

# The Spectre of Afghanistan

## Security in Central Asia

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# Afghanistan and Regional Security

## The Views from Central Asia

The security dimension has dominated policy thinking on Afghanistan in all Central Asian republics since independence. This was especially noticeable during the Taliban rule of 1996–2001, and is again the case following NATO’s withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2014. One indicator of a high level of mistrust and apprehension towards their southern neighbour, is public opinion. While there is a great deal of diversity in foreign policy preferences across the region, Afghanistan is universally relegated to the bottom three countries with whom it is felt close positive relations ought to be cultivated (Table 2.1). Even Tajikistan, which has the strongest ethno-cultural bonds with Afghanistan, seems lukewarm to the idea of all-round cooperation.

When asked a direct question about the biggest threat to their country, Afghanistan (together with the United States) topped the charts in Central Asia

**Table 2.1** Public opinion in Central Asian states on preferences for closer relations with foreign countries

<b>Kazakhstan</b>	<b>Kyrgyzstan</b>	<b>Uzbekistan</b>	<b>Tajikistan</b>
<i>Top three choices</i>			
Russia	Russia	Russia	Russia
The European Union	Kazakhstan	South Korea	Kazakhstan
Kyrgyzstan	China	Kazakhstan	China
<i>Bottom three choices</i>			
United States	India	Tajikistan	Afghanistan
Iran	Iran	Iran	South Korea
Afghanistan	Afghanistan	Afghanistan	United States

Source: Adapted from B. Rakisheva, ‘Integratsionnye orientiry molodezhi Tsentralnoi Azii (rezultaty sotsiologicheskogo issledovaniia)’, in *Tsentralnaia Aziia v usloviakh globalnoi transformatsii*, ed. Z. K. Shaukenova (Astana: KISI, 2017), 108–109.

**Table 2.2** Biggest perceived threats to Central Asian countries in 2015

Country	Biggest threat	Percentage mentioning
Turkmenistan	Afghanistan	51
Kazakhstan	United States	36
Kyrgyzstan	United States	33
Tajikistan	Syria	31
Uzbekistan	Afghanistan	16

Source: Adapted from N. Esipova and J. Ray, 'Eastern Europeans, CIS Residents See Russia, U.S. as Threats', *Gallup*, 4 April 2016, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/190415/eastern-europeans-cis-residents-russia-threats.aspx?version=print>.

in 2015 (Table 2.2). Again, Tajikistan was a bit of an outlier, naming Syria – as a code for the ISIS menace. Given the formation of ISIS-K in Afghanistan later in the year, the presence of the Afghan factor in the imagination of danger among Tajik citizens would almost certainly have grown in significance.

In 2017, a political scientist from Tajikistan, summarised the image of Afghanistan in Central Asia as follows:

Afghanistan has turned into a source of the whole complex of challenges and threats such as religious extremism, international terrorism, illegal circulation of drugs and weapons, illegal migration etc. which constitutes a genuine threat to national security of both individual newly independent states and regional security as a whole.<sup>1</sup>

Official policy documents concur with this assessment. In October 2017, the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) – which counts among its members Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Russia – issued a joint statement on the 'Situation in Afghanistan and the Threat of the Strengthening of International Terrorist and Extremist Organization'. The CSTO expressed concern about the 'deterioration of the security situation in Afghanistan, the high level of terrorist activity and the seizure of new regions around the country by armed opposition fighters,' and the consequent 'threats to security and stability in Central Asia.' The organisation highlighted particular alarm about the growing narcotic problem, and called on the international community to 'fight the Afghan drug threat more energetically'.<sup>2</sup> None of these observations was in itself ground-breaking; the declaration was notable in its official and succinct articulation of the Afghan threat to Central Asia. Its logic and vocabulary mirrored the official security discourse not just of the member states but also of Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, that has remained fairly consistent in the post-ISAF period.

This chapter undertakes a country-by-country analysis of the perceptions of security risks associated with Afghanistan, in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. These perceptions revolve around six distinct narratives of insecurity. These are: 1) terrorism and radicalisation; 2) narcotics trafficking; 3) spillover of fighting from Afghanistan; 4) humanitarian crises and refugee flows; 5) cross-border ethnofidelity; and 6) the risk of becoming involved in great power rivalry centred on Afghanistan. Evidence of all six can be found in official and expert discourse in each Central Asian republic, although their hierarchy and the intensity of securitisation varies by country and over time. Given the particular salience of international terrorism in the perceptions of danger in Central Asia today, it is necessary first to provide a detailed account of ISIS-K in the region, building on the discussion in Chapter 1.

## The ISIS Challenge

By mid-2018 the so-called Caliphate of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) had suffered dramatic and seemingly irreversible territorial losses. Indeed, as early as November 2017, the Iraqi Prime Minister, Hadir al-Abadi, declared military victory over ISIS forces in Iraq, while Iranian President Hassan Rouhani simultaneously announced that Iran had successfully driven ISIS out of Syria.<sup>3</sup> Almost exactly a year later, a drastically reduced core of ISIS fighters were under siege in Hajin, in the Deir ez-Zor province; the last remaining stronghold of ISIS in Syria.<sup>4</sup> This fight for survival was a far cry from the grand ambitions that accompanied the triumphant declaration of an Islamic Caliphate, by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, on 29 June 2014.<sup>5</sup> However, while attention has been firmly focussed on Iraq and Syria, ISIS has been building a global network of *wilayats* or provinces. As ISIS suffers immense territorial losses and casualties in the Middle East, these far-flung provinces on the periphery of the Caliphate, continue to breathe life into the crucial territorial ambitions of ISIS.

The *wilayat* Khorasan (ISIS-K), an Afghan-based affiliate of ISIS was declared on 26 January 2015, by Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, ISIS's spokesperson and second in command. The notional geography of Khorasan – a mytho-historical designation – comprises a broad swathe of territory: stretching from Iran in the west, across Central Asia, as far as China in the east. The founding members of ISIS-K were seasoned militants of the Tehrik-i Taliban Pakistan (TTP), along with recruits from existing regional salafist militant groups, who renounced previous ties and swore allegiance to al-Baghdadi. Under the initial

leadership of Hafiz Saeed Khan – emir of ISIS’s Khorasan province – ISIS-K established a foothold in Nangarhar, near the border with Pakistan, ‘recruiting disaffected insurgent Taliban commanders, leveraging local resources, and winning or coercing support from Salafi religious networks’.<sup>6</sup> The group quickly moved to the forefront of a crowded field of armed militant groups in Afghanistan, almost certainly due to the prestige of its association with a globally successful jihadist movement and its capacity to access broader external sources of funding.

