

# U.S. Military Aid to Central Asia: Who Benefits?

**Joshua Kucera**

Central Eurasia Project



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# U.S. Military Aid to Central Asia: Who Benefits?

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# About the Author

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# Executive Summary

U.S. military aid to Central Asia has substantially increased over the past 10 years, both in absolute terms and as a percentage of total U.S. aid to the region. U.S. military aid has increasingly gone toward the training and equipping of Central Asian special forces units, which in several cases has been misappropriated by host governments, while the United States has tended to look the other way at such abuses.

Military aid can have varying goals, but the way in which the United States has given aid recently to Central Asian governments suggests that the primary motive is to “buy” access to regional governments and militaries for cooperation in Afghanistan, rather than to improve defense institutions and militaries.

The governments of Central Asia tend to portray instability in Afghanistan as potentially posing a serious threat to their countries, though the evidence of such danger is thin. Nevertheless, the United States has largely accepted those claims, and relationships between the United States and Central Asian countries have become heavily securitized, with political, economic, and other issues relegated to supporting roles.

While this situation is likely inevitable as long as the United States remains militarily involved in Afghanistan, the following actions and policies by the United States could help prevent the pursuit of its objectives in Afghanistan from overwhelming other important issues:

- Critically assess the motivations of Central Asian governments in accepting security assistance, considering the possibility that governments may use security forces trained and supported by the United States to violate the rights of citizens.
- Delink military aid from the need to “pay” Central Asian governments for their cooperation in Afghanistan.
- Redirect military aid more toward reform and professionalization of Central Asia defense institutions and away from training and equipping.

- Make U.S. military aid programs more transparent, which would allow both U.S. and Central Asian governments and citizens to become better informed about this cooperation.
- Cooperate with Central Asian civil society groups to help develop a cadre of local civilian government and nongovernmental defense experts to monitor military aid programs for abuses.

# Introduction

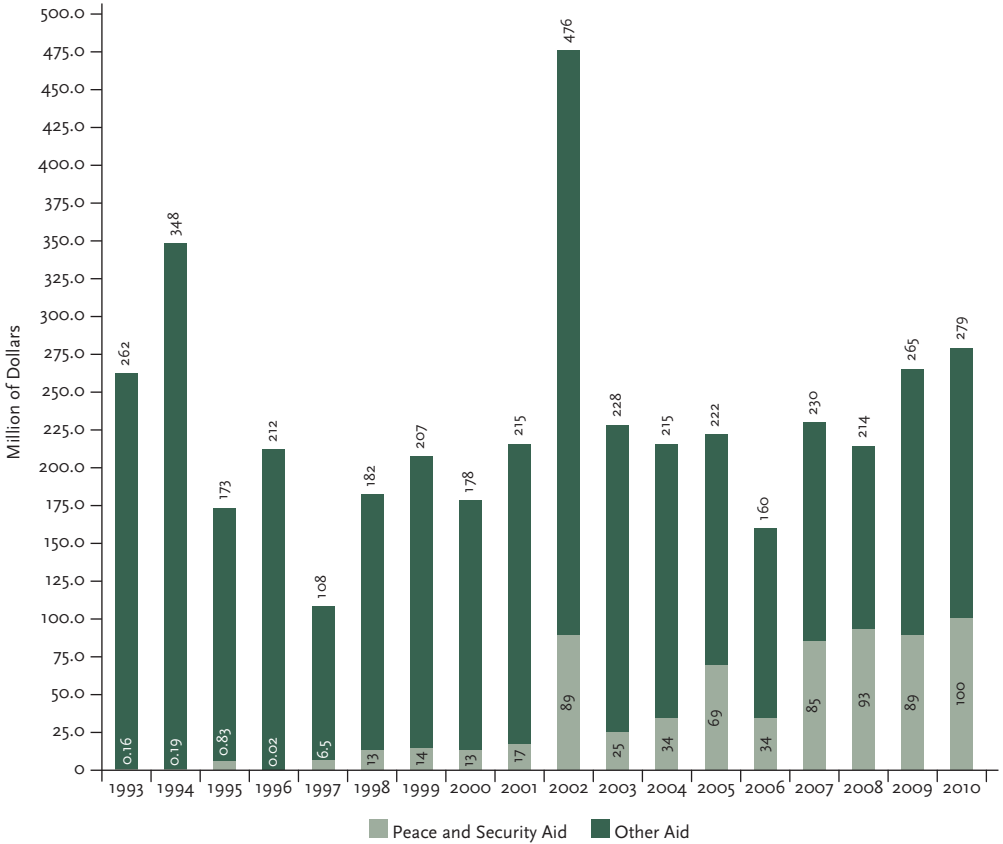
Over the last decade, U.S. military assistance to Central Asia has steadily increased, and the share of military aid that makes up the total U.S. aid package to Central Asia has risen as well, from around 5 percent throughout the 1990s to more than 30 percent since 2007. (See Figure 1).<sup>1</sup> But this aid has not been well documented: many of the aid programs are opaque<sup>2</sup> and do not require public notification (although they are not classified). The recipient governments have chosen not to publicize the aid, afraid of arousing leftover Cold War suspicions of the U.S. military.

As the aid has grown, it has increasingly focused on the special forces units of Central Asia. Special forces tend to carry the most responsibility for fighting threats like terrorist groups and drug traffickers and are more professional than regular units, which are often filled with short-term conscripts. But, as is often the case in authoritarian countries, special forces units also tend to have ill-defined missions that blur the lines between external threats to the country and internal threats to the current governments' power. Among the Kyrgyz and Tajik units trained and equipped by U.S. Special Forces are those outside the military, like OMON (usually part of the Ministry of Internal Affairs) and Alfas (typically part of the National Security Service, or other KGB successor agencies). While there has been no documented, egregious use of U.S.-backed units to suppress legal opposition, that may be a result of a lack of opportunity rather than lack of will. There have been several cases in which U.S. aid was used in ways contrary to the stated objectives of the United States, and in most cases there have been few or no repercussions for the offenders. U.S.-trained and equipped units were present during the violence in Bishkek and southern Kyrgyzstan in 2010, and while no concrete evidence has emerged to implicate U.S.-backed units in violence against peaceful civilians, it seems likely enough to warrant examination whether some U.S.-trained security forces engaged in violence. The U.S. embassy in Bishkek has not taken an active role in determining if any of the units it has worked with committed human rights violations, and it continues to support those units. The United States has also not inquired about another potentially questionable use of security forces when



former president Kurmanbek Bakiyev formed a new personal security unit commanded by his brother that used U.S.-trained forces and U.S.-provided equipment.

Figure 1: U.S. Security Assistance to Central Asia



Source: State Department, Office of the Coordinator of U.S. Assistance to Europe and Eurasia, via Congressional Research Service.

Note: \* Peace and Security Aid excludes aid for combating weapons of mass destruction.

Looking at the 10-year trajectory of U.S. military aid reveals a pattern in which U.S. security assistance spikes during times when Afghanistan is a focus in Washington, for example when the United States has a strategic interest in access to Central Asia: It rose sharply immediately after the September 11 attacks in 2001, leveled off as the United States turned its attention to Iraq, and then rose again as it once more focused on Afghanistan, around 2007–8. This suggests that U.S. military aid is, more than anything else, driven by

the strategic interest of gaining access to those countries for bases or overflights or, more recently, for hosting the logistical supply line known as the Northern Distribution Network.

