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Central Asia: Chased by Chaos

Aside from the threat of political violence, most Central Asian states are faced with internal, as well as external threats from terrorism and organized crime. All states must work and cooperate amongst themselves and with their neighbors to come up with a sustainable response to these threats and ensure the stability of the region.



Political Map of the Caucasus and Central Asia

(Image Credit: Wikimedia Commons http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Caucasus_central_asia_political_map_2000.jpg)

Nineteen years after Central Asian states gained their independence these countries continue to face transnational threats such as political terrorism, religious radicalization, drugs and arms-trafficking. The direct threat from the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and Islamic Jihad Union (IJU) has been minimized with the killing of top leaders of the respective groups be-

tween August to September 2009. However, the eruption of violence in Kyrgyzstan in mid-June 2010 has brought to question the ability of the local political systems to cope with internal conflicts.

June 2010 violence in Kyrgyzstan

From 10 to 15 June 2010, Central Asia once again witnessed a tragedy of

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epic proportions in Kyrgyzstan, which partly lies in the region's most densely-populated Fergana Valley. The violence which took place is said to be worst of its kind since the protracted Tajik Civil War in 1992-1997. Within the first several days of the violence, hundreds of human lives were lost and many livelihoods were destroyed. The violence further gave the impression that Kyrgyzstan is mired with chaotic clashes between its two main ethnic groups— the Kyrgyzs and the Uzbeks. Despite the preliminary claim by Kyrgyz security service about the combined involvement of ex-President Kurmanbek Bakiev, IMU militants and local bandits in the violence, the identities of the masterminds are not yet clear. The violence has had a traumatic impact at the local level and on regional politics. Several events and trends in the last decade are believed to have given rise to the violence in Kyrgyzstan.

First, the rapid and turbulent changes in Kyrgyzstan, brought about by a regime change in Bishkek on 24 March 2005 and a failed Islamist revolution in the Fergana Valley on 12-13 May 2005 dramatically exacerbated the already tense environment in this geopolitically exposed area. Second, in 2009 IJU militants attacked several towns in Uzbekistan near the Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan border. Similarly, Islamist groups in Tajikistan resumed their attempts to overthrow the government and mass riots spiraled out between Uighurs and Chinese in Western China. Since Kyrgyzstan shares borders with these countries, the government relocated its military bases to the south to guard against the possible infiltration of IMU militants based in the Afghanistan-Pakistan area. In addition Kyrgyz security forces were heavily involved in combating the extremist group Hizb ut-Tahrir and organized crime groups involved in drug trafficking. There is a perception that the funds used for these activities would have gone a long way to support development projects for Kyrgyzstan's population, 40 percent of which live below the poverty line. It is alleged that the local population had not seen or benefited from the changes promised by the government which has been accused of dynasty-based corruption.

Contrary to the perception that Kyrgyzstan benefits from all regional security-oriented organizations such as the Collective Security Treaty Organization, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, the current political situation means that the country could not rely on them. Only Uzbekistan's considerate support in the handling of over 80,000 temporary refugees during the crisis perhaps saved Central Asia from further catastrophic developments.

IMU and IJU: post-contusion clamors

Although a number of the founding leaders and key cadres of the IMU and IJU were killed between August and September 2009 by the United States military in the Afghanistan-Pakistan areas, the groups continue to revive and recoup. This could be because they were "inspired" by the latest events in their main target region - Central Asia. Since September 2009, IJU militants are believed to be going through some leadership and strategy-making problems. In the case of the IMU, its media wing has dramatically increased and modified its propaganda activities. Currently, more than fifty audio-video materials could be accessed from the IMU's website. These materials give detailed chronicles of IMU's operations in Pakistan's tribal areas and in Afghanistan which have not been made public since the group's establishment in 1998. A number of the IMU's video-clips were also put on the YouTube web-site. This may have reinforced popular support for the IMU among its sympathizers. In general, from September 2009 to July 2010 IMU operated in Pakistan's FATA under four separate commanders while its small group (around 30 militants) in Kunduz, northern Afghanistan remained engaged mostly in reconnaissance and recruitment activities on behalf of IMU and Afghan Taliban.