In 2018, ISIS-K continued to attract recruits, notwithstanding the ‘negative reverberations’ caused by the collapse of ISIS in Iraq and Syria.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, contrary to expectations that the destruction of the Caliphate would irreparably cripple ISIS operations elsewhere, there are indications that ISIS-K may, in fact, be an inadvertent beneficiary of territorial losses in Iraq and Syria. Antonio Giustozzi suggests that ISIS’s administration is being relocated in ‘piecemeal’ fashion from Syria to Afghanistan and that ‘top-level leaders will follow’.<sup>8</sup> This comes close on the heels of a resumption of funding from Syria to ISIS-K, as ISIS seeks to withdraw its significant financial resources from former territories.

A consequence of the collapse of the Caliphate is the dispersal of ISIS recruits – now battle-hardened – across the globe. The vulnerability of Western countries to violent acts committed by returning jihadists, has been widely flagged.<sup>9</sup> Less attention has been given to the movement of ISIS fighters into the Afghan arena. However, there is a historical precedent of foreign fighters in Afghanistan and the substantial Central Asian ISIS contingent – numbering anywhere between four hundred and five thousand<sup>10</sup> – are well-placed to re-emerge as the experienced foot soldiers of an ascendant ISIS-K.

Militants from Central Asia already have an established presence in ISIS-K. In September 2014, the emir of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), Usman Ghazi, declared that IMU was forsaking its traditional alliance with the Afghan Taliban, in support of ISIS.<sup>11</sup> In mid-2015, a faction of IMU declared *bay’a* (allegiance) to ISIS and a number of high profile IMU militants have actively promoted ISIS and sought recruits in northern Afghanistan.<sup>12</sup> Defections from other Afghan-based militant groups including Al Qaeda and, even more prominently, the Taliban, have, for the most part, been to the benefit of ISIS-K. Indeed, Paul Lushenko, an intelligence officer in the US army, suggests that any negotiation brokered between the coalition and the Taliban will see a wave of Taliban defections to ISIS-K.<sup>13</sup>

In mid-2017, a succession struggle erupted between Aslam Farooqi, a former commander of the Pakistani Lashkar-e-Toiba (LeT), and former IMU commander, Moawiya. The Central Asian faction, following Moawiya, has

operated in northern Afghanistan, while Farooqi's faction dominated eastern Afghanistan.<sup>14</sup> The two factions reconciled in early 2018, under pressure from the top leadership of ISIS and in the context of ongoing coalition and Taliban attacks against the group.

ISIS-K has inherited an expansionist strategy, capitalising on 'weak governance, under-addressed grievances, and poor security' in order to establish itself across the region.<sup>15</sup> It has intentionally sought to exacerbate ethnic, territorial and sectarian disputes to 'indigenize its agenda among marginalized Muslims and secular populations'.<sup>16</sup> According to reports from Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, ISIS-K earmarked US\$70 million in 2015, to finance sedition and subversion in Central Asia.<sup>17</sup> Giustozzi, among others, has commented on the growing presence of *mujahideen* within Central Asia, the number of which may have reached the 750 mark in 2017, noting that those operating in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan depend on ISIS-K while those in Tajikistan tend to follow ISIS-Central.<sup>18</sup> Recent attacks by ISIS-K operatives in South Asia and Tajikistan, and thwarted attacks in the United States are evidence of its reach beyond Afghanistan's borders.

After decades of war and internal chaos, much of rural Afghanistan is seemingly inured to living alongside armed militants and without the presence of a functioning state. However, burgeoning attacks against civilians – including attacks on schools and Shi'a communities – suggest that ISIS-K is prepared to continue the recognised terror-based *modus operandi* of ISIS. For the foreseeable future Afghanistan seems set to remain the backdrop against which the global ambitions of today's militant Islamists are played out. As such, the 'ISIS challenge' features prominently in the security concerns of Afghanistan's northern neighbours.

## Kazakhstan

Kazakhstan is the Central Asian state with the weakest ties to Afghanistan, as it shares no common border and has almost no ethnic kin living in Afghanistan. Kazakhstan is located at the opposite end of the greater Central Asian region, with a significant geographical buffer zone in between. From this position of geographical distance, Afghanistan is considered to be more closely tied to South Asia and the Middle East in terms of security, political, social, and economic dynamics. At the same time, Kazakhstan identifies itself as a Eurasian entity whose primary interests connect it with Europe and North-East Asia.

Despite this, Kazakhstan has, since 2001, been pursuing fairly active Afghanistan diplomacy, with an emphasis on multilateral frameworks such as the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), the United Nations and the 'Heart of Asia'/Istanbul process.<sup>19</sup> The reasons the Kazakh government have given for its engagement with Afghanistan include both security concerns and possible economic opportunities in Afghanistan. The Kazakh leadership is far quieter in public about the benefits of having served as a transit zone for NATO/ ISAF troops and supplies going to Afghanistan and back. Furthermore, Kazakh leaders have, as Nargis Kassenova argued, been 'seeking status and prestige through positioning [Kazakhstan] as a constructive and responsible stakeholder in the provision of regional and global security'.<sup>20</sup> It is significant to note that, as part of this broader objective, Kazakhstan has provided over US\$50 million in aid assistance to Afghanistan in support of reconstruction projects, which include emergency food assistance, social services provision and a long-term project to train Afghan students at Kazakh universities.<sup>21</sup>

In April 2017, President Nursultan Nazarbaev outlined three primary threats facing Kazakhstan in the contemporary world: terrorism, migration and narcotics trafficking. Four million migrants transit through Kazakhstan annually, according to Nazarbaev, with 600,000 guest workers (although the share of Afghans in either category is minuscule). He explicitly highlighted Afghanistan as the primary source of the narcotics problem, and praised the CSTO for its work combatting drug trafficking in the region.<sup>22</sup> According to the Kazakh Interior Ministry, thirty-five tonnes of heroin were intercepted by authorities in 2016, and eleven criminal trafficking groups were stopped. The interdiction rate is generally believed to be as low as 1 per cent.<sup>23</sup>

The radicalisation threat looms large in Kazakhstan, although it has not been subject to the same degree of hyperbole as in other Central Asian republics. In 2016, the head of the Kazakh security service estimated that 800 nationals were receiving training at jihadi camps on the Afghan–Pakistan border.<sup>24</sup> President Nazarbaev suggested in November 2017 that, 'some 400 young Kazakhstanis had been recruited by Islamic State. But now that ISIS is being defeated they are returning'.<sup>25</sup>