This report focuses on U.S. military aid to Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, which have been major recipients of U.S. military aid in Central Asia.<sup>3</sup> The report is based on dozens of interviews with U.S. officials from the Department of Defense (DoD), State Department, and Congress, as well as security officials from Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, and American and Central Asian military affairs experts. It also uses the public documentation of U.S. military aid and U.S. diplomatic cables released by Wikileaks. However, the information gathered is unfortunately incomplete, as many key officials are unwilling to talk about these issues, and much data is not available to the public. The author traveled to Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan to do research, but was not given a visa to visit Uzbekistan. As a result, this report's conclusions should be considered preliminary and should prompt further, deeper research in this critical but little-understood area of Central Asian security policy.

First, the report addresses the nature of the security threats to Central Asia. There are few external threats now, though they are likely to increase as U.S. and NATO forces leave Afghanistan starting in 2014. However, U.S. assistance is, by most accounts, likely to decline at that point, an indication that the assistance is directed less at helping Central Asian countries protect themselves and more toward buying access for current U.S. operations in Afghanistan. Next, the report uses interviews with U.S. and Central Asian officials and observers to examine in more detail how the United States uses aid to gain influence with and access to the governments of Central Asia. Then, the report provides an accounting of what specific aid the United States has been giving to Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, documenting the increasing focus on the training and equipping of special forces. Next, the report examines the interests of the Central Asian governments in cooperating with the United States, which range from a desire to counterbalance Russia to taking the focus off of political and economic reform, and less commonly from a genuine desire to improve their security forces. Central Asia's autocratic leaders are particularly disinterested in U.S. military programs that attempt to reform defense institutions and regard such programs as a potential threat to their power. Finally, the report chronicles several cases in which U.S. assistance was misused, or may have been misused, with the United States tending to look the other way in order to avoid antagonizing Central Asian governments.

# Afghanistan as a Regional Security Threat

The threat from Afghanistan dominates any discussion of security in Central Asia and is a primary public justification for why the United States provides security assistance to the region. But the actual effect that events in Afghanistan have on Central Asia is still poorly understood. And while Afghanistan poses little discernible threat to Central Asia as long as U.S. security assistance is relatively robust, most observers predict an increase in danger as U.S. troop levels and assistance decrease after 2014. This period of waning U.S. interest in the region is when instability in Afghanistan is likely to become a greater threat to Central Asia than it is today.

The governments of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan all regularly cite Afghanistan as the major security threat to their countries, either from drug traffickers or from Islamist radicals. That assessment is frequently echoed by the United States to justify its increasing military engagement in the region.<sup>4</sup> In his most recent briefing to Congress on threats around the world, U.S. Director of National Intelligence, James Clapper, said the United States was concerned about “Central Asia’s ability to cope with violent extremist organizations—especially militants based in Pakistan and Afghanistan... Tajikistan is particularly important due to its extensive border with Afghanistan and its history of internal and cross-border violence.”<sup>5</sup>

The United States is not alone in making assertions like these. Russia has used the same justification to increase its military involvement in the region. “Russia should expect the activation of militant activity on the borders of Central Asia after the withdrawal of coalition forces from Iraq and Afghanistan,” said Colonel-General Vladimir Chirkin, commander of Russia’s Central Military District, speaking in the fall of 2011. “Threats can now come creeping to our southern borders.” In response, Russia has promoted the expansion of the Collective Security Treaty Organization’s activities in Central Asia.<sup>6</sup>

Yet, there is little evidence that serious threats to Central Asia do in fact emanate from Afghanistan. The 2010–2011 violence in the Rasht Valley of Tajikistan, which the government in Dushanbe blamed on Islamists from Afghanistan, had at least as much to do with disaffected local leaders.<sup>7</sup> The United States has justified its reinstatement of military aid to Uzbekistan on the grounds that the country is subject to threats because of its hosting of the Northern Distribution Network,<sup>8</sup> yet there have been no reported attacks, or even attempted attacks, on the route (outside Afghanistan).

Many local observers believe that the governments of Central Asia use rhetoric about a threat from Afghanistan in their conversations with foreign diplomats in order to try to extract more aid and reduce pressure for political reform. The rhetoric about Afghanistan is “a cliché,” said one political analyst in Bishkek, and is used “just for public and international consumption.” Many diplomats in the region are skeptical of these assessments, too. One U.S. diplomatic cable, for example, refers to Kyrgyzstani officials hyping the “usual Eurasian narcotics bogeyman.”<sup>9</sup>

Nevertheless, it is not difficult to imagine that a worsening security situation in Afghanistan could spill over into Central Asia. After the U.S. and NATO forces begin to leave Afghanistan in 2013, it is reasonable to expect either increasing instability (i.e., a renewal of civil war) or a Taliban-controlled government taking over. Either scenario could have obvious negative security implications for Central Asia. (The latter scenario could, however, in fact reduce instability in Central Asia. The Taliban effectively controlled poppy production when it was in power before, and many analysts in Central Asia speculate that a new Taliban government would not be interested in fomenting Islamist revolutions in its neighbors, realizing that it would unnecessarily antagonize them.) In any case, the effects of either scenario are unpredictable. As researcher Christian Bleuer writes, in assessing the most commonly cited Afghan-based threat to Afghanistan, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU):

[T]here is no large reserve of Central Asian IMU fighters about to stream across the border into Tajikistan. And within Tajikistan the number of IMU sympathizers is hard to discern. Making a guess based on convictions of IMU suspects is especially difficult considering that confessions in Tajikistan are routinely secured through torture. Nevertheless, future instability that may occur as a result of elite-level political upheavals, external shocks or mass mobilization unconnected to Islamist militants could provide groups such as the IMU an opportunity to gain strength in Tajikistan. Furthermore, sympathetic forces across the border in Afghanistan could, in the future, possibly provide significant support and a safe-haven to insurgents and/or terrorists inside Tajikistan. Although there is no sign of this being a possibility at the moment, there is still a need to watch events in Tajikistan closely as the situation in Afghanistan gets consistently worse.<sup>10</sup>

While it's impossible to know what role the United States will maintain in Central Asia after it leaves Afghanistan, given the history of aid over the past 20 years, it is reasonable to assume that its level of engagement will decline along with its interest in Afghanistan. Nearly all the officials and experts in Washington interviewed for this report predicted that U.S. aid, including military assistance, would decline after 2014. That is obviously inconsistent with a policy that focuses on building strong security structures for Central Asia to defend itself—the stated goal of U.S. security assistance. It is, however, consistent with a policy that uses military aid as a way to gain access and influence in Central Asia.

# U.S. Interest in Security Cooperation with Central Asia

According to U.S. military doctrine, security cooperation programs serve three primary interests: they “promote specific U.S. security interests, develop allied and friendly military capabilities for self-defense and multinational operations, and provide U.S. forces with peacetime and contingency access to a host nation.”<sup>17</sup> All three of those interests could be relevant to security cooperation in Central Asia. The United States has specific security interests, e.g., maintaining the stability of friendly countries in Central Asia. The United States has worked to build up units in the Central Asian countries that could be deployable to multinational operations (though those efforts have yet to be tested through actual operations). And the United States has interests in gaining access to the countries of Central Asia, primarily in terms of the Northern Distribution Network, by which the United States transports military materiel overland through Central Asia to Afghanistan. These goals can be complementary, but they can also clash. Aid intended to gain short-term influence can be detrimental to long-term reform, while stronger U.S. efforts to reform security services could make Central Asian autocrats less likely to cooperate on other American priorities.

The trajectory of U.S. security assistance to Central Asia—spiking around the beginning of the war in Afghanistan, leveling off as the United States became more focused on Iraq, and then spiking again as the United States “surged” in Afghanistan and developed the Northern Distribution Network—suggests that Afghanistan-related access is the dominant motive in this case. That is backed up by private statements by U.S. officials. “The real driver of the assistance [after the 9/11 attacks] was our need in Afghanistan, and you’ve seen it over the past year and a half: with the increasing prominence of the Northern Distribution Network, it’s like old times,” said one former U.S. government official with extensive experience in Central Asia.

