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Inter Service Press

US Military Assistance to Central Asia Highly 'Opaque'

By Carey L. Biron

October 17, 2012

U.S. military assistance to key Central Asian governments has increased dramatically in recent years but remains highly “unexamined,” according to new research presented in Washington on Tuesday.

Military assistance, which stood at around 5% of all U.S. aid to the region during the 1990s, today constitutes nearly a third the total. This added up to around \$100 million in 2010 alone, although these figures remain “opaque,” according to researcher Joshua Kucera, who is associated with the Open Society Foundation in Washington.

In a [new paper](#) [.pdf], Kucera notes that many of these aid programs “do not require public notification [although they are not classified]” and that “recipient governments have chosen not to publicize the aid, afraid of arousing leftover Cold War suspicions of the U.S. military.”

He says the U.S. is especially focused on strengthening the special forces in the region’s militaries, particularly in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, while significant assistance is also going toward nonlethal equipment and some light weapons.

“Very soon, the military aid to these countries is going to enter a new phase,” he said on Tuesday. “As the U.S. starts to pull its forces out of Afghanistan by 2014, it has said that it intends to leave some of that equipment behind for its Central Asian partners. We don’t yet know what kind of equipment that will be.”

These programs took a significant shot in the arm in the immediate aftermath of the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, with overall aid to the region more than doubling in 2002, to \$476 million. Within that, security assistance went up by a factor of five.

While those figures declined somewhat in subsequent years, U.S. military assistance to Central Asia really took off in 2007-08, as Washington turned its attention back to the situation in Afghanistan. Indeed, threats emanating from groups within Afghanistan continue to be the central public rationale — by both U.S. officials and Central Asian governments — for the need for the continued significant military assistance being poured into the region.

Kucera says that Central Asian governments have “a long history of overstating threats from Afghan groups” in order to gain international support and increased aid.

Quid Pro Quo

“You don’t need to scratch beneath the surface too hard to find another more significant justification for the aid, which is in effect to pay for the cooperation of the Central Asian governments for U.S. operations in Afghanistan,” Kucera said at a presentation of his work on Tuesday.

“The United States needs these countries as transit points for shipments going into Afghanistan. ... It’s a fairly open secret that this quid pro quo is the real driver of the assistance.”

A key example of how this has hamstrung U.S. policy is Uzbekistan. In 2004, the U.S. Congress restricted military aid to the country due to its wretched record on human and civil rights. Yet last year several of those restrictions were lifted, despite the fact that the Uzbekistan’s rights record had not improved in any significant way.

“The U.S. needs Uzbekistan’s cooperation for the Northern Distribution Network,” Kucera says, referring to the critical Western supply route into Afghanistan that bypasses Pakistan, where NATO supply trucks became a target of insurgent attacks over the past year. “So the decision was made to reinstate that aid.”

The U.S. government roundly rejects any suggestion that military aid is being used as payment to Central Asian governments for Afghanistan operations.

“I really want to push back on this notion that Central Asia is adjunct to the Afghanistan operation,” Lynne Tracy, with the U.S. State Department, said Tuesday. “That conclusion is belied by our long history with the Central Asian states, dating back to their independence two decades ago.”

Tracy also urges caution on speculating that U.S. assistance to the region would change significantly after U.S. troops pull out of Afghanistan in 2014. “Despite tight budgets, our assistance has stayed stable in recent years, and we have several other long-term interests in the region.”

Still, Tracy does allow that there is “room for debate” on the strength of the current threats emanating from Afghanistan, but she warns, “There is real reason for concern following 2014, and now is the time to prepare, while we’re in good position.”

Weakened Leverage

A broader concern is that U.S. military assistance to authoritarian governments could be working directly against espoused U.S. values on democracy and rights.

Kucera’s work suggests that not only could direct aid be strengthening potential tools of government repression, but also that whatever tacit agreement may have been made regarding U.S. military aid might be undercutting Washington’s ability to enforce rigorous standards.

“It needs to be remembered that U.S. training focuses on special forces, because they’re the most capable units. But they’re also the units that would be the first to respond to internal instability,” Kucera says.

While there are mechanisms for oversight to ensure that such a situation doesn’t become a problem, Kucera says these depend on the U.S. government’s political will to actually respond when that aid might be being misused.

“Instead, we have a situation in which both sides understand that the aid is not really meant to improve the capacity of the security forces, but rather in effect is payment for the services that those countries render to the U.S. vis-à-vis Afghanistan,” he says.

“In that situation, the U.S.’s leverage over these countries in the way they use that aid is limited. If the U.S. pushes too hard, those countries could cease their cooperation with the U.S. — and that is thought to be too great a risk.”