The evolution of the views of Erlan Karin, Kazakhstan's eminent public intellectual in the area of Islamic radicalism who has held senior positions in government, think tanks and the media, is illustrative of the dynamics of official discourse securitising Afghanistan. In 2014, he dismissed the Afghan factor as of secondary importance to the security of Kazakhstan.<sup>26</sup> According to Karin, a tiny group of Kazakhstanis belonging to the Jund al-Khilafa gang, operating primarily

in Waziristan had been utterly destroyed by Pakistani and US attacks.<sup>27</sup> Three years later, Karin acknowledged Afghanistan's recrudescence to the radicalisation in Kazakhstan. The main threat, according to him, would be ideological: "This will be reflected in the growth of propaganda towards Central Asia. In other words, new propaganda materials targeting Central Asia will appear, the content of radicalizing sources will increase, and we'll have to take this into active account."<sup>28</sup> In 2018, Karin adjusted his position again, saying that those who, one or two years previously, underestimated the threat from ISIS in Afghanistan were wrong: it was no longer just about propaganda but also the direct risk of terrorism about which Central Asians ought to be wary.<sup>29</sup>

Kazakhstan's geographical remoteness ensures that the plight of the few ethnic Kazakhs in Afghanistan and the direct military threat from its territory, are not a major concern in the official security discourse. The 2011 'Military Doctrine of the Republic of Kazakhstan' noted that 'the security situation in Central Asia has the potential to deteriorate due to the ongoing instability in Afghanistan.'<sup>30</sup> In the event that the frontline republics, bordering Afghanistan, were destabilised, this would impact Kazakhstan via a domino effect. The 2017 edition of the 'Military Doctrine of the Republic of Kazakhstan', does not mention Afghanistan at all; it merely refers to the threat of radicalisation in general terms, noting, for example, 'the utilization of Kazakhstani citizens who are members of terrorist and extremist groups for the purpose of destabilizing the internal situation'.<sup>31</sup>

Public discourse centred on the influx of refugees does exist in Kazakhstan and is commonly referred to in local parlance as 'an emergency situation of a social nature'. It had particular salience in 2016, in the context of the migration crisis in Europe. Despite low numbers of refugees – only 700 in January 2016, of whom about 90 per cent were Afghan<sup>32</sup> – the Kazakh government has resolved to erect refugee camps on its southern borders, as a precautionary measure. One official commented that 'this is not to say that refugees will come to us today. This facility is to be held in reserve. If such a situation occurs, our region will be prepared for it'.<sup>33</sup> Funding for the camps came out of a budget line allocated for 'repulsing and resisting terrorism'.<sup>34</sup>

Kazakhstan's status as a comparatively rich nation, and an important regional player in its own right, lessens its concern about adverse impacts flowing from great power rivalry in Central Asia. The multi-vector foreign policy of Nazarbaev is based on maintaining a careful equilibrium of geopolitical balance between Russia, China and the West. Afghanistan is viewed as an opportunity in this context – Astana happily supports diplomatic initiatives coming from all three,



believing that ultimately all sides ‘may have a common interest and incentive’ in achieving lasting peace there.<sup>35</sup> At the same time, since 2014, the leadership of Kazakhstan has anticipated the growing presence of Russia and China in the military and security realm, accompanied by the West’s decreased engagement. The pecking order of preferred partners to deal with Afghanistan-related risks is clear: Russia and the CSTO, followed by China and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), with the United States and NATO relegated to third place.<sup>36</sup> Kazakhstan’s politicians and experts are fully aware that Moscow and Beijing are likely to exaggerate the actual threats but accept this as ‘a way for them to maintain their own domestic stability’, rather than a geopolitical ploy.<sup>37</sup>

## Kyrgyzstan

From late 2001 onwards, Kyrgyzstan gave Afghanistan an important place in its foreign policy, but only because of Afghanistan’s new relevance to Western countries. The war in Afghanistan offered Kyrgyzstan a chance to boost its international importance and its utility to the United States. The Manas air base in Bishkek was the most important element of this relationship, with the diverted revenue being an important rent for the Kyrgyz leadership and its family network. After Kyrgyz leadership changes – in addition to Russian pressure and deteriorating relations with the United States – in 2014 the Kyrgyz government ended the agreement that had allowed American and European militaries to use Manas.<sup>38</sup> After the air base closed Afghanistan was downgraded as a foreign policy concern of Kyrgyzstan.<sup>39</sup> However, while Tajikistan and Uzbekistan provide a land barrier between Kyrgyzstan and Afghanistan, Bishkek retains a multifaceted appreciation of the Afghan threat.

The ‘Military Doctrine of the Kyrgyz Republic’, adopted in 2013 and still in force, names Afghanistan among the ‘main threats to military security’ in Kyrgyzstan. As a matter of fact, it is the only foreign state mentioned by name in the document. The Doctrine observes:

Threats of international terrorism, extremism and separatism in the Central Asian region remain pertinent; their formations are capable of rapid adaptation to countermeasures and utilization of new tactics and techniques of subversive acts. Problems of narco-trafficking and illegal migration are transnational in nature and have acquired even greater dimensions. There is a possibility of border incidents and military action on the state frontier and border areas on the basis of the extant unresolved issues.<sup>40</sup>

The 2012 National Security Concept likewise identifies Afghanistan as ‘one of the key threats to stability in Central Asia.’<sup>41</sup> The then Vice Premier, Tokon Mamytov, articulated three principles which he said Kyrgyzstan should follow in its approach to Afghanistan. ‘First – relations of trust must be established,’ he wrote in 2013. ‘Second – businesslike atmosphere which should follow trust. Third – friendship of the Afghan people.’<sup>42</sup> While these ambitions may seem noble, Mamytov’s true feelings to Afghanistan were revealed later in the same document. ‘The Kyrgyzstan government’s position on Afghanistan consists of extinguishing the fire of tensions and threats to Central Asia at the distant approaches, in Afghanistan itself. When these threats arrive on the Tajik border they’ll be unstoppable.’<sup>43</sup>

Memories of Islamist incursions from Afghanistan into southern Kyrgyzstan in 1999 and 2000, known locally as the ‘Batken campaigns,’ continue to trouble the Kyrgyz leadership and public. Clashes between government troops and insurgents from the IMU, who enjoyed support from the Taliban and Al Qaeda, caused Bishkek to revise its military and security planning in order to overhaul its sub-par armed forces.<sup>44</sup> In the post-2014 era, there is still little domestic confidence in their ability to withstand another onslaught from Afghanistan. In August 2017, a serving military officer told a media outlet, on condition of anonymity, ‘Hypothetically, if enemies strike from Afghan Badakhshan . . . they will reach our city of Osh within 24 hours. The situation is extremely dangerous . . . So dangerous that we may wake up one morning and see militants walking in our streets.’<sup>45</sup> These comments align with the typical expert opinion:

