

VALDAI DISCUSSION CLUB REPORT



Valdai | Discussion
Club

www.valdaiclub.com

A NEW STAGE OF THE AFGHAN CRISIS AND TAJIKISTAN'S SECURITY

Akbarsho Iskandarov, Kosimsho Iskandarov, Ivan Safranchuk

MOSCOW, AUGUST 2016

Authors

Akbarsho Iskandarov

Doctor of Political Science, Deputy Chairman of the Supreme Soviet, Acting President of the Republic of Tajikistan (1990–1992); Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the Republic of Tajikistan; Chief Research Fellow of A. Bahovaddinov Institute of Philosophy, Political Science and Law of the Academy of Science of the Republic of Tajikistan

Kosimsho Iskandarov

Doctor of Historical Science; Head of the Department of Iran and Afghanistan of the Rudaki Institute of Language, Literature, Oriental and Written Heritage of the Academy of Science of the Republic of Tajikistan

Ivan Safranchuk

PhD in Political Science; associate professor of the Department of Global Political Processes of the Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO-University) of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia; member of the Council on Foreign and Defense Policy

Contents

The growth of instability in northern Afghanistan and its causes.....	3
Anti-government elements (AGE) in Afghan provinces bordering on Tajikistan.....	5
Threats to Central Asian countries	7
Tajikistan's approaches to defending itself from threats in the Afghan sector.....	10

The general situation in Afghanistan has been deteriorating during the last few years. The year 2015 saw several record low points at once. Anti-government elements (AGE) gained control over a larger stretch of Afghan territory than at any time since 2001.¹ It was the first time that they captured Kunduz, the administrative center of Kunduz Province. The Afghan Security Forces (ASF) were able to regain control over the city only

after two weeks of fierce fighting and not before AGE carried out an orderly retreat. In 2015, AGE seized another 23 administrative centers in different districts (as compared with only four in 2014).² In 2015, the greatest number of civilian losses was registered for the entire statistical period (nearly 90 percent of casualties were inflicted by AGE and the ASF): 11,002 people, with 3,545 dead and 7,457 wounded.³

The Growth of Instability in Northern Afghanistan and Its Causes

Afghanistan's southern, southeastern and eastern provinces (adjacent to Pakistan) remain some of the most dangerous and unstable areas in absolute terms. Dynamically, however, the situation appears different.

In provinces adjacent to Pakistan, the number of civilian losses in the ASF-AGE conflicts has increased by 35 % since 2009, and by 530 % in provinces adjacent to Central Asian countries (northeastern, northern and western Afghanistan). In 2009, losses in regions contiguous with Central Asia were 80 % lower than in regions bordering on Pakistan; in 2015, the figure dropped to just 23.1 %.^{???} The dynamics are clear.

In recent years, the situation has been stable, and has even slightly improved in regions contiguous with Pakistan. In areas adjacent to Central Asia, the situation has been steadily deteriorating since 2009, and particularly rapidly in the last year or two.

¹ SIGAR's *Quarterly Report to the US Congress*. Jan. 30, 2016. P. iii.

The surge in civilian losses as a result of the ASF-AGE conflict in the northeastern, northern and western provinces reflects an intensification of armed clashes between the governmental and pro-government armed groups, on the one hand, and the armed opposition, on the other. The question is, where has the armed opposition in these provinces obtained the resources for stepping up combat operations? There can be just one answer: the number of militants is on the rise because these provinces, primarily Badakhshan, Takhar and Kunduz, have been infiltrated by armed groups from Pakistan and eastern provinces of Afghanistan.

The official explanation for this migration is that in recent years (particularly after the December 2014 terrorist attack

² *As of late 2015, the ASF had regained control over 20 administrative centers. Afghanistan. Annual Report. Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict*. Kabul, Feb. 2016. P. 7.

³ *Afghanistan. Annual Report. Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict*. Kabul, Feb. 2016. P. 1.

in Peshawar), Pakistan has been more actively conducting military operations against entrenched extremist groups in Waziristan. Fleeing from the advancing Pakistani military, squads of militants have crossed to mountainous regions of Afghanistan, fanning out to eastern provinces and Badakhshan, where it is easy to hide. From Badakhshan they later headed for Takhar and the comfortably Pashtun-populated Kunduz Province. The militants were actually pushed out of Pakistan. For obvious reasons, the Pakistani army did not pursue them in Afghanistan, whereas the ASF failed to intercept the armed fugitives in the mountains. Eventually they gained a foothold in Afghanistan and joined various AGE.

