

ISSUES IN CENTRAL ASIA'S INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Podcast transcript

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This is a podcast on Central Asian International Relations. Scholars working in and on Central Asia discuss the key events and developments in the region and its engagement with the world. The podcast is part of a project by Dr Eric McGlinchey and Dr Shairbek Dzhuraev on debating international relations of Central Asia. The project is supported by the Hollings Center for International Dialogue.

The first episode, led by Dr Eric McGlinchey will look at the implications for Central Asia of the pullout of the U.S. military from Afghanistan and the evolving Russia-Chinese relations.

Eric McGlinchey [00:00:50] Thank you for joining us today. This is a podcast which we will be talking about, Central Asia and Central Asian International Relations. My name is Eric McGlinchey. I'm an associate professor of government at the Schar School at George Mason University. I'm joined today by Dr Farkhod Tolipov, director of the Caravan of Knowledge Non-governmental Research Center in Tashkent, Dr Nurseit Niyazbekov, Assistant Professor of International Relations at KIMEP University and Dr Shairbek Dzhuraev, director of Crossroads Central Asia and Postdoctoral Fellow at the OSCE Academy in Bishkek. Everybody, welcome.

There's a number of questions that I'd like to talk about and actually, I really hear your thoughts as experts on the region. Our overall theme today is going to be Central Asia, International Relations, Central Asia and the great and the great powers. But let's start off with this question is certainly one, a question that I know people here in Washington are very interested about, and that is there's a lot of talk about the departure of U.S. forces from Afghanistan. This is something that's been going on for quite some time. But now we're talking about an almost complete departure of U.S. forces from Afghanistan. And so I was wondering what, if any effect, you think this may have on Central Asian International Relations once the U.S. drawdown in Afghanistan is complete? Farkhod, let's start with you.

Farkhod Tolipov [00:02:21] Thank you very much for inviting me to this small group discussion.

Talking about Afghanistan and the implications of the overall developments in Afghanistan to Central Asia or Uzbekistan, I should, first of all, say that it's not so obvious that the American forces will withdraw completely and in a very short period of time.

As far as I remember, President Trump didn't make a secret that it's not just simple withdrawal, unconditional. He said that it was conditional. So this withdrawal would depend on the situation in Afghanistan, on the progress of communication and negotiations with the Taliban or between the Taliban and the government, between the Taliban and the U.S. side. So, much depends on the progress of these negotiations. And if there is progress and if everything goes as planned, then perhaps a withdrawal will take place. Otherwise, as President Trump indicated the situation, probably the forces will stay longer. When it comes to Uzbekistan's position, you know, well, that in March that 2018 in Tashkent, there was a big international conference on Afghanistan where representatives of more than twenty countries participated, including international organizations.

The conference participants adopted joint statements in which, among other things, they addressed the Taliban with this statement that the Taliban should stop fighting, stop terrorist actions and go to the negotiation table and then negotiate with the government and so on. I think this is quite unique because the international document of this kind directly addresses an organization or the people who used to be portrayed as terrorists.

This conference indicated a significant shift in Uzbekistan's foreign policy towards Afghanistan. First, as President Mirziyoyev during that conference said, Afghanistan is no longer considered as the source of the threat, as the territory from which terrorist and extremist threats emanate and Uzbekistan doesn't look at Afghanistan from such, you know, point of view. Afghanistan for Uzbekistan, he said, is the area of opportunities and that Uzbekistan should cooperate with Afghanistan. And this is an interesting shift in Uzbekistan's position. Mirziyoyev indicated three different interrelated levels to deal with Afghanistan. First, intra-Afghan process, it is on a national level. Second, it should be dealt with on the regional level that regional countries, neighbors of Afghanistan, should be more actively engaged. And finally, because the problem is about global threat of terrorism, it should be dealt with on the global level. So these three levels were indicated by Mirziyoyev when he was describing the position of Uzbekistan.

Eric McGlinchey [00:06:13] To pick up on a point you made, Farkhod, which is, you mentioned that there has to be, or at least from the point of view of Uzbekistan, regional governments, regional states play a very large role in helping to shape the future, both of Afghanistan, but also Afghanistan's relations within the region. So, Nurseit, picking up on that Farkhod's point there, what role, if anything, do you see Kazakhstan having here in this post-United States drawdown in Afghanistan now? Because, of course, you know, Kazakhstan does not share the border with Afghanistan as Uzbekistan does, or perhaps the imperatives are less. Nonetheless,

you know, Kazakhstan is a major, major player in the region. So what, if any role do you see Kazakhstan playing in this post U.S. drawdown period?