Afghanistan is turning into a hotbed fraught with threat to the entire Central Asia. ISIS plans include the conquest of the region. In Central Asia, Kyrgyzstan has a weak military and economic potential so this country won’t be able to stand up to the fighters. Besides, there are ‘ sleeper fighters ’ in our country who are waiting for a ‘ zero hour ’.<sup>46</sup>

The official narrative of danger posed presented by sleeper cells and returnee *mujahideen* gained momentum and found reflection in the 2017 launch of a state program designed to combat extremism and terrorism over the five years to 2022.<sup>47</sup> In 2010, seventy-nine people were convicted of terrorism-related offences in Kyrgyzstan; in 2017 that number reached 422. Members of the Uzbek minority are often treated as particularly suspicious. Researchers at the Diplomatic Academy of the Foreign Ministry of Kyrgyzstan wrote:

Hundreds of young ethnic Uzbeks – citizens of Kyrgyzstan – have joined radical Islamists and are at training bases in Pakistan and Afghanistan. They are ready

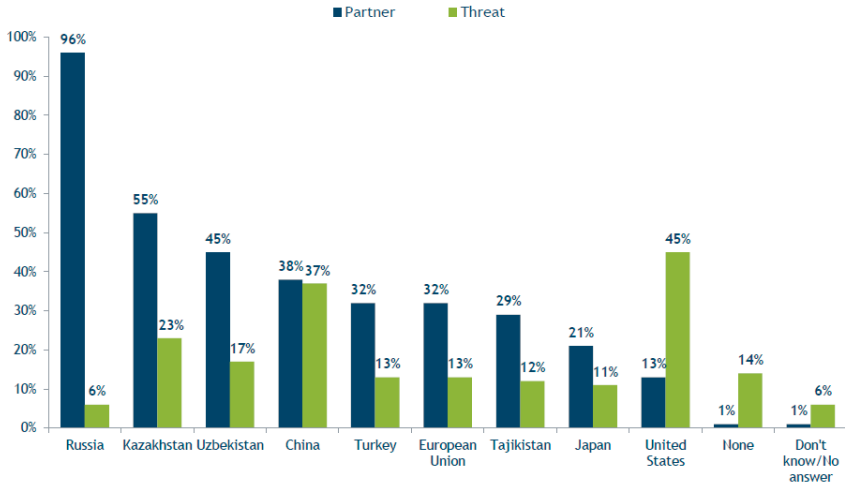
to return to the Ferghana Valley in order to take part in armed struggle against secular regimes.<sup>48</sup>

Indeed, ethnic Uzbeks accounted for two-thirds of the 850 or so residents of Kyrgyzstan who joined ISIS abroad; they have recently been implicated in high-profile international terrorist incidents, including an attack on the Reina nightclub in Istanbul in 2016 and the St. Petersburg metro bomb blast in 2017.<sup>49</sup> Sirozhiddin Mukhtarov, the leader of the Jama'at al-Tawhid wa-l-Jihad (JTJ) terror group who masterminded the St. Petersburg attack, as well as the bombing of the Chinese embassy in Bishkek in 2016, has been alleged to have ties with the notorious Haqqani Network in Pakistan and Afghanistan.<sup>50</sup>

Afghanistan is squarely blamed for the deteriorating narcotics situation in the country. In 2014 the main government think tank warned of the imminent danger of Kyrgyzstan 'becoming a hostage to one of the most dynamically progressing drug producers in the world'.<sup>51</sup> According to Kyrgyzstan's top investigative police officer, 30 per cent of Afghan opiates earmarked for export went through Kyrgyz territory, with up to 10–15 per cent of the transit volume staying for local consumption, causing a spike in public safety and health issues.<sup>52</sup> In March 2017, President Almazbek Atambaev engaged in a lengthy televised diatribe. 'Why has the narcotics circulation grown so much, why have shipments of narcotics from Afghanistan to other countries increased?' he asked, going on to answer, 'Because for better or worse the Taliban used to combat poppy cultivation and narcotics growing and when they were replaced by the coalition led by the Americans, the new guys didn't care.' He directed a targeted barb at the US-led coalition for the 'several fold' increase in opium plantation: 'We have to thank those who made a decision to implement a new order in Afghanistan for this.'<sup>53</sup>

Criticising the United States for its Afghan counter-narcotics policy is just one element of the wholesale anti-Americanism evident in the official security discourse of Kyrgyzstan. Bishkek uncritically associates Washington's strategy with the geopolitical ideas of Zbigniew Brzezinski, whereby control of Central Asia is indispensable to the perpetuation of US global hegemony.<sup>54</sup> The United States is held largely responsible for regime changes in Kyrgyzstan in 2005 and 2010. Its plans to cajole Central Asian republics into logistical and infrastructure integration with Afghanistan serves 'the principal objective of subjugating the extractive and transport industries in the region to the American capital'.<sup>55</sup> According to a 2017 poll, some 45 per cent of Kyrgyz citizens view the United States as the greatest economic threat to their country (Figure 2.1), outpacing the second-placed China by some distance.

Which of these countries do you consider to be the most important economic partners and greatest economic threats to Kyrgyzstan?  
(Multiple answers allowed)



**Figure 2.1** Popular views on economic partners and threats in Kyrgyzstan.

Source: *Public Opinion Survey: Residents of Kyrgyzstan*. Washington, DC: Center for Insights in Survey Research, 2017, p. 47.

Finally, there has been some migration from Afghanistan to Kyrgyzstan, although nothing of a volume that could be perceived as a security threat. In May 2016, the government expressed concern about the plight of their ethnic kin, the Pamir Kyrgyzs, who face privation and lack of social services in Afghanistan. An official humanitarian mission was launched with the purpose of ‘delivering emergency humanitarian aid to ethnic Kyrgyzs who have found themselves in a difficult life situation.’<sup>56</sup> Thirty-three persons were evacuated to be resettled in Kyrgyzstan. In the same year, 106 Afghans were granted refugee status in Kyrgyzstan.<sup>57</sup>

## Tajikistan

Officials and experts in Tajikistan have securitised Afghan threats more systematically and with greater vigour than in any other Central Asian republic. A long and porous 1,344 kilometre shared border and Afghanistan’s involvement in the Tajik civil war between 1992 and 1997,<sup>58</sup> naturally contribute to this

process. Since 2014, the discourse of menace from Afghanistan has gained in intensity. President Emomali Rahmon's state of the nation address, in December 2017, articulated this perception of Afghanistan, noting that 'the threats in contemporary world, especially the situation in the Middle East and particularly in neighbouring Afghanistan are compelling us to attach fundamental significance to the question of national security.'<sup>59</sup>