This explanation is based on a number of verifiable facts. The Pakistani army had indeed stepped up its military operations in Waziristan and has scored successes. Quite logically, the armed groups in the mountains began a retreat to eastern Afghanistan. Pashtun tribes have always migrated across the border, which they don't recognize as such. But this version fails to answer several questions.

For example, why, as the militants migrate from western Pakistan to the eastern Afghan provinces, are there no signs of intensified local warfare between the ASF and AGE? (On the contrary, fighting seems even to be subsiding.) Why don't the Pashtun armed groups that cross from Pakistan to Afghanistan linger in eastern provinces, or seek to return to western Pakistan? Why don't they stay in their native Pashtunistan on both sides of the Afghan-Pakistani border? It's understandable why the Pashtun armed groups head for the heavily

Pashtun-populated central Afghanistan. But why are they making for the northeastern, northern and western provinces with predominant Tajik and, in some provinces, Uzbek populations? Even in the case of Kunduz, where Pashtuns predominate, why would the armed Pashtun groups move so far from Pakistan, whose army they have long and successfully confronted, and so far from Kabul, the headquarters of the regime with which they are at war?

The militants are being squeezed out of Pakistan. This should have led to a sharp exacerbation of security problems in Afghanistan's eastern provinces and later in other Pashtun-populated areas. But what is not quite clear from the official version is why this "squeeze" has brought about a radical deterioration in the northeastern and – to a slightly lesser extent – northern provinces.

Eventually the Afghan press and political circles offered another explanation, according to which the militants' migration and reinforcement of AGE is an organized rather than spontaneous process. You can often hear or read in Afghanistan that in the spring or summer of 2014, the Pakistani intelligence, the ISI, and the CIA, and later the ISI and the Afghan and Pakistani Taliban movements, signed a secret agreement on the redeployment of militants. Allegedly, the agreement provides for a corridor to Afghanistan to be left open to the armed groups being "pushed out" of Pakistan. These groups are even encouraged to cross to the northeastern, eastern and western provinces of Afghanistan. Certain variants of this version claim that Pakistan is not only "squeezing out" armed groups from Waziristan, but that it has also organized conveyance

to Afghanistan of Central Asian militants, who in recent years used to head to Syria and Iraq via Turkey to join the fight and who now cannot return home by the same route.

This “organized migration” version has many inconsistencies as well. For example, how can we explain the December 2014 terrorist attack in Peshawar, if secret agreements were in place earlier in the summer? Could it be that some Taliban chief simply “slammed the door?” In any case, the above version (and its variations) is widespread in Afghanistan, Pakistan and the neighboring Central Asian countries. It is largely through its prism that people look at and explain current events.

As usual, the situation in Afghanistan is highly intricate; there are controversial events and numerous interpretations of them. But a clear dynamic pattern is discernible over a period of several years. Near its borders with Central Asian countries, the situation has been deteriorating steadily since 2009, particularly in the last few years. In the northeastern areas contiguous with Tajikistan, this deterioration has been particularly pronounced over the last two years. In the meantime, the situation in areas adjacent to the Pakistani border remains complicated but stable, without a clear change for the worse, although it is to there that the militants were “pushed out” from Pakistan.

AGE in Afghan Provinces Bordering on Tajikistan

Four Afghan provinces have a common border with Tajikistan, and the situation has deteriorated in each of them over the last two years.

Two districts in Badakhshan – Warduj and Yumgan – are almost entirely under AGE control. In other districts, AGE control large territories. During 2015, AGE seized administrative centers in four districts. The strongest organizations in Badakhshan are the Haqqani Network and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar’s Islamic Party. But the leading role is played by the Taliban Movement (TM). The local Taliban-appointed governor, Qari Fasehuddin, coordinates most AGE operations in the province. AGE forces in Badakhshan are well-armed and have heavy weapons and military equipment. The remote, predominantly mountainous Badakhshan has become a base

of sorts for AGE forces operating in other northeastern and northern provinces. By all appearances, Badakhshan serves as a north-bound transit route for armed groups from Pakistan and eastern provinces of Afghanistan. Badakhshan sends militants and weapons to AGE in other northeastern and northern provinces. In addition, Badakhshan has emerged as an important “financial center” catering to AGE. Raghistan District is a scene of continuous infighting for gold-panning sites and emerald deposits. (Last year, AGE established control over the district’s administrative center.) The province hosts drug laboratories that are practically inaccessible to the ASF, and their proceeds are used to support AGE. Drugs are smuggled via Tajikistan, which leads to frequent clashes on the Tajik-Afghan border.