Nurseit Niyazbekov [00:07:05] Thank you, Eric. First of all, I'd like to thank you all for having me. It's a pleasure to be in this fascinating discussion.

For Kazakhstan, Afghanistan has always been a country that raised two major concerns or two major, let's say, goals. The security aspect and the trade aspect. So, well, while the United States was engaged in Afghanistan for Kazakhstan, it looked like the presence of the U.S. in Afghanistan brought about stability in the region in terms of the spread of terrorism. So I'm talking about the security dimension, in terms of building the state, in terms of ensuring a peaceful trade between the countries and development, regional development. As for the trade dimension, probably it's not a secret to you guys that Kazakhstan has been viewing Afghanistan as a recipient of Kazakhstani goods. We're talking about wheat, particularly. So Kazakhstan has been a major exporter of wheat to Afghanistan, and while it does not directly engage with Afghanistan in any other way, President Tokayev, as well as Nazarbayev, have always been talking about ensuring peace and stability in Afghanistan. Being aware of the security threats emanating from Afghanistan and the rise of the terrorism in Central Asia and the two terrorists, not two actually, more than two instances of terrorist attacks in Kazakhstan have been linked by the security agencies to Afghanistan.

So the fact that the United States is disengaging from Afghanistan for Kazakhstan has two implications. One in the short-run and one is the long run implication. In the short run, Kazakhstan will not be affected in any way by that, so Afghanistan will continue to receive Kazakhstani aids, Kazakhstani goods. Kazakhstan has established a Kazakhstani Aid Agency or something like that, which is providing foreign aid to countries in need, and Afghanistan is one of them. So like I said, in the short-run, the withdrawal of the U.S. from Afghanistan will not have any significant effects on Kazakhstan. But in the long-run, as I mentioned earlier, there is a security dimension, the risk of the growth of terrorism, the risk of the reappearance of terrorism emanating from the Taliban, emanating from the ISIS, all of that could a little concern the government of Kazakhstan fearful of the potential spread of terrorism from Afghanistan in the long-run.

Eric McGlinchey [00:10:14] Shair, I know you are a citizen of a country that played host to, outside of Afghanistan, the largest, longest-standing U.S. military presence in the region, which is the Manas transit center. Of course, the United States has been out of Manas for over six years now, but still from the point of view of Kyrgyzstan, what implications, if anything, does the U.S. drawdown in Afghanistan have for Kyrgyzstan?

Shairbek Dzhuraev [00:10:41] Well, compared to other Central Asian states, I think, Kyrgyzstan is likely the least affected by the developments in Afghanistan, including the drawdown of the U.S. forces from Afghanistan. We don't have borders with Afghanistan, and unlike Kazakhstan, we have less ability and less interest to actively engage with Afghanistan, be it in terms of trade or demonstrating our capabilities to contribute to international efforts to assist or support Afghanistan.

Kyrgyzstan viewed the developments in Afghanistan through the prism of Kyrgyz - U.S. relations. The military base in Kyrgyzstan was the biggest and only thing that

mattered for us in all this issue. If you look at the public discourse in Kyrgyzstan, there's almost nothing on Afghanistan or political or military developments in Afghanistan. So the short answer would be that Kyrgyzstan has already passed through that stage, and the chapter is closed. The U.S. forces are no more in Kyrgyzstan and the eventual disappearance of the U.S. military from Afghanistan, I think, would be additional relief for the current Kyrgyz government. The confrontation between the United States and Russia has been a source of the nervousness, a source of tension. The less U.S. is engaged and active in Kyrgyzstan, the less headache is there for the government.

Eric McGlinchey [00:12:13] Thank you all for your contributions. In my own discussions with U.S. government colleagues, I have essentially shared a very similar position to yours, Shair, in that for many Central Asian countries, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, the U.S. drawdown has already happened, right? I mean, the U.S. drawdown, the United States has been out of Uzbekistan since 2005, has left K2. The United States has been out of Kyrgyzstan since 2014. The United States militarily was really never much of a presence in Kazakhstan.

Nurseit, your point about the potential rise of terrorism is actually an interesting one and one I'd like to dig down a little bit more into, and I'll put my cards on the table, I'm somewhat dubious about claims that the terror, that actually relatively rare events of terror that we've seen in Central Asia are related to events in Afghanistan. But, Nurseit, you directly linked this. So I'd like to hear a little bit more about the terror that you've seen in Kazakhstan and those links to Afghanistan. And then Farkhod, I'd like to pose the same question to you after Nurseit talks. Thanks.

