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Afghan Conflict Spreading into Central Asia, Russian Analyst Says

By Paul Goble

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Because NATO has chosen to supply its forces in Afghanistan via Central Asia and because its battles against the Taliban in the northern part of that country have led to a dramatic increase in the number of Tajiks and Uzbeks in that radical group, the conflict in Afghanistan is spreading into portions of Central Asia itself.

Indeed, Moscow analyst Aleksandr Shustov argues in an essay posted online today, Central Asia now faces “the threat of Afghanization,” something he implies both the leaders of the countries in that region and of Russia should take into consideration when deciding how much to support the US-led effort south of the former Soviet border.

Shustov says that “the increase in the transportation and communication role of the Central Asian republics for the US and NATO is being accompanied by a threat to their military and political stability,” a trend exacerbated by recent changes in the composition of the Taliban itself (www.stoletie.ru).

In the course of the spring and fall of the past year, he continues, a wave of armed actions and clashes, connected by analysts with the penetration of illegal armed formations from Afghanistan and Pakistan, has passed through the three republics of ‘the conflict triangle’ of Central Asia, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan.”

“The majority of these incidents, Shustov says, “took place on the territory of the most explosive region of Central Asia – the Fergana Valley,” which is the most densely populated of that area and which suffers from high rates of unemployment and increasing problems with the supply of water and other government services.

Shustov provides a detailed chronology of these attacks, linking them not only to the desire of the Taliban to undermine governments who are providing assistance to its opponents but also to an increase in the number of clashes between the Taliban and NATO forces in the northern portion of Afghanistan.

Historically, the Moscow commentator says, the Taliban have been primarily a Pushtun organization, but in the north, a region populated largely by Tajiks and Uzbeks, the radical Islamist group has sought to recruit from these two groups whose co-nationals form the titular people of two of the most important Central Asian countries.

In the Kunduz province, Shustov continues, “approximately 20 percent of the Taliban formations already consist of Tajiks and Uzbeks,” at least some of whom are engaged in crossborder activities such as drug trafficking and who have an interest in undermining the Central Asian states that they believe are helping the opponents of the Taliban.

Moreover, as NATO military operations in northern Afghanistan have increased, there has been a rising tide of refugees into the neighboring countries of Central Asia, people who “under the conditions of growing military-political instability fear for their lives” and often support radical groups.

Many politicians and experts are concerned that Tajikistan, which in comparison with neighboring Uzbekistan has extremely limited military possibilities also may be drawn into the Afghan conflict as a result.” If that happens, Shustov argues, then “inevitably” Russia will be drawn in as well.

While Shustov’s argument may be overstated, there are three reasons why it is important. First, it is yet another indication that however much Moscow may support the suppression of the Taliban in Afghanistan, the Russian government faces a serious security threat if that suppression has the effect of spreading the conflict into what Russians call their “near abroad.”

Second, Shustov’s words highlight something that many in the West are inclined to ignore or downplay: political and ethnographic borders in Central Asia seldom correspond, a situation that means whatever is done in one country may quickly spread to another in which there are members of the same ethnic community.

And third, his article suggests that the governments in Central Asia, already nervous about challenges to their power, are becoming more so and that they will thus demand either that NATO provide them with more protection against such threats emanating from Afghanistan or that the alliance stop using them in ways that only invite Taliban actions on their territories.