In Takhar, AGE are entrenched in Ishkamish, Yangi Kala, Darqad and Khwajah Ghar. Last year, they established control over the administrative centers of the latter two districts. The local Taliban-appointed governor, Qari Aminullah Tayyiba, has his headquarters in Ishkamish District. Last year's fighting in Takhar Province took place in three border districts – Yangi Kala, Khwajah Ghar and Darqad – in close proximity to the Tajik border. Residents of two border districts of Tajikistan's Khatlon Region – Panj District and Farkhor District – repeatedly told the media in 2015 that their houses had been shaken by shell bursts on the Afghan side. There were cases in which ASF shells landed on the Tajik side of the border (the authorities in Kabul promptly apologized). The Panj River contracts abruptly in a locality, where Afghanistan's Yangi Kala and Khwajah Ghar districts are contiguous with the Panj and Farkhor districts of Tajikistan.

Last fall, when engagements near the Tajik-Afghan border became particularly fierce, Tajik border guards were seriously concerned, lest this stretch of the Afghan border be taken under AGE control.

Most of Kunduz Province is controlled by the Taliban and other antigovernment armed groups. In 2015, AGE established control over the administrative centers of five out of seven districts, including the provincial capital. In 2016, AGE are in full control only of the center of the city of Kunduz. The situation in Kunduz is extremely fragile. This province is a rather comfortable haven for AGE, since certain districts are predominantly Pashtun-populated, with the Taliban enjoying support or at least neutrality from the local

population. The local Taliban-appointed governor, Mullah Abdul Salam, was in command of the seizure of Kunduz in September–October 2015. This was for the first time since 2001 that the Taliban succeeded in capturing a provincial administrative center. Nothing of the kind had been done in any province before. The Taliban held Kunduz from September 28 to October 13, 2015, when they retreated in a fairly organized manner under ASF pressure. In this case, the government forces were provided combat support by foreign units remaining in Afghanistan. This was a clear show of force by AGE. In Kunduz, AGE units captured a lot of weapons, including heavy weapons. AGE maintain strong positions in three districts of Kunduz bordering on Tajikistan's Khatlon Region (and they seized their administrative centers in 2015).

Balkh Province (bordering on Tajikistan, but mostly on Uzbekistan, and on a small section of border with Turkmenistan) remains relatively safe. Governor Atta Muhammad Nur, one of the most powerful Tajik field commanders, is keeping the situation under control for the time being. Balkh is one of two Afghan provinces bordering on Central Asian countries, where AGE failed to seize a single administrative center in 2015 (the other province is Herat). However AGE units have managed to set up camp in southwestern highlands. The local Taliban-appointed governor, Mavladi Yunus, is a prominent TM figure and a Quetta Shura member. The Chintal, Sholgara, Dawlatabad and Charbolak districts are where AGE units are concentrated; their total strength is estimated in the hundreds. Attempts by AGE to mass

their forces and organize a full-scale fortified area from which to threaten the provincial administrative center, Mazar-i-Sharif, were thwarted. Governor Nur was personally in charge of an operation against the militants in March 2016 that culminated in their dispersal. But they were not finished off and will most likely continue to consolidate their hold on southwestern Balkh Province.

What is interesting is not only the fact that AGE have become active all over Afghanistan and particularly in provinces bordering on Central Asian countries, but also certain particularities of this activity. As mentioned, AGE captured a total of 24 administrative centers in different districts in 2015, of which 15 were in provinces bordering on Central Asian countries and 11 in provinces bordering on Tajikistan. Out of 11 districts, where administrative centers were seized in Afghan provinces contiguous with Tajikistan, six are districts that border on Tajikistan. At the same time, AGE captured just four administrative centers (two in Kandahar

and two in Helmand) in restless southern Afghanistan. Another two were occupied in Farah Province, bordering on Iran in western Afghanistan. Only one administrative center was seized in unstable eastern Afghanistan (Nuristan Province), and not a single one in the destabilized central provinces.

The situation appears as follows. As they fight their way through eastern and central provinces, AGE are mostly focusing on securing their freedom of movement. In northeastern (and partially in western and southern) provinces, however, they are establishing permanent bases and seek to take power by occupying administrative centers. The Taliban feel safe in AGE-controlled districts and are perceived as the “authorities” by local populations. Taliban-appointed governors supervise both military and social efforts. Local populations are being actively lured away to the side of AGE. Particular attention is being placed on working with young people, including schoolchildren.