Nurseit Niyazbekov [00:13:26] Well, when the terrorist attacks happened in Kazakhstan, the National Security Committee, as well as any other special agencies, were keen to attribute, they were keen to trace those instances to the Afghan groups. The Hizb ut-Tahrir organization, Tablighi Jamaat, many banned organizations, soldiers of Caliphate, a bunch of these organizations were traced not only to Afghanistan but also to Egypt, to Syria and Afghanistan is the usual suspect in that sense. And our government likes to point fingers at Afghanistan and to view Afghanistan as a scapegoat, even if there is no direct proof that Afghan Taliban or any other organizations are anyhow linked to the Kazakhstani terrorist attacks. The government, nevertheless, likes to use Afghanistan as the source of potential threats.

Eric McGlinchey [00:14:31] So interesting, to the extent that maybe Afghanistan's involved here is in the sense that the Kazak government has invoked Afghanistan, despite the fact that there might not be any evidence actually linking these terrorist threats to Afghanistan. So thank you for that clarification. Farkhod, what about in Uzbekistan? I mean, things in Uzbekistan have been, I think, somewhat quiet on this front for a while. But what about this potential for increased terror with the U.S. drawdown from Afghanistan?

Farhad Tolipov [00:15:05] When I analyze the possible or actual challenges to security of Uzbekistan or Central Asia stemming from Afghanistani territory, I often try to compare the situation right after 9/11 and now. The peak of terrorist threat was that time, I mean after the 9/11. It's not by accident that it's then when the U.S. troops were involved, I mean the U.S. contingent was deployed in Uzbekistan Karshi-K2, on the Manas Airport and so on. Even then, you know, the threat from Afghanistan, let's say

from Taliban, was not at the degree to threaten Central Asia or in particular Uzbekistan. Uzbekistan forces were put on alert. I mean, they were ready to mobilize and take measures in case of severe threat, in case of violation of border and if some fighters from Afghanistan crossed the border and so on. Even then, when, as we perceive, the threat was a "red color", there was no attack, there were no incidents, border incidents, and there were no serious dramatic changes in the sphere of regional and national security. That's why, if then in 2001-2002 and throughout the overall Enduring Freedom operation period we didn't face any serious threat, what should we say about the state of threat or challenges today? I think the level of threat as compared to the 9/11 or 2001 situation is much, much lower. That's why I think we should, it doesn't mean that we should be calm and, you know, ignore any threats, any tokens of challenges from Afghanistan. But nevertheless, the degree of threat is much lower.

Shairbek Dzhuraev [00:17:44] I think there are two extremes. On the one hand, we acknowledge that there is this discourse of danger, very much government-sponsored, and you can name several governments who are interested in maintaining this discourse. At the same time, I think we should be careful not to move to the other extreme. We have to acknowledge that there are a couple of other variables that may, in the long term, influence the developments. First of all, that's the political developments in Afghanistan and second, political developments in Central Asian states. As long as we have the situation as of now, we may safely say that whatever happens in Afghanistan seems to be quite detached from the developments in Central Asia. However, we're all aware that Afghanistan is an area that allows much liberty to different warlords, and Central Asia is very close geographically. Certain developments in Tajikistan or in Turkmenistan, say the immediate bordering countries with Afghanistan might create, at some point, a situation conducive for the proliferation of security risks.

Nurseit Niyazbekov [00:19:03] One quick comment that came to my mind about the threat of Afghanistan. It's not only terrorism, which we've been discussing quite extensively. It's also the threat of organized crime, and drug trafficking is a big issue. Organized crimes in Kazakhstan had flourished during the times when the U.S. was not in Afghanistan. And there were very often recordings of the customs stopping some big transit routes of the drugs out of Afghanistan. So that's one thing.

And the second comment I'd like to make is it actually resonates with what Shairbek said. What he calls as the dimension of the danger I would like to call as an issue of the threat deficit. Kazakhstan may be experiencing a threat deficit in one way or another after the COVID-19 pandemic has been totally destroyed. This is actually a normal thing, I think nowadays, in international relations and for Kazakhstan, that vacuum of the threat could be filled by, again, securitization dialogue, securitization discourse. And when the U.S. leaves from Afghanistan, if things go really bad in Afghanistan after that, Kazakhstan could immediately take on that instance and say "look, this is what happened in Afghanistan, in Afghanistan things are getting worse and worse, so Kazakhstan should securitize" and that might eventually affect even the further autocratization scenarios in Kazakhstan. Thank you.