He went on to highlight the specific risk of terrorism, in the context of the lengthy Tajik–Afghan border, singling out ISIS as an emerging threat. This construction of Islamist threat has occurred in the context of Rahmon's crackdown on the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT). The IRPT operated as a legitimate political entity in Tajikistan from 1997 up until 2015, at which point the authorities accused it of plotting a coup, proscribed it and had many members arrested. The official narrative portrayed the party as a lynchpin of a grand international jihadi conspiracy affecting the whole of Central Asia and beyond:

The IRPT is regarded by its foreign sponsors as the centre of Islamist revolutionary activity in the region as a whole given the geopolitical position of Tajikistan which has access to Afghanistan, the Ferghana Valley, and the Xinjiang-Uighur Autonomous Region (XUAR).<sup>60</sup>

Security officials claimed that of 1,000 Tajik citizens in the ranks of ISIS in Syria and Iraq, 521 were IRPT members.<sup>61</sup> Local pro-government experts added to the sense of moral panic by opining that, due in large part to the IRPT propaganda, more than 2,000 Tajik citizens had gone to Afghanistan and Pakistan, joining ISIS-K and other jihadi formations.<sup>62</sup> Having received training and money, they allegedly crawl back across the Afghan–Tajik border 'in small groups of two to three persons . . . in order to scout locations for their armed units and terrorist groups.'<sup>63</sup>

Without denying the problem of radicalisation in Tajikistan, independent scholars have questioned its scale and the impact of Afghanistan upon it. The Rahmon government may be bolstering its internal and external legitimacy by presenting itself as a victim of global terrorism and an uncompromising fighter against it.<sup>64</sup> A recent sociological study found that potential support for religious extremist movements in Tajikistan was low and its social base narrow, not exceeding 6–7 per cent of the Muslim population; ISIS recruiters had less success in Tajikistan than in Russia; the Taliban had no influence on the domestic situation at all; and interaction between Islamists in Tajikistan and Afghanistan was weak, occurring mostly through the agency of the Gulf countries' support networks.<sup>65</sup> The study concluded, 'The Afghan factor can only amplify

radicalization in the Republic of Tajikistan but it won't play the trigger role – merely an expediting device.<sup>66</sup>

Also on President Rahmon's radar was the problem of drug production and cross-border trafficking through Tajikistan. Official discourse portrays Tajikistan as a heroic sentinel protecting the rest of Central Asia, Russia and much of the world from a murky torrent of Afghan opiates:

Since 1994 up until now, the law enforcing bodies and military structures of Tajikistan confiscated 121 tons of narcotics including over thirty-four tons of heroin. Such quantities of drugs could have destroyed lives of fifty-three million people and devastated many families.<sup>67</sup>

The Chief of Staff of Tajikistan's frontier guards spoke in 2016 about 'a serious threat of saboteur operations by international secret services from the territory of Afghanistan aimed at undermining the political situation in the Republic of Tajikistan', working in cahoots with 'Afghan smugglers who create hideouts and caches of narcotics and base camps in their border region from which they transport their deadly wares and recruit accomplices from the population in the [Tajik] border zone'.<sup>68</sup> The Tajik public is frequently reminded that Rahmon has appealed, multiple times, to the international community to create an impenetrable 'security belt' on the border with chaotic and dangerous Afghanistan, but that these pleas have fallen on deaf ears. The picture is one of manifest failure, on the part of the government of Afghanistan and its Western backers, to curb the drug barons inside the country, most of whom have now formed links with terrorists, extremists and subversive agents of all stripes.<sup>69</sup> Against this bleak scenario, President Rahmon, projects an image of Tajikistan, 'resolving the whole world's problems single-handedly'.<sup>70</sup>

Leaving aside the intriguing question of Tajik government officials' role in the narcotics racket,<sup>71</sup> the image of Dushanbe as a world saviour is misleading. Tajikistan accounted for 34 per cent of all opiate seizures (expressed in heroin equivalent) in Central Asia over the period 2011–2015, the largest proportion of opiate seizures in any country in the region,<sup>72</sup> but the northern route via Central Asia conveyed only 25 per cent of Afghanistan's total heroin exports.

There is no doubt that narcotics trafficking from Afghanistan does affect state security in Tajikistan. One of the critical issues at present is that it empowers alternative centres of authority, especially in the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast (GBAO) which has had a chequered history of accepting control from Dushanbe. Heroin seizures in GBAO rose by 89 per cent between 2016 and 2017, indicating a spike in smuggling activity; the remote region was estimated

to be a conduit for 16 per cent of Afghan opiates traversing the country.<sup>73</sup> Proceeds from a criminal enterprise in narcotics have enabled the local strongmen to deliver social services and maintain significant, if ambivalent, public legitimacy at loggerheads with the central government.<sup>74</sup>

Narcotics-related skirmishes on the Afghan–Tajik border are common – in the first nine months of 2017, twenty-six armed incidents occurred, with thirteen traffickers killed and nineteen apprehended.<sup>75</sup> Afghan officials accused the Tajik border guards of killing innocent Afghans in order to simulate a fight against contrabandists and receive awards from their leadership: ‘Tajik intelligence has promised that they will be awarded medals if they capture or kill a smuggler on the border with Afghanistan.’<sup>76</sup> Dushanbe strenuously denied such allegations and defended its sovereign right to open fire on armed smugglers, adding that such episodes would occur, ‘until such time that peace and stability prevail in the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan.’<sup>77</sup> One of the most serious incidents took place in December 2017, when a Tajik Colonel commanding a border guard detachment in the Shuroabad district was shot and killed by Afghan drug mules.<sup>78</sup> The entire border was subsequently closed for several days by Tajik authorities, including the strategic Sher Khan Bandar crossing.

Beyond incursions by Islamists and criminals, the narrative of a spillover risk in Tajikistan has increasingly focused on the Taliban’s operations in the north of Afghanistan. In 2016–2018, the Taliban conducted several offensives in the provinces of Balkh, Kunduz, Takhar and Badakhshan, overrunning ANA garrisons and coming right to the border with Tajikistan. Dushanbe interpreted this as a disturbing strategic development, whereby what used to be a secondary front for the Taliban, was now receiving a lot more attention. The main Tajik security agency, GKNB, revised its assessment of the strength of the Taliban in the adjacent areas from 1,200 armed fighters in 2015 to 7,000 in 2018, identifying twenty-nine new training camps, at which some Central Asians were spotted.<sup>79</sup> The fall of Zebak in May 2017, created consternation in Tajik Ishkashim across the river. ‘If the Taliban, God forbid, decide to cross the border and attack our districts, we don’t have a professionally trained army’, said a local Tajik politician, adding, ‘but the Taliban are a very disciplined movement and not a single fighter will get onto our territory without receiving an appropriate order.’<sup>80</sup> Such an order has not yet come and is not likely to be issued any time soon, but nervous anticipation on the Tajik side of the border is real enough, and the likelihood of an accidental exchange of fire is high.