After the June 2010 violence in Kyrgyzstan, Abdul Fattoh Ahmadiy, the spokesperson of the IMU, gave a public statement which was designed to regain popular support among the populations of Central Asia. The relevance of this statement was underpinned by Usmon

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Odil, the new leader of IMU. In Odil's first propaganda speech on 17 July 2010, he sought once again to manipulate the violence in Kyrgyzstan to the advantage of IMU's political strategy by portraying it "as the conspiracy of infidel countries against Muslims in southern Kyrgyzstan".

In peril of religious fundamentalism

The escape of 25 highly-dangerous detainees on the 22nd and -23rd of August 2010 from Tajikistan's National Security Committee's detention centre in Dushanbe demonstrates how certain religiously-motivated and mafia-structured groups exploit the corrupt elements inside the government. The escaped prisoners, including several IMU militants, pose a serious threat to Tajikistan in the short-term. There is a likelihood that unofficial religious schools will spawn across the country under the umbrella of the official Hanafi branch of Islam and that would endanger and push the relatively young Tajik government to deal with troublesome trends and conflicts in the mid-term.

Uzbekistan also has to deal with home-grown terrorist cells and radicalized groups amongst some apolitical segments of its population. In June and July 2010 clandestine cells of the utopian Nurci Pan-Turkist movement operating in the Fergana Valley and Tashkent were detected and brought to court. The movement is linked to Fethullah Gulen, a prominent Turkish spiritual leader who advocates for a Pan-Turkist Islamic ideology and allegedly, mild sabotage, which the Uzbek government considers potentially threatening. In late August 2010 eleven members of a Tashkent-based home-grown Islamic cell were tried for organizing illegal gatherings on a regular basis. The danger of radical groups is that they are vulnerable to infiltration by IMU or IJU members who could influence them to join training camps in Afghanistan or Pakistan. The shift to this direction of the threat necessitates the modification of the counterterrorism policy, not just of Uzbekistan, but all Central Asian countries, particularly in the sphere of education and public awareness.

In need of spiritual leaders and integrative institutions

The violence in Kyrgyzstan has also brought to surface the reality that local people, regardless of their nationalities, need spiritual leaders like the writer Chingiz Aytmatov whose reconciliatory role during the inter-ethnic frictions in June 1991 in southern Kyrgyzstan was irreplaceable. Moreover as a strategic, preemptive action against internal religious radicalization and external terrorist threats, all five Central Asian states must unite their efforts into one integrative regional organization which will foster mutually-beneficial economic reforms and facilitate prudent solutions and vitriolic attacks on multi-faceted security-related threats.

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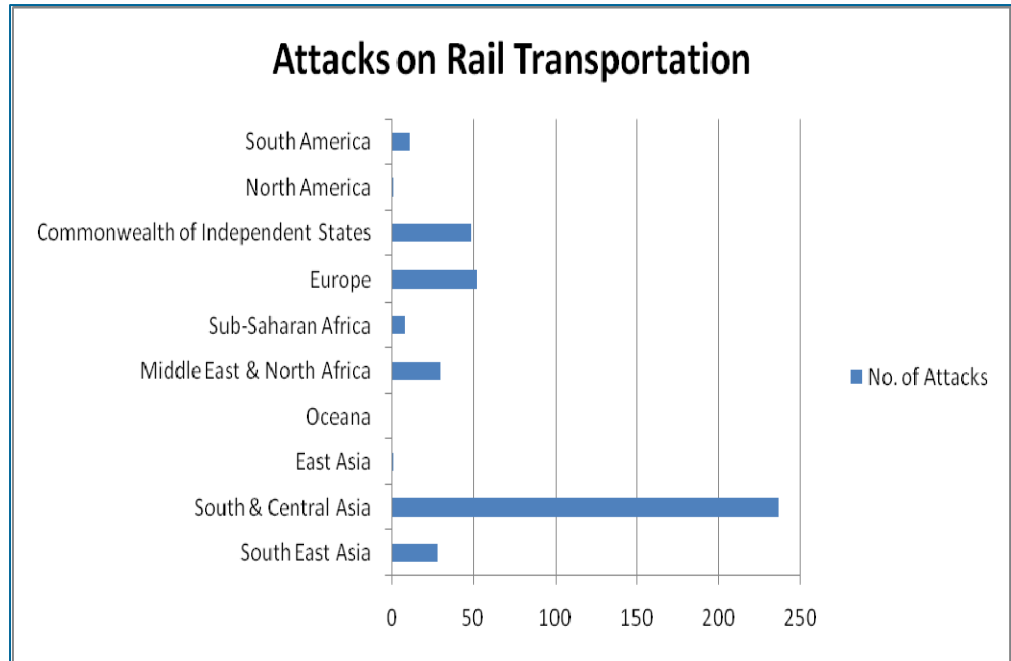
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A Preliminary Assessment of Rail Security and Insurgency in the North Caucasus