Eric McGlinchey [00:20:43] Interesting, these are all really fantastic points. Picking up on this comment that it's not just terror that's a challenge that Nurseit and Shair,

you guys both mentioned, you know, I've spent time in Ishkashim and Khorog in Gorno-Badakhshan, right on that border with Afghanistan. And, you know, the concern wasn't so much terror. The concern was narcotics. Ishkashim was a major point of narcotics distribution coming up through Afghanistan.

I guess what's interesting for me is what happens to these economies once the security that had been provided by the United States to a certain extent is gone. What happens to the drug trade, and what impact does that have on the Central Asian states? If we do see a massive uptick in the drug trade if we see a decrease in insecurity in the region. So I think it's a fantastic point and one that we have to keep in mind. We so often think about terror, but there are all these other things that can happen when we see security vacuums. Well, thank you. That's a really helpful conversation. It's somewhat reassuring to hear that you guys collectively don't necessarily anticipate terror to be a threat. But I think you have given us a lot of reasons to be somewhat sober in our analysis and to actually anticipate that there could be trouble down the road.

One thing that's for sure is once the United States leaves Afghanistan if it's not already apparent, there will be two primary regional and great powers left in the region, and they're never going to leave, right? Because they can't leave, they are right there. There's Russia, and there's China. And traditionally, I think at least in the analysis here that I see in the United States, we see people portraying Russia as being the power that has a monopoly over the security room and China as a power that increasingly has a monopoly over the economic room. And this poses a really challenging balance, I think, for Central Asian countries how to navigate these two great powers that both have legitimate claims to be the ascendant power in the region. So I was curious what you guys think about future relations between Russia and China and whether or not just go straight to the point whether or not you anticipate that there might be some kind of conflict that emerges as China becomes economically more powerful and Russia star potentially begins to wane a little bit in the region. Is there a potential for conflict between these two great powers?

Nurseit Niyazbekov [00:23:20] For Kazakhstan, as I've mentioned in my research policy paper on Kazakhstan's foreign policy, what matters right now more than anything else, especially in the post-COVID times, is a pragmatic development, pragmatic ties, pragmatic relationships, not only with the great powers, regional and international but with any other neighboring countries.

And considering the fact that both China and Russia are becoming more and more visible in the region, both geopolitically and economically, I think that Kazakhstan would be happy to receive any hand that is about to help Kazakhstan. So if we're talking about Russia, that was always a geopolitical interest, security interests. But with China, it's, again, economics. It's again, about stability in the region, securing the Chinese interests. I wouldn't say there is a competition between China and Russia, I'd rather say collaboration. I don't think that Kazakhstan is trying to somehow get as much as they can into the competition between the two countries. We shouldn't forget that both Kazakhstan, as well as two other countries, are members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and within the framework of that organization.

Considering the growing rapprochement between the two countries, I think that we shouldn't be watching any things, any tension stemming up. Quite the opposite, considering the disengagement of the U.S., we should be seeing more and more collaboration between the great powers plus Kazakhstan.

Eric McGlinchey [00:25:17] Instead of a competitive great game, we see a kind of a cooperative environment going here.

Nurseit Niyazbekov [00:25:22] Yeah.

Eric McGlinchey [00:25:24] Yeah, you're blowing apart the analogy. It's a little less kind of confrontational, but probably closer to reality. Thank you, Nurseit. Farkhod, what about the view from Uzbekistan?

Farkhod Tolipov [00:25:38] Well, again, from a comparative perspective, if you look at Karimov's policy vis a vis Russia or China, on the one hand, and what policy Mr Mirziyoyev is pursuing today, you can see some differences. Karimov positioned himself as a relatively more independent leader and was able to keep a reasonable distance from Russia and from China. And, you know, understanding well, that's diversification of foreign economic and foreign political orientation is important for then a newly independent Uzbekistan. There are many examples which confirm such a policy which Karimov pursued, for instance. Just to mention just a few, just a couple of examples. Well, after the Andijan events, you know, in 2005, Uzbekistan joined the then-existing EurAsEC organization. It no longer exists. But then there was EurAsEC, Eurasian Economic Community, as distinguished from the currently existing Eurasian Economic Union. So Uzbekistan joined that organization because that membership was actually the security measure, the protective measure against alleged Western or American threats about overthrowing the government in Uzbekistan.

President Karimov himself wrongly evaluated that there was American hand behind the Akromiya organization which committed the terrorist action in Andijan. There was a color revolution attempt and things like that, and afterwards Karimov, as a protective measure, decided to join the EurAsEC. But membership of Uzbekistan in EurAsEC didn't last for more than two years. Uzbekistan joined in 2006 and in 2008, Uzbekistan stopped its membership in the EurAsEC. A few years later, in 2012, Uzbekistan withdrew from ODKB, the Collective Security Organization of the CIS countries. So these couple of examples just demonstrate, illustrate a relatively independent policy of Karimov.