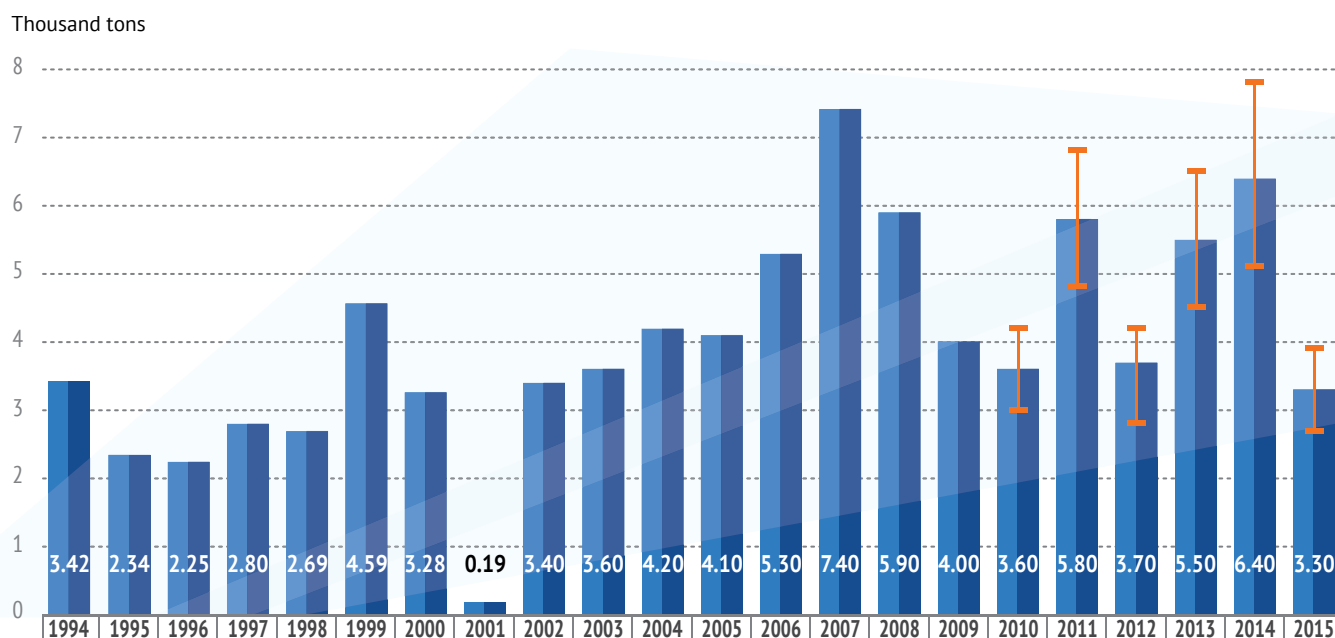
Threats to Central Asian Countries

The countries of Central Asia will not face a direct military threat from the main AGE forces if hostilities between the ASF and AGE continue or escalate.

It can be said with sufficient certainty that for now, the main task of AGE in western, northern and northeastern Afghanistan is to expand territories under their control, take power, impose their rules and, most

importantly, prepare to capture provincial administrative centers. Currently the main AGE forces do not intend to head north or west beyond Afghanistan's borders or attack Central Asian states. For this reason, a head-on attack by AGE on the borders of Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan can be practically ruled out until AGE establish full control over the Afghan provinces contiguous with the Central Asian