Uncontrolled population flows from Afghanistan also cause concern in Dushanbe. Tajikistan faced a refugee crisis due to instability in Afghanistan in

1999 and 2000, with over 10,000 Afghans officially seeking asylum across the border.<sup>81</sup> The total figure was almost certainly much higher, with some suggesting up to 90,000 Afghans may have attempted to seek asylum in Tajikistan – many were denied entry and loitered on islands in the Panj and Amu Darya rivers.<sup>82</sup> According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), Tajikistan hosts, at present, approximately 3,000 refugees from Afghanistan.<sup>83</sup> The country's ability to accept displaced persons remains precarious. One expert wrote in 2017, that 'the arrival of thousands of refugees could seriously destabilize the situation in Tajikistan and generate large-scale negative consequences ... Tajikistan continues to lack the necessary material resources to accept a large number of refugees.'<sup>84</sup>

Among all Central Asian republics, Tajikistan has the strongest connection with Afghanistan in terms of mutual awareness. Nonetheless, despite shared ethnicity, language, religion and history, cross-border connections are not particularly strong. A recent sociological study revealed that communities on two sides of the Amu Darya river consider each other as having different values, political aspirations and economic ambitions, producing a poignant summary: 'A Tajik from Afghanistan and a Tajik from Tajikistan would not have much to share, even if they understood each other's language.'<sup>85</sup> A narrow but vocal stratum of nationalist intellectuals in Dushanbe disagrees and agitates for a united front of Tajiks in both countries against what it sees as a combined onslaught against 'Tajikness' perpetrated by the Taliban, the government in Kabul, ISIS and the West. The first two are culpable of forced Pashtunisation; after all, 'the current war in Afghanistan is the war of two nations – Pashtuns and Tajiks.'<sup>86</sup> The United States and the regime of Ashraf Ghani deliberately and systematically push the Taliban and ISIS to the north of the country in order to destroy ethnic Tajiks there, who had traditionally played the role of a buffer protecting Central Asia and Russia.<sup>87</sup> These intellectuals lionise Ahmad Shah Massoud, Burhanuddin Rabbani, Mohammad Fahim, Atta Mohammad Nur and other Afghan Tajik commanders and posit that peace in Afghanistan, and consequently in Central Asia, is impossible without strong leadership by the Tajiks who are the only group in the country free of external geopolitical patronage.<sup>88</sup>

While pan-Tajik nationalists are active in the media and especially social networks where they engage with anti-Pashtun elements in Afghanistan,<sup>89</sup> their ideas are not openly shared by Dushanbe. It has never questioned the legitimacy of the Karzai and Ghani governments, or otherwise interfered in Afghan domestic politics. As Marlene Laruelle argued, Tajikistan's financial and political



reach remains circumscribed and does not stretch beyond moral support to the Tajik Afghans and the provision of a potential rear-operating base for anti-extremist forces, should the situation in Afghanistan spin out of control.<sup>90</sup>

Although Tajikistan officially pursues a multi-vector foreign policy, its policy elite essentially follows the Russian lead in assessing the geopolitical context of the Afghan problem.<sup>91</sup> Its dominant narrative is that of deliberate and purposeful movement of the zone of instability from the south of Afghanistan to the north with the aim of setting up a mini-ISIS wilayat or new Waziristan there. The agency in this process belongs to the United States and its allies, who are preparing to spread instability to Central Asia, 'viewed by the West as a bridgehead for an attack on Russia's and China's interests.'<sup>92</sup>

## Turkmenistan

Since its independence in 1991, the government of Turkmenistan has followed the international policy of permanent neutrality; better viewed as self-imposed isolation, occasionally moderated by bilateral transactional diplomacy. It has neglected to cooperate with its Central Asian neighbours in regards to economic or diplomatic relations. Outside the region, Turkmenistan has been careful not to make any serious commitments to multilateral cooperation or international organisations.<sup>93</sup> For Ashgabat, relations with Afghanistan are, however, a necessity conditioned by geography and a shared frontier. Both of Turkmenistan's post-Soviet leaders, presidents Saparmurat Niyazov and Gurbanguly Berdimuhammedov, have – to varying degrees – been worried about war and instability across the border in Afghanistan (including the potential spill-over of conflict onto Turkmen territory).

Examining patterns of securitisation of the Afghan factor in Turkmenistan presents unique methodological challenges, as all security-related issues are taboo for the local media and the expert community, insofar as it exists at all. Officials are equally tight-lipped and do little more than reproduce sound bites from the president which are infrequent and inconsistent. As a result, a lot of information about Ashgabat's dealings with Afghanistan comes to light in a mediated form, through sources in Turkmen opposition and via external observers.

Given the 744 kilometre-long border it shares with Afghanistan, conventional security concerns preoccupy official thinking in Turkmenistan regarding the Afghan threat. Throughout the ISAF era, northwestern Afghanistan, comprising the provinces of Herat, Badghis, Faryab and Jowzjan that abut Turkmenistan, was

perhaps the most peaceful and stable part of the country. This all began to change in 2013 with attacks by the Taliban in Faryab. In February 2014, unidentified militants crossed the Murghab River into Turkmenistan for the first time, killing three Turkmen servicemen. Since mid-2014, ISIS-K, or to be more precise pro-ISIS groups in the IMU, have been increasingly active in the region.<sup>94</sup> Russian and Turkmen opposition commentators had suggested that eventually ISIS-K may conduct a raid on Turkmen gas fields in South Yolotan and Dauletabad. These expectations proved alarmist, and the focus of securitisation subsequently moved to the scenario where *mujahideen* crossing the border would ignite an uprising of local Islamist cells under conditions of internal unrest or elite infighting.<sup>95</sup>

After years of denial, the Turkmen authorities have finally recognised the existence of an Islamic underground on its territory. In June 2015, an official statement spoke about the arrest of 150 Turkmen citizens – ‘supporters and adherents of bandit entities, the Taliban and Islamic State’ – who allegedly planned an attack on a state prison. More than 700 of their sympathisers were also identified. Another group of 100 extremists, was caught with explosive devices and a large sum of cash in hand. The statement concluded with a pithy note that ‘modern weapons, high professionalism of the army and security agencies, and, naturally, support by the people’ guaranteed the state’s efficiency in shielding Turkmenistan from harm.<sup>96</sup>