Today Mirziyoyev pursues slightly more pro-Russian policy. Also, there are several examples which also confirm such a shift let's say, such a turn in Uzbekistan's foreign policy in favor of Russia, let's say. Mirziyoyev decided to join the Eurasian Economic Union with the status of observer. This simple fact, this single fact also demonstrates that Uzbekistan takes this turn. But recently, the Foreign Minister of Uzbekistan, Kamilov, said that Uzbekistan tried to negotiate an agreement with Russia on migration. But Russian side insisted "why do you need such an agreement, just join the Eurasian Economic Union as a full member. Then there will be no problem with labor migrants". Thereby, he just uncovered the existence of invisible pressure on the part of Russia. This pressure should be remembered when we analyze the seemingly pro-Russian course in the foreign policy of Uzbekistan.

When it comes to China, I think it's not about the balance of power position on the part of Uzbekistan. Mirziyoyev, several times expressed full support to the BRI Concept, and his predecessor also supported this concept fully. So, as long as the BRI projects, infrastructure, undertakings, etc., meet the interests of Uzbekistan, it will, of course, support it. So that's why it is not so much maneuvering of Uzbekistan between Russia and China as about Russia-China relationships.

Eric McGlinchey [00:30:50] Thank you, Farkhod. Shair, I do want to give you a chance to weigh in here and just for our listeners. To perhaps note the obvious, Dr Toplipov and Dr Niyazbekov are talking for the point of view of Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, which no offence to Kyrgyzstan, are the two economic powers of Central Asia and also particularly, with regards historically to Uzbekistan and increasingly with regards to Kazakhstan, the military powers of Central Asia. Kyrgyzstan is quite different, right, in that the economy is much smaller, the population's smaller, and the military capabilities of Kyrgyzstan are much smaller. So, I would imagine Shair, that the calculations that the Kyrgyz government faces with this relationship and the relationship between China and Russia are probably different than the considerations that the economically and militarily more powerful Uzbek and Kazak governments face. So, what's the strategy of Kyrgyzstan, do you think?

Shairbek Dzhuraev [00:31:58] Well, indeed, Kyrgyzstan stands out, probably, together with Tajikistan, for much greater dependence, on both Russia and China. It's not a secret that Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have huge debts to China. The debt grew particularly in the past 10 years and there are reports listing Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan among the high-risk countries in terms of indebtedness to China. So, in that sense, we stand out. At the same time, Kyrgyzstan is probably the most loyal ally of Russia in the region. Particularly, that's been evident with President Atambayev. President Jeenbekov is continuing the rhetoric of Russia being the strategic partner of Kyrgyzstan, and that mantra gets repeated nearly in every foreign policy-related speech. And the tension between Russia and China would be a disaster. But there are two things that I would like to mention. First, as Nurseit and Farkhod mentioned, I don't think that we are going to see an escalation of tension between Russia and China soon in the region, particularly because there is still the West, Europe and the United States have problems with both Russia and China. And I don't simply see any ground on which Russia and China would have competing claims, competing interests, both overall and particularly in this region.

However, if the time comes when China gets more proactive politically or Russia is increasingly interested in squeezing out China economically in the region, I think Kyrgyzstan wouldn't have much choice. Kyrgyz governments will most likely remain an ally of Russia. Kyrgyz labour migrants make Russia not only political or geopolitical power but also a huge economic factor. And the migrants matter for the Kyrgyz economy, probably much greater than the huge Chinese loans that come through the government and get invested into roads. So, I don't think that there will be a huge headache for Kyrgyzstan. But as a small state, as a poor state, Kyrgyzstan would prefer both China and Russia remain as cooperative as we see them today.

Eric McGlinchey [00:34:35] Thank you all, and thank you for our listeners. This is the first of at least two podcasts that we plan on conducting. So I would like to thank our

participants Dr Tolipov, Dr Niyazbekov, Dr Dzhuraev for joining us today. Let me give the last word to Dr Dzhuraev. But again, from me, thank you. I really enjoyed our conversation today. Dr Dzhuraev.

Shairbek Dzhuraev [00:35:00] Thank you, Eric, very much for hosting this podcast and throwing questions. It's been a very interesting discussion. And I really hope that we will be able to continue with both Farkhod and Nurseit and possibly add more Central Asia scholars, bringing them together with the US-based, Russian, European, Chinese scholars to discuss the most interesting and current issues on international relations of Central Asia. Thank you very much.