The increasing number of attacks on Russia's railway system has given rise to concerns that insurgents, particularly those belonging to groups based in the North Caucasus, now have a broad campaign to attack targets outside of their usual area of operations. While the Russian government has launched campaigns against such groups, it also needs to address the root causes of the violence to help preempt further attacks.



Partial Compilation of Attacks on Rail Transportation Sector sorted by geographical region from 1 January 2000 to December 2009

(Source: International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research, 2010)

One of the more prominent terrorist attacks so far in 2010 was the 29 March suicide bombings at two subway train stations in downtown Moscow, Russia. More than 39 people were killed and dozens more wounded in the attacks which were perpetrated by two female suicide bombers. The attacks were the first in the Moscow subway since February 2004 when ten people were killed in a suicide bomb attack outside of a train station. The first blast at 8:00AM was at the Lubyanka station which was located underneath the building that houses the

main offices of the Federal Security Service (FSB) which is Russia's main domestic security agency involved in counter-intelligence, internal and border security, and counterterrorism. The FSB is the main successor agency to the Committee for State Security or KGB which existed during the Soviet era. The second blast took place on 8:45AM at the Park Kultury train station.

While no group has claimed responsibility for this attack, there are speculations that the attacks were just a spillover of the violence in the North

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Caucasus, mainly Chechnya, Dagestan and Ingushetia, which have seen an upsurge in militant violence these past years. Frequent targets are police, government officials, and increasingly, railway systems. Attacks against railway systems have sparked renewed fears on Russia's vulnerability to insurgents, especially those belonging to groups based in the North Caucasus. While rebel attacks have been largely limited to the North Caucasus, the March 2010 Moscow subway attacks, as well as the November 2009 bombing of a Moscow-St. Petersburg train which killed 26 people, has sparked fears that the rebels now have a broader campaign to attack Russia's heartland.

Trends, Targets and Responses

Railway systems are considered to be softer targets than the aviation and maritime sector. This is because they offer terrorists relatively easy access to their facilities and there is little security measures to penetrate. Moreover, train schedules and the locations of train stations and railway tracks are publicly available and this makes them more liable to be targeted for terrorist attacks.

The attack on Moscow's subway system is not the only attack against Russia's railway system for this year. Bombings of trains and railway tracks have become a major security problem in the North Caucasus. Since January 2010, there were at least fifteen reported attacks. According to data from the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research (ICPVTR), Russia and the Commonwealth of Independent States ranked third overall as the region with the most number of attacks against rail transportation targets from 2000 to 2009. The rise in attacks against the sector may be part of a new campaign by the insurgents to undermine the Russian government.

The more common tactics used by the insurgents are hostage-taking (2004 Beslanschool siege) but in recent years they have turned to using remote-detonated Improvised Explosive Devices (IED) and suicide bombers with railway trains, freight trains, railway

stations and railway tracks as frequent targets. Suicide bomb attacks are preferred tactics because the perpetrator(s) has control over the location, timing and method of attack and obviously there is no need to plan for an escape route. The recent suicide bomb attacks in Moscow is said to have borne the trademarks of female Chechen suicide bombers called the "Black Widows". These women are said to be the wives, mothers, sisters or other close relations of men who were killed at the height of the conflicts.