The pattern of denial continues when it comes to the aggravation on the Afghan–Turkmen border. Multiple reports have described Turkmenistan after 2014, as being ‘pre-war and mobilizational’, with 70 per cent of the Turkmen army stationed on the border and the upper limit of the national call-up age increased from twenty-seven to thirty, in order to bolster the number of recruits.<sup>97</sup> Nonetheless, Ashgabat reacts nervously to any suggestion that problems exist, regardless of whence it comes. The Turkmen government sent a diplomatic note to Kazakhstan in 2015, registering ‘serious concern and lack of understanding’ about President Nazarbaev’s comments regarding multiple incidents on the Afghan–Turkmen border.<sup>98</sup> When US-funded Radio Azatlyk broke the news about the death of twenty-five Turkmen soldiers in a shoot-out on the border in July 2018, the authorities rebuffed it by parading a local shepherd who saw nothing untoward, and castigating ‘electronic media financed by the West’.<sup>99</sup> A Russian news outlet’s report on concerns raised by the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) border guards commanders about the situation on the Turkmen–Afghan border, was similarly dismissed as not corresponding to reality and an ‘unfriendly step towards Turkmenistan’.<sup>100</sup>

Narcotics trafficking and widespread drug use in Turkmen society have been publicly identified as a concern. While former President Niyazov and his head of security, were allegedly directly involved in drug trafficking from Afghanistan during Turkmenbashi's reign,<sup>101</sup> Berdimuhammedov has adopted a strict anti-narcotics government policy. Barely a year into his presidency, Berdimuhammedov created a specialised State Service on Combating Narcotics, which has had a considerable positive impact. In 2015, Turkmenistan was the only country in Central Asia not reported by Moscow as a key transit point for shipments of opiates trafficked from Afghanistan to the Russian Federation (it previously held a regular place of honour on that list).<sup>102</sup> The United States has also praised Turkmenistan's efforts, both in supply and demand reduction: 'President Berdimuhamedov's [sic] regular public statements calling for greater international cooperation and increased efforts against illegal narcotics make clear the importance the Government of Turkmenistan places on its counternarcotics efforts.'<sup>103</sup>

One point of departure from Ashgabat's neutral/isolationist stance, consists of the Turkmenistan–Afghanistan–Pakistan–India (TAPI) gas pipeline. In gestation since 1994, it was supposed to become the main export route for Turkmen hydrocarbons. Despite countless MoUs, negotiations, feasibility studies and opaque commercial deals, the project still has no clear prospects, secure financing or a commercial champion to see it through.<sup>104</sup> Desperate for TAPI to materialise, the Turkmen government quietly helped the US-led effort to vanquish the Taliban in the early 2000s.<sup>105</sup> Since 2016, in even greater desperation, it turned to the Taliban for assurances of security astride the pipeline route; allegedly supplying ammunition to them as a sweetener.<sup>106</sup>

## Uzbekistan

Uzbekistan has a strong stake in Afghanistan's stability and security – despite its current modest involvement in that country. In light of its patronage of the IMU, the rise of the Taliban movement was viewed as a serious security challenge by the government of Uzbekistan, in the late-1990s. The IMU was accused of plotting President Islam Karimov's assassination and it carried out attacks on Uzbek soil from Afghan territory. A 2000 incursion into the Surkhandarya region, coming quite close to Tashkent, was a particularly disturbing event: 'Uzbekistan's army managed to repulse the IMU gunmen and drive them back, but suffered considerable losses.'<sup>107</sup>

After 2001, the IMU's fortunes declined, and predictions that Karimov's dictatorial domestic policies and repeated crackdowns on unofficial Islamic groups would turn Uzbekistan into a hotbed of extremism did not materialise – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan had greater problems with the radical underground by comparison.<sup>108</sup> Nonetheless, Islamists continued to be securitised by the state leadership and media, as the number one threat. Government-sponsored opinion polls showed that citizens agreed with the dominant narrative: 85.8 per cent of respondents in 2016 identified religious extremism as the greatest menace to Uzbekistan.<sup>109</sup> The description of danger shifted from a conventional invasion, to what the Uzbek security service (SNB) termed 'hybrid war' – acts of terrorism, along with anti-government agitation and propaganda, recruitment and disturbances from Afghan territory, by ISIS and what is left of the IMU.<sup>110</sup> Afghanistan was the only foreign country mentioned by name (and not in a good way), in Uzbekistan's Military Doctrine, adopted in January 2018: 'The activity of illegal armed formations in Afghanistan constitutes a particular security threat' which 'may necessitate the deployment of military force [by Uzbekistan]'.<sup>111</sup>

Drug trafficking from Afghanistan has been receding in Uzbekistan's security discourse, especially when compared to other frontline states. In 2012, the growing Afghan opium production was deemed to be 'the decisive factor negatively impacting the narcosituation in the republic,' similar to the extant analysis in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.<sup>112</sup> By 2018, references to the heroin explosion in Afghanistan had all but disappeared, giving way to matter-of-fact praise for law enforcers who 'dedicated their main effort to cutting the contraband of opiates from Afghanistan's northern provinces' – an effort which resulted in the seizure of 56 per cent less narcotics (by weight) between 2016 and 2017.<sup>113</sup> Uzbek authorities claimed that in 2017, there was not a single case of death caused by overdose in the country, whereas between 2001 and 2008 about a hundred people perished annually. The diminution of traffic from Afghanistan, and the resultant loss of supply, was touted as one of the main reasons for this outcome.<sup>114</sup>

The 144 kilometre border that Uzbekistan shares with the Afghan province of Balkh is among the most fortified perimeters in the world, featuring electrified barbed wire, minefields and heavily armed troops, including decommissioned Soviet-era tanks that are used as stationary gun emplacements. In general, since the late 1990s the army has been the centre of attention of the Uzbek leadership and has played an important role in legitimising the regime. After Karimov's death in 2016, Shavkat Mirziyoyev campaigned for presidency under the slogan 'Armed Forces of Uzbekistan are the Reliable Guarantor of Security and Stability',

reassuring the electorate that they are completely protected even when ‘the threats of terrorism, extremism and radicalism are rising’.<sup>115</sup>