Some U.S. diplomatic cables also make this plain. In one, from September 2009, the embassy in Bishkek “strongly endorses” the DoD counterterrorism (Section 1206) cooperation plan for the following year, saying it will “significantly improve U.S.–Kyrgyz relations and help to create the conditions necessary for continued use of Manas Transit Center and ground routes in support of the Northern Distribution Network.”<sup>12</sup>

Another cable, from May 2009, described a meeting between the embassy’s chief of the Office of Military Cooperation and then-foreign minister Kadyrbek Sarbayev in which the U.S. security assistance package was explicitly tied to the continuing presence of the Manas air base. The U.S. officer “cautioned that future funding hinged upon the continuation of the framework agreement. Without the framework agreement, [the officer] estimated Kyrgyzstan would lose \$47 million of the \$60 million currently allocated for the upcoming fiscal years.”<sup>13</sup>

Local observers also have interpreted the increasing U.S. interest in security assistance as being driven by its needs in Afghanistan. Tajikistan opposition leader Muhiddin Kabiri told the author:

In the last 2–3 years the United States is sending some messages to the leaders in the Central Asia region, to open a new page of cooperation, not only on humanitarian fields, and democracy and human rights, but also in military questions. Maybe in Washington some people decided that before withdrawing from Afghanistan there should be some cooperation with Central Asian leaders on these questions. Now we have seen that this was the tactic. The United States had some problems with Pakistan and all the Central Asian leaders have been willing to help the United States use this region as transit for NATO forces. Without this military cooperation, it would be difficult for NATO to use this region as transit. So from the U.S. perspective this approach was effective.<sup>14</sup>

There are, of course, other motivations for the aid rather than being simply a quid pro quo for access to Afghanistan. A political analyst in Dushanbe said that the United States’ primary interest in its security assistance is in keeping Tajikistan “on their side” in the war with Afghanistan, i.e., allowing transit and overflight. The military aid “is their payment for being a good guy,” the analyst said, adding that the United States also does appear to have a genuine interest in having the border well-guarded. Another diplomatic cable from the U.S. embassy in Bishkek in October 2009 supports the DoD counternarcotics assistance plan for the upcoming year saying (though without explanation) that drug trafficking in Kyrgyzstan threatens U.S. interests. “Narcotics trafficking into and through the Kyrgyz Republic jeopardizes United States objectives in the region. Furthermore, the Central Asia drug trade funds terrorist groups in Kyrgyzstan, Afghanistan, and throughout Central Asia.”<sup>15</sup>

There is a distinction between the “modest” security assistance the United States provides to Central Asia under ordinary circumstances and the more ambitious aid that the United States gives when it needs access to those countries for Afghanistan, the for-

mer U.S. official said. There are “traditional, non-major-national-security reasons for us to provide some type of security assistance. We do have an interest in the professionalization of armed forces around the world, and we do have an interest in establishing relationships with key leaders in the security establishment, and that can justify very modest amounts of assistance. But the real reason for assistance is when you have need of a country. And we had need of the Central Asian states, or at least some of them, after 9/11, and that’s why our military and non-military assistance went up substantially in 2001 and 2002.”

The temptation to award high-profile, big-ticket military aid items as quid pro quo is greater when the regional combatant commanders (e.g., the head of CENTCOM) step in, rather than (as is the normal practice) when career security cooperation officers craft aid plans, said one U.S. military official who formerly worked extensively on security cooperation in Central Asia. The latter are more inclined to think long-term and to consider the sustainability of aid.

One example of the high-profile type of aid is the bridge from Tajikistan to Afghanistan at Nizhniy Pyanj, a \$35 million project actively pursued by Rahmon and funded by CENTCOM,<sup>16</sup> but which, according to U.S. officials, has not substantially increased trade between the two countries—at least of the legal variety. International officials in Dushanbe and some media reports<sup>17</sup> suggest that the bridge has in fact been a boon to drug trafficking from Afghanistan into Tajikistan.

Perhaps the clearest example of aid being given for reasons of access is the decision in the fall of 2011 to resume foreign military financing (FMF) and other forms of military aid to Uzbekistan. The law allowing that resumption requires that the secretary of state certify that doing so “is in the national security interest and necessary to obtain access to and from Afghanistan for the United States.”<sup>18</sup> (Congress negotiated, as a condition of granting the waiver, that the administration report on where NDN funding is going in Uzbekistan, but that the information be classified.)

The State Department has suggested that the military aid it provides (specifically International Military Education and Training, or IMET) promotes human rights in Uzbekistan<sup>19</sup>, but the resumption of FMF has complicated that message, including to other partner militaries in Central Asia, which tend to distrust Uzbekistan, but in this case also see the United States as applying a double standard. In Kyrgyzstan, for example, military officers have complained to U.S. officials about the resumption of aid to Uzbekistan. “It makes the people mad that we do anything with them. They say, ‘Really? Here [in Kyrgyzstan] you talk about human rights, they’re [in Uzbekistan] not so good at it,’” said a U.S. military official currently working on security cooperation with Central Asia. “The desire to work with people outweighs the desire to do the right thing sometimes.” A Kyrgyzstani security official echoed that analysis: “When political interests are important, democratic interests get forgotten. It’s a double standard.”



# What Does the United States Give?

The following three sections describe the U.S. military assistance that the United States has carried out with Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan in recent years. In the former two countries, the United States has concentrated on counternarcotics, counterterrorism, and border security and has focused on training and equipping these countries' special forces units to undertake those missions. In Uzbekistan, aid has been limited because of congressionally mandated human rights restrictions, but those restrictions have been eased as the country has become key to the transit of materiel in and out of Afghanistan.

However, it is difficult to gather data on this aid. Even on unclassified programs, there is little public reporting, and what public reporting exists is reported in different places, making it difficult for even U.S. policymakers—to say nothing of citizens and researchers—to have a clear view of what U.S. military aid is being given. The following is the best available summary, based on various public reports, interviews, and diplomatic cables made public by Wikileaks. A more complete picture of this aid, however, would allow a more informed discussion of its results.

## Aid to Kyrgyzstan

U.S. military aid to Kyrgyzstan focuses on three missions: counternarcotics, counterterrorism, and border security. The largest amount of aid comes from DoD counternarcotics programs, known as 1004 and 1033 funding. For fiscal year 2012, for example, DoD counternarcotics funding is slated at \$13.8 million (for construction and equipment for border and counternarcotics forces) and counterterrorism funding (Section 1206) at \$5 million

(for working with a new Ministry of Defense (MoD) special forces brigade, Ilbirs, and three MoD counterterrorism battalions), as compared to \$1.4 million for the more traditional, State Department-funded foreign military financing program.<sup>20</sup>

In the recent past, DoD funding has been used to construct a drug control service regional office in Batken, near the borders of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, and to build small border outposts that allow border guards to work closer to the border. According to DoD documents justifying the expenditure to Congress, drug control officers used to have to work in “donated property such as former schools, collective farms, and summer camps. These facilities are in disrepair and are inadequate for full-time, all-season life support and work.” To replace those buildings, “USCENTCOM has designed dedicated and standardized life support facilities that will allow full deployment to remote areas in support of year-round detection, interdiction, and disruption of illicit trafficking.” The facilities will also act as “a forward operating location to support special forces intelligence-based deployments to high-traffic areas.” Counternarcotics and border troops also have been given equipment including vehicles, radios, and night-vision goggles. The DoD has funded the construction of a \$10 million hospital for MoD personnel<sup>21</sup> and a \$6.5 million academy for non-commissioned officers at Koi Tash, and it has attempted to refurbish Kyrgyzstan’s military cargo planes and train a peacekeeping unit in Batken that could be deployable to international operations like Afghanistan.<sup>22</sup> The United States and Kyrgyzstan have discussed the possibility of building a \$5.5 million training facility in southern Kyrgyzstan, and after a variety of delays, U.S. military officials say that the Kyrgyz government is ready to go ahead with the project, which will likely be located in Kizyl-Kiya, between Osh and Batken.