The increasing vulnerability of railway systems in Russia has prompted officials to announce the return of armored trains to service in the North Caucasus provinces in December 2009. These trains are equipped with "special devices for the removal of landmines and heavy weapons capable of countering an attack by armed militants." These trains are meant to address bombings and sabotage of railway tracks, so there is still the possibility that an attack would occur onboard a passenger of freight train itself. Security has also been tightened in passenger train systems throughout the country, especially in Moscow. The enhanced security measures have also been extended to airports, energy facilities, and other critical infrastructures. The increased security and other precautionary measures against potential terrorist attacks might be well and good but the question still remains as to how authorities would be able to provide full protection to an open system such as the rail transportation network.

A Growing Insurgency?

After the fall of the Soviet Union in the early 1990's, separatist movements from Chechnya launched a coordinated campaign for independence which has resulted in two wars and the ongoing insurgency in the North Caucasus region. There have been a number of turnovers in the leadership of the separatists over the years but at present, the most prominent and active separatist group is the Caucasus Emirate which is led by Doku Khamatovich Umarov. In February 2010, he posted a video on the Internet warning of potential at-

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tacks in Russia. Prior to this, the group is already active with their online propaganda on claiming responsibility for several bombings of railways and derailments.

According to a 2009 report by the Business Monitor Online, the more pressing issue is that the North Caucasus is believed to be targeted for radicalization by extremist groups from the Middle East. Islamist extremist groups are said to have infiltrated what was originally a nationalist struggle and shifted focus towards the creation of a greater North Caucasian Islamic state. However, while the Russian government has launched campaigns against such groups, it is also important for them to address issues of unemployment, organized crime, poverty, and rampant corruption, which are widely believed to be at the root of the ongoing insurgency and violence in the North Caucasus.



Photograph of a passenger train operating in Russia's vast rail network (Image Credit: Matt Banks/Free DigitalPhotos.net)

For the latest reports and commentaries on terrorism and political violence please visit www.pvtr.org

GLOBAL PATHFINDER II

The ICPVTR Terrorism Database – Global Pathfinder - is a one-stop repository for information on the current and emerging terrorist threat. The database focuses on terrorism and political violence in the Asia-Pacific region – comprising of Southeast Asia, North Asia, South Asia, Central Asia and Oceania.

Global Pathfinder is an integrated database containing comprehensive profiles of terrorist groups, key terrorist personalities, terrorist and counter-terrorist incidents as well as terrorist training camps. It also contains specific details and analyses of significant terrorist attacks in the form of terrorist attack profiles.

In addition to providing the latest information on terrorist attacks and pronouncements, Global Pathfinder also includes over a hundred terrorist training manuals, counter terrorism legislations and conventions, analytical papers on terrorist ideologies, commentaries on terrorist trends and patterns, transcripts of landmark cases, interviews with terrorists as well as photographs from different conflict zones across the world. Further, Global Pathfinder also has a huge collection of jihadi websites, the contents of which are routinely translated and analysed by our analysts. This analysis helps develop an understanding of the developments in the ideological spectrum and trajectory of the terrorist threat, in both in tactical as well as strategic space.

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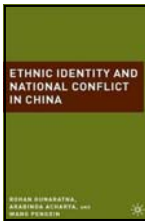
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The International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research (ICPVTR) is a specialist centre within the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS) at Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.

ICPVTR conducts research, training, and outreach programs aimed at reducing the threat of politically motivated violence and at mitigating its effects on the international system. The Centre seeks to integrate academic theory with practical knowledge, which is essential for a complete and comprehensive understanding of threats from politically-motivated groups.

The Centre is staffed by academic specialists, religious scholars, as well as personnel from the law enforcement, military and intelligence agencies, among others. The Centre is culturally and linguistically diverse, comprising of functional and regional analysts as well as Muslim religious scholars from Asia, the Middle East, Africa, Europe and North America.

Events and Publications



- Ethnic Identity and National Conflict in China (Palgrave Macmillan 22 June 2010) by Dr. Rohan Gunaratna, Dr. Arabinda Acharya and Mr. Wang Pengxin



- Targeting Terrorist Financing: International Cooperation and New Regimes (Routledge 2009) by Dr. Arabinda Acharya



- International Aviation and Terrorism: Evolving Threats, Evolving Security (Routledge 2009) by Dr. John Harrison