Foreign military analysts agree that Uzbekistan’s army is the strongest in Central Asia, but cast doubt on its actual ability to counter spillover from Afghanistan. One point of criticism, is the alleged low morale and lack of combat experience: ‘If Afghan Taliban mount an attack, it is quite likely that the martial *mujahideen* will disperse the Uzbek army within a week.’<sup>116</sup> Others highlight the sorry state of equipment, inherited from both the Soviet era and the United States, after its withdrawal from Afghanistan. Unless a radical and expensive program of rearmament is pursued, parrying hypothetical attacks by the Taliban, ISIS-K or the IMU would be difficult.<sup>117</sup> Still others comment that Uzbekistan has been preparing for conventional warfare against Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Kazakhstan, instead of operations against highly mobile militants in difficult terrain: ‘Perhaps we can even rejoice that the armaments of the [Uzbek] national army have practically not been renewed since its establishment – less quality equipment will fall into the hands of the Taliban or, God forbid, ISIS-K supporters.’<sup>118</sup>

The criticisms above are harsh and exaggerated, but they raise valid questions which were completely ignored in the public security debate in Uzbekistan. Official statements and the media stretch the iron-clad security guarantee to cover the spillover of fighting from Afghanistan, brooking no possibility of a perimeter breach. Only in 2018 did this situation began to change, as will be discussed in Chapter 5.

Uzbekistan’s position vis-à-vis its ethnic brethren in Afghanistan, is quite different to that of Tajikistan. Neither the Uzbek government nor patriotic intellectuals regard the Afghan conflict in ethnic terms. The Uzbek minority in Afghanistan is not discussed in Uzbekistan’s media, and their living conditions and potential mass exodus are not securitised. The official discourse portrays the picture of rhapsodic harmony:

Close ties of friendship based on common history, culture, traditions and values connect us with Afghanistan. It must be noted that today more than five million representatives of the Uzbek nationality reside in the IRA. Ethnic Uzbeks take active part in creative processes occurring in that state.<sup>119</sup>

On the other hand, Tashkent dabbles in domestic politics of the neighbouring country to a far greater extent than Dushanbe. This involvement is not publicised; officially, Uzbekistan ‘conducts relations with Afghanistan on the basis of bilateralism and principles of mutual respect and non-interference in each other’s

affairs.<sup>120</sup> In practice, the Uzbek government uses local proxies in Afghanistan from time to time, to achieve pragmatic objectives. Tashkent's relations with Abdul Rashid Dostum, an ethnic Uzbek who has been the strongman of Mazar-e Sharif and a senior figure in Afghanistan's national politics for decades, is a good example of cool calculation trumping ethnic solidarity. Dostum received some material support from Uzbekistan in 1996–1997, when he was fighting the Taliban, but after he lost and had to flee he was treated very poorly by Uzbek officials, before they allowed him to go into exile in Turkey. Islam Karimov used to joke that 'if Dostum is an Uzbek general, then I am a Chinese general'.<sup>121</sup> In 2016, Dostum was involved in skirmishes with the governor of Balkh, Atta Mohammad Nur, and made demands on Kabul to increase the representation of ethnic Uzbeks in government structures, at the expense of the Tajiks. He received no encouragement from Tashkent. Leaked reports from a meeting between presidents Mirziyoyev and Ghani in December 2017, revealed that Tashkent agreed to help Kabul in resolving 'some political problems with General Dostum and his entourage', in return for Ghani's commitment to deploy more security forces in the border zone and extradite Uzbek criminals wanted for drug trafficking and extremism.<sup>122</sup> A political analyst from Tashkent, in a rare published comment, characterised Dostum as a useful secular figure, 'fighting bearded *mujahideen*', but added that Uzbekistan's leadership did not over-estimate his significance and certainly did not push for his greater role in Afghan national politics.<sup>123</sup>

Similarly to Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan has been cautious about being involved in geopolitical projects focused on Afghanistan. Having bailed out of the strategic alliance with the United States in 2005 and the CSTO in 2012, Tashkent exhibited reluctance to take part in multilateral or regional security initiatives as a matter of policy. Karimov's '6 + 2' talks (involving China, Iran, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, plus Russia and the United States), launched in 1999 and briefly resuscitated in 2008, and Tashkent's half-hearted involvement in the 'Istanbul Process' since 2011, did not alter the picture at all.<sup>124</sup> A significant change that may have begun to occur in 2018, will be covered in Chapter 5.

## Conclusion

Unstable and war-torn, Afghanistan is viewed as a source of threat by all Central Asian countries. The discourse of danger focuses on six major themes that are common across the region but vary in terms of visibility and intensity from

country to country (Table 2.3). Afghanistan's perceived role as a safe haven and operational base for jihadi groups, particularly ISIS-K, is a particularly strong and commonly shared concern. Narcotics production and trafficking is also a universal theme, although it has been recently desecuritized in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Afghanistan features prominently in the official geopolitical calculus only in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan – in both cases, it is seen as a bridgehead for the West to penetrate Central Asia, for the purposes of containing Russia and China. The Turkmen and Uzbek ethnic minorities in Afghanistan are not securitized at all by the eponymous states, and Tajikistan's concern about fellow-ethnics across the border is moderate at best.

A detailed examination of how Central Asian republics construct Afghanistan-related threats is an indispensable component in understanding their actual policies vis-à-vis that country – the book's central assumption is that these policies are primarily security-driven. State-sponsored patterns of securitisation (and desecuritisation) follow complex dynamics, where articulation of threats may serve the agenda of regime maintenance domestically and internationally. Nonetheless, the official discourse analysed above, reflects genuine concerns of Central Asian governments about the situation in Afghanistan. Kazakhstan provides a pertinent story in this regard – which should not be used as an 'authenticity deflator' coefficient at all. When authorities in Astana started to sound alarm bells about the rise of ISIS-K as a mortal menace in 2015, the

**Table 2.3** Intensity of Afghanistan-related risks in the security discourse in Central Asia

Risk	Kazakhstan	Kyrgyzstan	Tajikistan	Turkmenistan	Uzbekistan
Islamic radicalism and terrorism	High	High	High	High	High
Narcotics trafficking	High	High	High	Medium	Medium
Spillover of fighting	Low	High	High	Medium	Low
Humanitarian crisis and refugee flows	Low	Low	Medium	Low	Low
Cross-border ethnofidelity	N/A	Low	Medium	Low	Low
Geopolitical risks	Medium	High	High	Low	Low

country's top security intellectuals who enjoyed reasonable autonomy from the state were split: 12 per cent believed that the authorised narrative was an instrument of manipulation by the government to tighten domestic control, but 80 per cent agreed with its veracity.<sup>125</sup>

How the Afghanistan policies of the Central Asian republics come to be influenced by the great powers and how they are implemented in practice, will be the subject of discussion in the next two chapters.

## Notes

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