U.S. aid and training programs are especially focused on Kyrgyzstan’s special forces units, though reporting on these programs has been scant. “If you want to train the guys who are actually going to go out and do things, it’s the special forces,” said one U.S. security cooperation official. Nearly every security agency has a special forces unit, from the MoD, the National Security Service, and the National Guard to the border and drug control services. These units tend to have broad and overlapping missions and are often used together in crisis situations.

A diplomatic cable from January 2009 summarized the U.S. cooperation with Kyrgyzstan’s special forces up to that point: “Through SOCCENT programs, we have already constructed several ranges and facilities for Kyrgyz Special Forces units; to include the Ministry of Defense’s 25th Scorpions and the National Guard’s Panthers. We have also purchased new equipment for these units. Army and Marine SOF (Special Operations Forces) conducted training with the Interior Forces, National Guard and Ministry of Defense SOF in the past year. We assess Kyrgyz Special Forces to be among the best in the region and very receptive to SOF engagement.<sup>23</sup>” Among the facilities built was a \$9 million base for the Scorpions special forces unit in Tokmok.<sup>24</sup>

In 2007, U.S. special forces conducted three JCET (Joint Combined Exchange Training) exercises in Kyrgyzstan, with units from the National Guard (the “Panthers”), Ministry of Interior counterterrorism units, and the State Committee for National Security (the “Alphas”).<sup>25</sup> Similar trainings have apparently continued, though they have not been reported publicly or to Congress. In 2008, General David Petraeus, then commander of CENTCOM, visited Kyrgyzstan and said that he wanted to “expand the cooperation between SOCCENT and the State Committee for National Security (GKNB) ‘Alphas’ unit, congratulating the government for the recent successful operation against terrorists in southern Kyrgyzstan.”<sup>26</sup> The DoD is supposed to report annually to Congress on all the JCET activities it undertook over the previous year, but since 2007, there have been no reported JCET activities in Kyrgyzstan (or in any other Central Asian country), according to congressional sources with access to the reports. But special operations training that is very similar to JCETs has continued, military officials say, including two activities in 2011, when U.S. special forces came and trained mixed groups of Kyrgyz special forces. In addition, Montana National Guard units, as part of the National Guard State Partnership Program, come about once a month to Kyrgyzstan to conduct training exercises.

## Aid to Tajikistan

The profile of U.S. security cooperation with Tajikistan is similar to that of Kyrgyzstan, focusing on border security, counternarcotics, and counterterrorism. But the aid to Tajikistan appears to be even more heavily weighted toward special forces’ operations. In fiscal year 2012, the United States was planning to spend \$9 million on special forces in the border guards and counterterror and counternarcotics units, according to briefing slides describing U.S.-Tajikistan security assistance. (The particular agencies involved were not specified.) These activities were part of a counternarcotics aid package totaling over \$24 million, which also included the construction of a national guard training facility at Qarato'gh and an “interagency communications” program. The fiscal year 2011 plan included \$5 million for “counternarcotics special unit equipment” and \$2 million for training of counternarcotics forces by U.S. special forces. The equipping has included giving weapons to OMON and GKNB units, in the latter case, AK-74s rifles and Makarov 9mm pistols. Fiscal year 2010 saw \$4 million in special forces equipment and \$2 million for special forces training.<sup>27</sup>

In 2007, U.S. special forces carried out four JCET exercises in Tajikistan, training units from the national guard and the border guards. As with Kyrgyzstan, there have been no reported JCETs since then, but training of special forces appears to have continued in other forms. At least for the next two years, there were four similar training events per

year.<sup>28</sup> According to a cable from January 2009: “The Defense Department completed four counter-narcoterrorism training events in 2008. One of the units trained, the Border Guard special force group, afterwards conducted three successful operational missions resulting in drug seizures. We developed counterterrorism capacity within the Ministry of Internal Affairs OMON unit used for SWAT and other emergency response operations. The MVD’s elite Militia Detachment for Special Purposes (OMON) drill at the embassy demonstrated an improved anti-terrorist response and confirmed OMON’s capacity after a change in leadership.” There were also efforts to teach English and to develop a peace-keeping unit.

Another cable, from October 2008, describes the curriculum of the special forces training exercises: “Critical training tasks that the Tajik National Guard, Border Guards, and OMON squads have requested include the following: staff organization and planning, orders production, mission analysis and the military decision making process, intelligence preparation of the battlefield (IPB), direct action (raids and ambushes), special reconnaissance, close quarters combat/battle (CQC/B), sniper/observe operations, military operations in urban terrain (MOUT), Counter-Improvised Explosive Device (C-IED), Sensitive Site Exploitation (SSE), tactical communications and basic combat lifesaving.”<sup>29</sup>

The United States appeared to want to get more heavily involved in organizing Tajikistan’s special forces. One diplomatic cable from February 2010 said that forces from the U.S. Special Operations Command Central were planning an assessment and then would be “organizing these groups into special units” and then “sustain an increase in capabilities” via training with U.S. special forces. “Security cooperation remains a strong point in our relationship with Tajikistan,” the cable said.<sup>30</sup>

## Aid to Uzbekistan

Uzbekistan has received limited security assistance from the United States in recent years, due to congressionally mandated human rights conditions. In 2004, Uzbekistan stopped receiving new FMF and IMET aid because the secretary of state was unable to certify that the country was making substantial progress on human rights and political reforms.<sup>31</sup> Relations further worsened after the Andijan massacre of 2005, which led to the Uzbekistan government evicting the United States from its airbase in southern Uzbekistan and to a brief geopolitical swing by Tashkent toward Moscow. But as the United States deepened its involvement in Afghanistan and set up the Northern Distribution Network, and as Tashkent has again become wary of Russia’s intentions, the military relationship between the United States and Uzbekistan has been rekindled.

The re-engagement began in 2007, at Uzbekistan's initiative, and grew steadily from there, according to a diplomatic cable written in August 2009: "In August 2007 the MoD began to re-engage CENTCOM with dialogue about getting past our 'diplomatic pause' and working towards improving our security cooperation relationship. Even with visa and dip note difficulties in June 2008, FY 2008 was the most prolific military-to-military engagement year since FY 2005. The FY 2009 cooperation plan more than doubled from FY 2008. Uzbekistan and CENTCOM are well on their way to completing the majority of the 33 small scale military-to-military events on our FY 2009 plan."<sup>32</sup> What appears to be the largest of those events took place in September 2009, when a mobile training team of U.S. Navy special forces<sup>33</sup> conducted a two-week training course for 46 members of the State Border Guard Maritime Service and the Uzbekistan Navy in Termez, on the border with Afghanistan.<sup>34</sup> "The Border Service is very excited about any training or equipment we can help out with along their shared border with Afghanistan," the cable said. The training was to complement the donation of 14 riverine patrol boats, which were delivered to Uzbekistan in 2007, but were negotiated before aid restrictions were enacted.<sup>35</sup> According to another cable, unspecified contractors, funded by the United States, had provided similar training in 2008.<sup>36</sup>

The cooperation events were hindered by bureaucratic issues from the Uzbekistan side, the cable continued: "Unfortunately we have had significant delays and in some cases cancellations of events because the MoD-selected attendees were never granted Uzbek exit visas. In fact, our event supporting MoD's top-stated priority of Modeling and Simulation has been scheduled and postponed two times this year for that reason."

