

## Central Asian states must unite to halt the spread of jihadism

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By Ahmed Rashid.

After US withdrawal from Afghanistan, central Asia's stability is at risk, says Ahmed Rashid

The withdrawal of US forces from [Afghanistan](#) this year is almost as worrying to the country's neighbours as to the Afghans themselves. The five central Asian states - Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan - fear an [upsurge in Islamic terrorism](#), increased flows of heroin and a flood of refugees. The US-led intervention, which aimed to uproot al-Qaeda from Afghanistan, may instead have scattered the seeds of jihadism over a wider field.

Abdulaziz Komilov, the Uzbek foreign minister, and Erlan Idrissov, his Kazakh counterpart, have warned of serious threats to regional security after 2014. Tajik president Emomali Rakhmon has described the western withdrawal as "a matter of deepest concern". Drug smuggling is a big source of revenue for militants, who readily cross into Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan over Afghanistan's 1,200-mile border.

In private, Russian officials express nervousness about the withdrawal. But Moscow is also using the political vacuum as an opportunity to reassert itself in a region that it has always considered its backyard. The Kremlin has promised tiny Kyrgyzstan \$1.1bn in military aid and debt relief worth a further \$500m. In return, Bishkek has agreed to shut down a US air base in the country. In Tajikistan, parliament voted in October to allow Russia to station 6,000 troops inside the country for another 30 years.

[China](#), too, has entered the bidding. It has sent senior officials on long tours of central Asian states, holding out the prospect of increased trade and promising billions of dollars in loans and funding for infrastructure projects. Another Chinese initiative, the Shanghai Co-operation Organisation, channels support to central Asian militaries. China and Russia have launched intensive discussions with states such as India, Pakistan and Iran to agree a common approach to stabilising Afghanistan.

Fears for the stability of central Asia have increased, with reports that the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan is establishing bases along the Afghan border. With its allies, which include al-Qaeda and the Taliban, it is preparing to inject more fighters into the country once the Americans leave. Pakistani militants keep the IMU generously supplied with arms, money and recruits.

The group already has bases around the northern Afghan city of Kunduz. However, developments in Badakhshan province in the country's northeast - separated from Tajikistan only by the narrow Panj river - now point to an even greater threat to security in the region. Hundreds of IMU are trying to occupy several districts in Badakhshan, a vast area in the Pamir and Hindu Kush mountain ranges. From here the tip of southern Tajikistan, Pakistan's northwestern border and eastern Afghanistan are all within striking distance. The next step would be for militants to secure the entire northeastern corridor of Afghanistan, which would provide a major operational base.

Yet despite their overwhelming common interest in tackling this threat, the five states are at loggerheads, unable to agree a common policy on how to stabilise Afghanistan. The west should also play a more constructive role to prevent Afghan militants from spreading after US forces withdraw.

Drug smuggling, corruption and poverty are rife in Tajikistan. In Uzbekistan, 75-year-old President Islam Karimov, in office for almost a quarter of a century, is facing a succession crisis as his two daughters fight over who will take his place. His jails hold more political prisoners than the rest of the former Soviet Union put together, according to Human Rights Watch. Only Kyrgyzstan, which has no border with Afghanistan, has a semblance of democracy. But its weak government makes it an easy target for IMU attacks.

Central Asian states must rise to this common challenge. It will take co-ordinated action from Afghanistan's neighbours to prevent a resurgence in Afghan jihadism from spreading across the region. The west should also play a more constructive role. The former Soviet republics feel slighted by the US and Afghan governments, and mistrust Nato powers that have failed to end the war in Afghanistan. Restoring their faith is an urgent task. There is too much at stake for central Asia to be allowed to fail.