPP	3.291	11.6
Military Budget US \$bln (2011), foreign exchange rate	1.422	11.6
Literacy (%)	91	36

Sources: CIA World Factbook; Marvin G. Weinbaum, *Afghanistan and Its Neighbors. An Ever Dangerous Neighborhood*, US Institute of Peace Special Report, No 162, June 2006.

Also noteworthy is the fact that, in July 2012, the international donors, led by the US and Japan, agreed to provide Afghanistan with at least 16 billion US dollars in development aid by the end of 2015. This was in addition to the 4.1 billion the same donors had pledged, two months earlier, in May 2012, would be transferred to Afghanistan annually for the Afghan army and police after 2014.³⁵ Thus, military and security aid is going to match the aid Afghanistan receives for economic development, proportions probably never seen by any country in the world.

Taking into account the Afghanistan military's manpower, budget, equipment, and long war experience, it is not difficult to imagine that by the end of 2014, the Afghan military may emerge as one of the strongest in the Central Asian region, including all the post-Soviet states. The spectre of a

33 Cf. Gary Parsons, More Spartans for Afghanistan, in: *key.aero*, 27 September 2010, at: http://www.key.aero/view_news.asp?ID=2545&thisSection=military.

34 Cf. Elizabeth Burke, Afghan Air Force Helicopter Fleet Grows To 31, in: *Afghanistan Online*, 5 October 2010, at: http://www.afghan-web.com/military/aaf_helicopters.html.

35 Cf. Chester Dawson, Donors Pledge \$16 Billion Afghan Aid, With New Strings, in: *The Wall Street Journal*, 8 July 2012, at: <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052702303567704577514103467478784.html>.

highly formidable ANSF will make Uzbekistan, both its leadership and population, feel insecure.

The reasons for concern are abundant. The growth of Afghanistan's military force against the background of its weak state institutions, poor economy (compare its GDP and military budget), poverty, and weak secular civil society, may itself become a source of instability. The disparity between military and civic institutions, in terms of their financial capacities and influence, may tempt army generals to play their own politics, as happened in neighbouring Pakistan or in Egypt where the military became a state within a state, totally unaccountable to society. It is as yet unclear whether the unpopular Karzai regime or the politically and socially backward, but highly organized Taliban will ultimately exert real political control over the army, or whether the generals themselves will form an untouchable elite caste. The future of Afghanistan, as well as its impact upon the whole region, will depend on the outcome of relationships within this triangle of major actors. The situation is also complicated, as we note above, by tensions within the current ruling regime, between factions representing Pashtuns and ethnic minorities, between Kabul and the provinces.

What should Uzbekistan's response be to this looming uncertainty? It is clear that in its current political and economic condition, Uzbekistan is unlikely to be capable of withstanding – by itself – a possible military conflict with Afghanistan or any of Afghanistan's major armed factions. Not only because of the lack of cash, modern weapons, and supplies, but also due to the lack of the loyalty of its own population to the ruling regime. Frequent cadre reshuffles in the army suggest that Karimov mistrusts the military, too. During the post-Soviet period, Karimov has replaced the Minister of Defence six times,³⁶ and army officers have faced criminal charges for alleged corruption on several occasions. One wonders what Islam Karimov would fear more: defeat by Afghanistan in the battlefield or an uprising by a discontented population on the home front? Karimov has been always unable to conceal his nervousness with regard to a possible scenario of "colour" revolutions or an "Arab Spring" style upheaval in Uzbekistan. That is why he has always overreacted to domestic dissent, seeing it as a threat to his regime. His crackdowns have been harsher than those of any other post-Soviet regime save Turkmenistan. In a country where thousands of Muslims are languishing in prison for their religious views, where all imaginable civil freedoms are suppressed, where corruption is omnipresent, and export revenues are used to subsidize the luxurious lifestyles of the president's daughters, any ruler would quickly realize that he is sitting on a powder keg. In such a situation, even a minor external shock may cause destabilization and upheaval within the country. Therefore, Afghanistan represents a challenge not so much in

36 Cf. Uzmtronom.com, *General'y peschanoi kar'ery* [Sandpit Generals], 13 January 2009, at: http://www.uzmtronom.com/2009/01/13/general'y_peschanojj_karery.html.

terms of the threat of invasion (which is unlikely) than as a factor that may trigger an uprising or a coup within Uzbekistan.

That is why Karimov is so desperately seeking alliances with greater powers to protect not only the country from external threats, but also his own regime from home-grown revolutions. However, dependence on patron states bears risks of its own. Uzbekistan risks sacrificing its sovereignty and cherished stability. While it is indeed difficult to avoid dependence on major powers, this dependence could be reduced to an acceptable level if the government enjoyed the support of its own population. But popularity can hardly be achieved exclusively by means of propaganda and brainwashing, as the Karimov regime tries to do. What is needed to raise the spirit of the nation is to let the civil society grow, unleashing grass-root initiatives of which Karimov has been always suspicious. NATO's withdrawal from Afghanistan will be a moment of truth for the current regime in Uzbekistan and will yield some answers to the question of whether its ideology of *mustaqillik* was a hollow declaration or a value that Uzbek society is ready to stand and fight for.