Some IMET funding for Uzbekistan was reinstated in 2010<sup>37</sup>, and the largest training conducted that year, according to State Department records,<sup>38</sup> was "Special Operations—Combating Terrorism,"<sup>39</sup> which is normally taught at the Joint Special Operations University (JSOU) in Florida, but in this case seems to have been conducted by a "Mobile Education Team" in Uzbekistan. According to JSOU's description, the course focuses on "developing international partnership networks that will strengthen and enhance U.S. efforts in combating terrorism.... and strategically building and leveraging a global network of international SOF personnel in accordance with the Global War on Terrorism's strategic goals." The key lessons of the course are: "Defining Terrorism; Root Causes and Motivation; Global Strategy; Decision-Making Strategies; Organizing for Combating Terrorism; Networks and Other Structures; Counterinsurgency; Civil Military Operations; and Media Issues."<sup>40</sup>

What training and equipping of Uzbek security forces has taken place since then is not clear. The most recent State Department report on military cooperation activities with Uzbekistan says that the aim of such cooperation is to "support democratic institutions and principles and pro-Western viewpoints, [s]upport defense modernization and

transformation, [e]nhance Uzbekistan’s ability to control its borders and stem the flow of narcotics from Afghanistan and Tajikistan, and [e]nhance Uzbekistan’s counterterrorism response capabilities to ensure security of Northern Distribution Network transit routes.”<sup>41</sup> The report, however, doesn’t provide details of how any of this will be achieved.

A diplomatic cable from January 2010 outlines the security cooperation plan for that year in broad terms; it was to include a visit from State Department and Pentagon officials to “assess the requirements of the Armed Forces of the Republic of Uzbekistan in particular types of military equipment and ammunition, and for organization of their supply under the framework of the FMF and EDA [Excess Defense Articles] programs,” continuing IMET programs, sending a representative of Uzbekistan to CENTCOM headquarters in Florida, cooperation on border security, non-proliferation and “antiterrorism efforts.”<sup>42</sup> However, reports to Congress outlining DoD funding for counternarcotics (1004 and 1033) programs and Coalition Support Funds did not report any such aid to Uzbekistan.

In the fall of 2011, on the initiative of the White House, Congress passed a funding bill for Uzbekistan that included allowing the State Department to reinstate FMF aid. The first tranche of this aid is to include funding for GPS systems, night-vision goggles, and body armor.<sup>43</sup> For fiscal year 2013 and 2014, Uzbekistan is slated to get \$1.5 million a year in FMF, comparable to what its Central Asian neighbors receive. The aid is aimed at helping Uzbekistan secure NDN routes, according to State Department officials.<sup>44</sup> However, there is no obvious threat to the NDN, and Uzbekistan—unlike Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan—maintains a firm grip on the security of the country. More likely motivations for Uzbekistan are to enhance its international standing and to gain a geopolitical lever against Moscow.

# Central Asian Governments’ Interest in Security Cooperation with the United States

The reasons for why Central Asian governments participate in military cooperation programs with the United States vary, and include building up weak security forces and strengthening relations with the United States as a counterbalance to Russia or other powers, which may correspond well to U.S. interests. Other motivations by Central Asian governments do not correspond as well to U.S. interests, including pursuing opportunities for financial gain by government or military officials, strengthening internal security forces to prevent an “Arab Spring” scenario, and shifting the emphasis of their bilateral relations with the United States to security, rather than political or economic reform.

Kyrgyzstan’s government, poor and relatively open, tends to accept whatever aid is offered it. “Which country pays more? This is how we orient ourselves.... Our country is a big bazaar,” one Kyrgyzstani security official said.<sup>45</sup> Tajikistan also is poor and in desperate need of help for their security forces, but Dushanbe’s cooperation with the United States on defense seems to be primarily driven by a desire to counterbalance Moscow and a fear of crossing it. Uzbekistan, which has strong security forces that are largely capable of defending their border and internal security, appears to pursue military cooperation with the United States out of geopolitical considerations. “It’s showing the Russians that they [Uzbekistan] have other options,” the former U.S. security cooperation official said.

Related to the desire to balance Russia is Uzbekistan’s desire to not be an international pariah, and the government sees normalization of U.S. military relations as playing an important symbolic role in that effort. As one U.S. diplomatic cable from February 2010 put it:

[President] Karimov and the GOU [government of Uzbekistan] are seeking legitimacy and recognition in two ways: First, they want the recognition and prestige that would accrue from a visit by Secretary Clinton to Uzbekistan. Second, they want to see progress on the issue of military-technical cooperation and what they know would be the concomitant lifting or waiving of the Congressional restrictions on FMF and IMET. Our challenge is to leverage this opening to our best advantage, but we cannot assume that time is our ally. The GOU is clearly looking for “signals,” and, as part of any additional NDN-related requests, we would be well-served to be able to offer tangible responses to the Uzbeks on the question of a high-level visit or military-technical cooperation.<sup>46</sup>

All the Central Asian governments have an interest in balancing the influence of Russia, which remains the dominant foreign influence on Central Asian militaries. But that is a fact that both encourages and limits U.S. defense cooperation. In Tajikistan, for example, President Rahmon fears and resents the influence that Russia has over the security forces, said one local analyst. While he wants to pursue a multivector foreign policy, including with the military, he is afraid that if he goes too far Russia could use the security forces to engineer his removal. The analyst also noted that Tajikistan wants military relations with the United States because, unlike Russia, which doesn't pay for the numerous strategic objects it maintains in Tajikistan, “the United States pays.”

In both Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, observers note that the governments seem to try to deliberately keep quiet about military aid from the United States. “When Russia gives us something, trucks from 1984, we clap and say ‘We're with Russia,’ and it will be on every TV channel for a week. When the West gives us up-to-date technology, vehicles, builds barracks, it gets one line in the newspaper,” one Kyrgyzstani security official said, explaining that “the mentality is still Soviet.”

The Dushanbe analyst suggests that U.S. support of the security forces also helps Rahmon maintain the loyalty of his commanders, and that the United States was being duped into supporting them. Asked if it was a good idea to support them, the analyst said “I'm not sure.” Americans, he continued, “are a bit naive, they believe what our guys say,” and the Tajikistan government “uses this trust in order to get money.”<sup>47</sup> A U.S. diplomatic cable also suggests a mercenary motive for Tajikistan's rulers. “They see U.S. involvement in the region as a bulwark against Afghan instability, and as a cash cow they want a piece of.”<sup>48</sup> The acquisitive impulse can work on a smaller scale, as well. One international official in Dushanbe, when asked what Tajikistan got out of U.S. military cooperation programs, said “most of it is short-term—like who gets to go on shopping trips” to the West.

Tajikistan's leading political opposition figure, Muhiddin Kabiri, in an interview for this report, said Tajikistan's government has a variety of interests in U.S. defense cooperation:



First of all, we need this training. The events in the east of Tajikistan, showed us that we are not so ready for terrorist attacks, so Tajikistan needs these units to be stronger. Second, our president is using this opportunity to show to others that Tajikistan can have another friend, for example to Russia, China, our other partners, that even in this sensitive field of military cooperation Tajikistan can have another partner. Before this, all of our cooperation on military issues was with Russia, and maybe some small cooperation with Iran. And now everyone knows that there is very good cooperation between Tajikistan and the United States and European countries. So this approach gives Tajikistan more flexibility.

Of course he wants to make these units stronger, it's not only a political question. But at the same time, Rahmon wants these units to be far from Russian influence. All of our high-ranking officers were educated in Russia, and now he wants to have some balance between Russian-educated officers and Western-educated officers.

Central Asian governments also have an interest in shifting the topic of their conversations with U.S. officials to security issues from the more sensitive topics like political reform. As one Kyrgyzstani analyst put it, if you have good relations with the United States that provides leverage against Russia and China, and “if you have good relations with the Pentagon, that’s leverage against the State Department.”

U.S. officials deny that their interest in political reform and human rights has lessened as a result of the increased focus on security. And a review of the leaked diplomatic cables confirms that, while U.S. military officials are frequent visitors, questions of human rights are nearly always on the agenda when they visit. One 2009 cable, preparing then-CENTCOM commander David Petraeus for a meeting with Rahmon, said that one of the priorities for the meeting was to “[e]mphasize that long-term stability and security can only come with real political and economic reform.”<sup>49</sup>

Nevertheless, many local observers believe that the message about reform is delivered with a wink and a nod, and that local leaders know not to take it seriously. Kabiri said that U.S. pressure on political issues has decreased since the surge in Afghanistan reoriented Washington’s focus in Central Asia toward security. “Two or three years ago, the main question between Tajikistan and U.S. representatives was economic questions, human rights, democracy, and stability. But now, the main topic is military cooperation, transit. And human rights, democracy, free elections, these kinds of problems, maybe they will touch these questions, but only last, only for protocol. So our leaders are very lucky that the United States is not raising these sensitive questions.”<sup>50</sup>

The improved capability of the security forces that the United States is training and equipping—ostensibly the reason the cooperation activities take place—seems to be a relatively minor factor for the participating governments. “From our side, it’s a pleasant time,”

said one Kyrgyz security official. “We don’t have to go to work, maybe we go abroad, or we stay here and drink coffee. We go and listen to the theory, but practically, we don’t get anything out of it.” Former Kyrgyzstan ambassador to Washington Zamira Sydykova said that military officers from her country told her that U.S. training was “useless.” (When speaking of “training,” many Central Asians interviewed for this report tended to conflate IMET training, which involves largely classroom training in the United States or Germany, and JCET and other sorts of tactical training conducted in-country by U.S. special operations forces or National Guard units. But the reviews appeared to be largely negative for both.)

Much of the disinterest in U.S. cooperation programs is due to the fact that the United States places a higher priority on training than it does on giving equipment, whereas Central Asian governments are much more interested in gaining new high-tech equipment. U.S. diplomats acknowledged as much in a 2007 cable preparing then-CENTCOM commander General David Petraeus for a meeting with Tajikistan’s defense minister, Sherali Khairulloev. “Khairulloev delivers a consistent message: Tajiks prefer receiving material goods (called “technical assistance”) [versus] training and reform-oriented support. We try to dispel this notion as often as possible.”<sup>51</sup>

To the extent that they might foster a pro-Western or pro-democracy mindset among officers, however, the programs can create some suspicion among the more authoritarian of the Central Asian governments. This suggests that Central Asian leaders view the training as having a real effect on their officers’ way of thinking. The experience of Georgia during the Rose Revolution was a sobering one for many Central Asian leaders: the military, which had had a relatively strong relationship with the United States even under Edvard Shevardnadze, failed to intervene when street protests threatened and ultimately forced him out of office. The perception that U.S. military training with a focus on democratization leads to results as in Georgia—whether or not that belief has any basis in reality—has “soured many” Central Asian leaders on more extensive cooperation with the United States, said the former security cooperation official.<sup>52</sup>

In particular, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan “are cautious about allowing impressionable junior officers to have too much contact with the United States through security-cooperation programs,” with Uzbekistan going further, according to another former security assistance officer, Colonel Michael McCarthy: “Over the past five years, several Uzbekistani students attending English-language training in San Antonio have deserted, some claiming political asylum in the United States. As a result, President Karimov has also imposed overt controls on his military officers, refusing to permit any to attend academic programs in the United States and significantly restricting the quantity and type of military contact events with the United States. Since 2005, President Karimov has eliminated all military contact events for young officers conducted outside Uzbekistan to ensure they will not be influenced by Western ideals.”<sup>53</sup> (This was written in 2007, and

in recent years a handful of Uzbekistani officers have in fact participated in DoD training programs outside the country, mainly in Germany, which suggests that the move to curtail training may have to do with the country's geopolitical orientation, as well as with democracy.<sup>54</sup>)

That much U.S. military aid is mistrusted, or at least not appreciated, by the governments who receive it, raises the question of whether or not it is really an effective way to ensure these countries' cooperation with the United States. Central Asian governments also receive substantial transit fees and business for local companies as a result of NDN traffic. There has been little examination of how much military aid sweetens the pot, or if other forms of aid might be more effective in this regard.

Still, at least some troops do get something from the training, and it can build bonds with the United States. The author visited the base of the Scorpions special forces brigade in Tokmok, Kyrgyzstan, with a U.S. military officer, and due to a communications problem, the Scorpions were unaware of our visit until shortly before we arrived. Nevertheless, they were far more open and hospitable than one would expect from a post-Soviet special forces unit confronted with a journalist and a uniformed U.S. Army officer on their doorstep. The English-speaking soldiers who showed us around the base praised the training they'd gotten (both on IMET programs in the United States and special forces training in Kyrgyzstan). Western officials who work with Central Asian militaries say there is a "20-60-20" rule, meaning that roughly 20 percent of soldiers are enthusiastic and receptive to training, 60 percent are indifferent, and 20 percent are actively hostile. For some young, ambitious Central Asian soldiers, U.S. training can be welcomed exposure to a military that is not dominated by corruption and hazing. "Aside from learning at excellent institutions, foreign officers have a chance to interact with professional NCOs and female soldiers, who aren't always found in foreign militaries, and to see what 'right' looks like, when it comes to working professionally," the U.S. officer said.

# Potential Abuse of U.S. Security Assistance

Aiding security forces in authoritarian countries comes with an inherent risk that those forces could be used to put down legitimate, peaceful political opposition. As the former U.S. security assistance official acknowledged, “training is fungible.” In Central Asia, the most capable special forces, which are the focus of U.S. training and equipping, often have dual missions, e.g., anti-terror (which the United States may have an interest in supporting) and presidential security (in which the United States has less interest). While some U.S. security cooperation programs (e.g., those carried out by the embassy’s Office of Defense Cooperation) have strong restrictions against working with non-military units, special forces training is less restricted and can be more easily provided to these potentially dual-use units. There is no evidence that any U.S. aid has been used directly in any anti-democratic suppression.<sup>55</sup> But there have been a number of cases of misuse of American aid, which have been only sporadically followed up on by U.S. authorities.

## Panthers and Lions

One unit that the United States trained and equipped under the Bakiyev government, the National Guard’s “Panthers” unit was transferred to a new unit, called Arstan (“Lions”), which was commanded by the president’s brother, Janysh Bakiyev. The Lions’ mission was to “prevent regime change,” according to analyst Erica Marat, writing just after the change was made and Bakiyev was still in power:

The new structure will be separate from all other military institutions. Aside from protecting Bakiyev from direct pressure by competing forces, the new force will have the capacity to act as an offensive institution against the regime's opponents. According to local analysts, Bakiyev has created the structure with the idea that it would prevent any attempt at regime change.<sup>56</sup>

After Bakiyev was overthrown, Marat continued to document the development of the Lions:

In the last two years of Bakiyev's rule, the entire structure of the military changed. Bakiyev had put his relatives and political allies into key military and security posts so that the whole structure belonged to him and his brother and there was no oversight—it was his personal military. And he saw an opportunity to get money from the United States for “anti-terror” programs.

A former senior Kyrgyzstani security official said of the Panthers-Arstan transfer: “It was a misuse of power... he took over everything that the United States provided.” Yet there seemed to be no reaction from the United States, despite the fact that such “re-flagging” of units violates the rules that the United States imposes on militaries that receive U.S. aid. According to one U.S. military official who currently works in security cooperation with Central Asia: “We don't necessarily have a say in how they [partner units] are organized. But from a security cooperation point of view, let's say I give equipment to an MoD unit. And then the government says, ‘This is a pretty well-trained and equipped unit, I'm going to reflag them so they're going to be the Ministry of Interior internal forces unit,’ that is a problem. If you're using our stuff, and training can be included in that, and you're using it improperly, then we can have a say in that, and it becomes a political issue.”

The United States has limited options if it believes a partner military misuses aid. American officials emphasize that they deal with sovereign countries to whom they can't dictate how to use security forces. “We're the owners of these things, we get the aid and we do what we want with it,” said one Kyrgyzstani security official. The U.S. military official added: “If they use the equipment improperly, there's not much we can do to punish a country... About the only tool you have is to say, ‘In the future, I'm not going to give you that training, I'm not going to give you that equipment.’”<sup>57</sup> Said the former U.S. government official: “If I were someone senior in Special Operations Command (SOCOM), or if I had some policy responsibility for that, I would take that as a precaution for future efforts.”

There is no indication, however, that the United States reconsidered its aid to Kyrgyzstan as a result of this episode, or even communicated to the Kyrgyz government about it. The former senior Kyrgyzstani security official said that members of the Panthers were unhappy but didn't complain to the U.S. embassy. The official added that it wasn't even apparent that the embassy knew about the transfer.

To the United States, however, security forces focused on the security of the president, rather than of the country, has not necessarily been a problem. Another cable from the U.S. embassy in Dushanbe published by Wikileaks reported that U.S. special forces had been training Tajikistan's National Guard, frankly noting that the force "is primarily designed to protect the Rahmon regime and respond to him personally. Essentially, they are President Rahmon's own Praetorian Guard and they clearly receive the priority of fill and perks within the Tajik defense establishment."<sup>58</sup>

In any case, there wasn't much time to react to Bakiyev's dismantling of the Panthers: he was overthrown less than two months later, which Arstan was powerless to stop.

## Events in Bishkek and Osh, 2010

The role of the security forces in the violence that wracked Kyrgyzstan in 2010 has not been thoroughly investigated, so nearly two years after the fact, it's impossible to say whether or not any U.S.-trained or equipped units took part in violence against peaceful civilians. In the April street protests in Bishkek that led to Bakiyev's overthrow, more than 80 people were killed. The new government has brought charges against those it says were responsible for the killing of civilians in those events, including eight members of the Alfa special forces unit, which has received training from the United States. The trial is ongoing, but the issue of U.S. training of the Alfas has not been made an issue, either in the trial or by the media covering the trial.

Another, more serious, spasm of violence hit the southern part of the country a few months later, in the form of ethnic pogroms, largely by ethnic Kyrgyz against ethnic Uzbeks. There have been widespread reports that security forces—who are dominated by ethnic Kyrgyz—were complicit in the violence. The International Crisis Group reported shortly after the events:

There are numerous reports that police, military and border forces surrendered weapons or voluntarily handed them over to ethnic Kyrgyz during the unrest. "Strangely enough (troops and police) parted with their weapons practically without a fight or a regret. I will say more: the surrender of a military arsenal often happened voluntarily," said Omurbek Suvanaliyev, Osh chief of police during the pogroms. An ethnic Russian member of the Afghan veterans' unit, mobilised by the government to help keep order, criticised the Kyrgyz army and police for their lack of discipline and training, as well as their "fraternisation" with the looters and those intent on what he called "genocide."<sup>59</sup>

There is no information about what particular units may have been engaged in the violence, whether they were units trained by the United States or not. Adding to the

difficulty in determining responsibility, there were widespread reports of civilians breaking into armories and stealing soldiers' and police officers' weapons, uniforms, and vehicles, so that witnesses couldn't distinguish between members of security forces and civilians dressed like soldiers. (Some local human rights groups investigating the southern Kyrgyzstan events believe that security forces played an active role in the early stages of the pogroms, and that the seizures/turnovers of military equipment to civilians were engineered as a means to cover up that fact. But so far no proof of that has emerged.<sup>60</sup>)

One member of the U.S.-trained Scorpions special forces brigade said that the unit was deployed to Osh during the unrest there, but that it didn't take an active role, only guarding strategic facilities. (The soldier's account of the violence, however, raises some suspicion: he said that for the first two days of the violence, only Uzbeks were armed, and that ethnic Kyrgyz only got hold of weapons on the third day, when "hunters" emerged from the countryside to help arm the Kyrgyz of Osh.)

A senior American official currently working on policy toward Central Asia said that the events of 2010 are "murky and tragic and poorly understood," and that the United States has not made an independent effort to determine if security forces that it trained and equipped took part in the violence either in Bishkek or in southern Kyrgyzstan.

## Kyrgyzstan's Drug Control Agency

The story of Bakiyev's disbanding of the nation's Drug Control Agency (DCA) shows that abuses of Western security assistance are not limited to Department of Defense programs. The U.S. State Department and Justice Department, along with the United Nations, have provided substantial support to the DCA, including paying salaries, embedding U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration personnel as advisers, training, building barracks, and providing equipment. But in October 2009, then-president Bakiyev disbanded the agency and assigned the mission of controlling drugs to the Ministry of Internal Affairs. The consensus view of observers was that Bakiyev disbanded the agency because it was doing its job too well and getting too close to key elites and Bakiyev allies who were involved in drug trafficking.<sup>61</sup>

But the U.S. embassy in Bishkek—still dealing with the near-closure of Manas—had only a muted reaction to the disbanding of the DCA. The embassy made no public statement, and the conversations between American diplomats and their Kyrgyzstani interlocutors revealed by Wikileaks on the issue don't register very strong disapproval. In December 2009, then-U.S. ambassador Tatiana Gfoeller met with Oksana Malevanaya, head of the presidential secretariat. The cable reports that Gfoeller "regretted" a new law on religion, "criticized the current human rights situation," and "strongly urged" Malevanaya to allow

the U.S.-funded Radio Azzatyk back on the air. Then the two discussed the DCA in less critical terms:

The Ambassador questioned Malevanaya regarding the recent closure of the Drug Control Agency (DCA) and its absorption into the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MIA), noting the previously strong cooperation between the DCA and the U.S. Government. Malevanaya noted that there had previously been too many overlapping agencies and that for this reason, the DCA's responsibilities had been assumed by the Ministry of Internal Affairs. Malevanaya stated that in principle, the Government's position on drug cooperation would not change.<sup>62</sup>

The story of some vehicles donated to the DCA suggests that the United States was willing to countenance some of the reshuffling, but only as long as the vehicles were being used by whatever agency was charged with combating drug trafficking. The United States had donated 11 vehicles to the DCA in the summer of 2009, and when the agency was disbanded shortly thereafter, American officials report, the DCA gave the vehicles back to the U.S. embassy. The following summer, the vehicles were donated again to the Ministry of Internal Affairs Main Directorate for Combating Illegal Drug Trafficking office in Osh. (The transfer happened the day before the unrest began in Osh.) When the new government re-established a dedicated drug agency, the Drug Control Service, the United States required that the 11 vehicles be transferred to that agency. But the Ministry of Internal Affairs has so far failed to do that, and so the embassy has withheld ownership documentation as a result. "We will continue to press the issue until resolution," said an official at the U.S. embassy in Bishkek.

The senior American official said that the United States is satisfied with the process it uses to determine how security assistance is provided: "Our policy on how we approach this is sound," with its combination of vetting in accordance with the U.S. "Leahy law" (by which the United States is required to certify that units it trains have not been guilty in the past of human rights violations) and end-use monitoring of equipment donated. "You can't do reform unless you build relationships," the official said, adding that training helps "transmit values."

The Leahy law is the most significant piece of legislation aimed at preventing abuses of U.S. security assistance. It requires the United States to withhold aid "if the Secretary of State has credible evidence that such unit has committed gross violations of human rights, unless the secretary determines and reports to the Committees on Appropriations that the government of such country is taking effective measures to bring the responsible members of the security forces unit to justice."<sup>63</sup> This requirement is a narrow one, however, that was not able to prevent these abuses from occurring. None of the relevant units had been accused of human rights violations in the past, and the abuses that did



occur wouldn't necessarily rise to the level of "gross violations of human rights," and so they wouldn't, by law, be forbidden from continuing to receive aid. In addition, the law allows the State Department to take a fairly passive role. In the case of the 2010 violence in Kyrgyzstan, for example, it is certainly possible that some U.S.-trained units engaged in violence against peaceful civilians. But the United States has not done any independent investigation of whether that is the case.

The problems that have emerged so far are not surprising, given Central Asia's legacy, the senior official said. "There is always a risk when the United States provides security assistance—we're not a colonizer, and they are a sovereign government," the official said. "Kyrgyzstan and the other Central Asian countries are in transition. The military is undergoing change, but there is a deep culture that we didn't create, that the security forces are responsible to the state, not to the citizenry. And we're working through this."

The former U.S. security cooperation officer says that the United States appreciates the potential for units it trains in Central Asia to be used for more domestic political purposes than against legitimate external threats. But, on balance, "we lean more on the side of doing something than doing nothing," the official said. This dilemma also was expressed in a U.S. diplomatic cable from 2008, discussing the possibility of training a new Tajikistani special forces unit, called SpetzNaz: "As this is a new unit, the timing and openness of the Ministry [of Defense] provides the United States with a unique opportunity to influence the training, standard operating procedures, infuse western-style policing, less-than-lethal protective equipment, and human rights training. Abdicating this opportunity leaves the team with either Uzbek-style crowd control (i.e., Andijon 2006), or an inept response opening the potential for further instability."<sup>64</sup>

# Conclusion

The recent strategic importance of Central Asia to the United States has led to a rise in U.S. security assistance to those countries, with aid increasingly focused on “hard” areas like training and equipping of special forces engaged in the counterterrorism and counternarcotics missions. The “soft” programs like IMET, focusing on reform of defense institutions, have continued at roughly the same level, making the “hard” aid an increasingly large piece of the security assistance pie. That shift has coincided with a small, but distinct, pattern of misuse of the U.S. aid, and the United States appearing disinclined to push the recipient governments when those abuses occur.

Both of those trends are the natural outcome of an aid policy that prioritizes gaining access and influence over genuine reform. When the goal is to curry favor with the governments of the region, it makes sense not to press those governments too hard when they misuse U.S. aid, lest the government make it harder for the United States to operate an air base or transport goods through their country. The governments in the region have shown a clear disinterest in “soft” aid, and while “hard” aid from the United States is sometimes the object of suspicion among Central Asian leaders, it is still more desirable.

Michael McCarthy, a U.S. Air Force colonel who worked on security cooperation with Central Asia in the early 2000s, wrote in a 2007 report on security assistance to the region that “soft” military training programs, like IMET and efforts to build professional non-commissioned officer corps, often have better results than “hard” training like giving equipment. Writing in 2007, McCarthy proposed reinstating IMET, but not FMF to Uzbekistan:

While a restriction on using FMF funds is appropriate to ensure U.S. military equipment is not used for repression, restricting the use of IMET funds eliminates one of the most valuable methods the United States has available to influence current and future leaders in the military and other security services. Instead, Congress should permit the use of these funds, but mandate they may only be

used for E-IMET courses—those that have been specifically identified as promoting the concepts of democracy, civilian rule of law, civilian control of the military, and internationally recognized standards of human rights. Continued engagement, at the right level, for the right reasons, and with the right methods is the only way to modify or mitigate the increasing repression in Uzbekistan, and it will help ensure that in the post-Karimov era there are civilian and military leaders at all levels who understand and appreciate American perspectives on these issues.<sup>65</sup>

That was written before the NDN existed, however, and it's clear that the United States has chosen to take a different route than McCarthy recommended.

For better or worse, however, it seems likely that this era of increased military engagement will end soon. Starting in 2014 the United States will begin to leave Afghanistan and its short-term interests in Central Asia will likely subside, allowing for the emergence of a more modest strategy for engagement with the region's militaries, one more oriented toward productive long-term reform.

# Recommendations

The challenges described in this report are the result of a Central Asia policy that is dominated by a single priority, the war in Afghanistan. As a result, they are likely to only be solved when the United States significantly decreases its military engagement in Afghanistan. However, there are measures that could be taken that would mitigate these risks.

- The U.S. should seek different ways of rewarding Central Asian countries for their cooperation with the Afghanistan mission. Given that the war is conducted by the DoD, which has more money than other government agencies to provide aid, it is natural that the quid pro quo for access to Central Asia comes in the form of security assistance. But given that such assistance can be easily misused, and by many accounts isn't even all that desirable to Central Asian leaders, it would be useful to explore other types of aid through which the United States could reward those countries. There are cases in which security assistance is especially desired, as in the case of Uzbekistan, which sees such aid as symbolic of Washington's support. Creative thinking could perhaps come up with aid packages that are both attractive to the host countries and better represent the whole spectrum of U.S. interests.
- The United States should shift the focus of its security assistance back toward professionalization and democratization and away from the turn it has recently taken toward increasing the capacity of the countries' special forces. There is scant evidence that these countries face a serious external security threat, and also little public evidence that U.S. support would help them deal with such a potential threat if it existed. This outsized attention to security threats distorts the U.S. relationship with these countries and makes it more difficult for the United States to advocate for political and economic reform. It also works to tie the United States to any human rights abuses these forces commit.

- The United States should make its security cooperation efforts more transparent. Having more information about what security assistance is provided will help both Americans and Central Asians make more informed decisions about the aid. Most of these programs are uncontroversial and unclassified, but obtaining information on them is unnecessarily difficult. Individual programs (like FMF and counternarcotics programs) are required to report to Congress, but the reports are not available to the public. And they go to different committees depending on whether or not the program is run by the State Department or Department of Defense, so even Congressional staffers charged with monitoring the programs don't have a complete picture of U.S. security cooperation in the region. An annual report describing all the unclassified security cooperation programs that the United States conducts in a country, including programs from the State Department, Department of Defense, and other agencies, would not be difficult to compile, and would greatly improve public understanding of U.S. activities in Central Asia.
- The Central Asian countries' partners should help develop a cadre of civilian and nongovernmental security and defense experts. In Central Asia, there is very little knowledge of the doings of the military and other security forces outside the security structures themselves, which makes it difficult to hold the forces accountable (or to hold the security forces' foreign partners accountable for their cooperation). Human rights groups in some cases try to monitor the activity of security forces, but they rarely have the expertise to do so authoritatively. A stronger corps of civilian governmental defense officials, nongovernmental security experts, and independent defense journalists would improve the public accountability of the security forces.
- Aid to security forces should be contingent on an analysis (perhaps performed through an interagency process including the departments of state and defense) that looks at the units to be trained and evaluates how likely they are to protect power structures at the expense of citizens. Claims by host governments that security forces are primarily directed against the threats of drugs or "terrorism" should be critically evaluated before using them to make decisions on security assistance.

# Notes

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