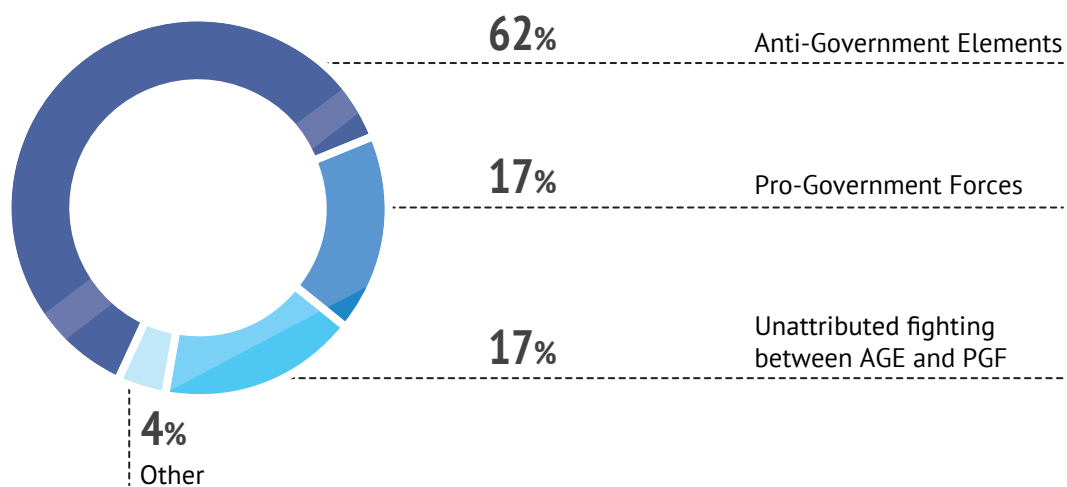
POTENTIAL OPIUM PRODUCTION IN AFGHANISTAN, 1994-2015



The high-low lines represent the upper and lower bounds of the confidence interval of the estimates. Figures refer to oven-dry opium

Production figures for 2006 to 2009 have been revised; see MCN/UNODC Afghanistan opium survey 2012

CIVILIAN DEATHS AND INJURIES BY PARTIES TO THE CONFLICT



Sources: UNODC and MCN/UNODC opium surveys

countries. At the same time, we cannot exclude the possibility of limited attacks by the main AGE forces, which might signal displeasure with the neighboring states' policies and/or be ordered by sponsors.

A continued ASF-AGE war presents two clear threats.

The first is drug trafficking across the Tajik and Turkmen borders (this cannot be done on the Uzbek border) with support from armed fighting groups. This is what Tajik and Turkmen border guards face regularly. In the future, pressure by militants covering drug trafficking operations can only grow. As they expand their zone of control, AGE will increasingly be involved in the drug business, taking it from the old drug mafia, and they will fight to lay drug routes to Tajikistan and Turkmenistan. As the ASF grow weaker and regional field commanders come to play a more important role in the war against AGE, the latter may also be increasingly involved in drug trafficking and smuggling to finance their forces. This will become a particularly grave problem as international aid to Kabul subsides. Cut off from this source of funding, field commanders will fall back on smuggling, the only available opportunity to make a quick buck, or they will ask outside partners for financial aid. The last fifteen years of foreign financial injections into Afghanistan have left major politicians and field commanders with considerable personal fortunes estimated in the hundreds of millions or even billions of dollars. In principle, upper-bracket field commanders can go on fighting as long as they have resources. But they are more likely to want to preserve their own fortunes and

draw for as long as possible on current, including shadow, sources of income.

The second threat is gradual infiltration of small groups of militants from AGE forces, including natives of post-Soviet countries. The main peril in this case is posed by young people who left Central Asian countries for the wars in Syria and Iraq over the last five years. At present, they can hardly use the official return routes. Some will settle in Turkey or other Muslim countries. But a number of militants in this category have been reported to have surfaced in Afghanistan. They will be inclined to return home by crossing the Afghan-Tajik or Afghan-Turkmen border. If successful, they will fan across the region to organize underground resistance and receive new militants from Afghanistan. Another likelihood is for militants hailing from the post-Soviet space to launch direct attacks, including with support from other AGE forces, to probe the border, project power or enable breakthroughs with groups consisting of dozens of militants, who may try to set up a base in certain areas (more likely, located far from the capital cities) in Tajikistan and Turkmenistan.

If AGE establish stable control over several Afghan provinces contiguous with Central Asian countries, the above threats will continue to exist and may even become aggravated. But some new ones will be added to them as well.

First, a refugee influx powered by tens of thousands of ethnic Turkmens, Uzbeks and Tajiks may occur. In this connection, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and particularly Tajikistan (where the inflow of ethnic Tajiks is likely to be particularly strong by virtue

of their large numbers) may be inclined to receive at least some part of the refugees, thus generating not only a social, but also, potentially, a grave political problem. A security problem is also possible, because a vast refugee flow may be accompanied by massive hostile infiltration.

Second, if AGE are successful, defeated field commanders may request permission to redeploy at least part of their rear services or even to withdraw some of their forces to neighboring Central Asian countries, such as Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. This decision will be difficult for certain of these governments. If, for political reasons, some of them agree, this would mean a new level of involvement of their country in the Afghan conflict.

Third, after consolidating their hold on Afghan provinces, the main AGE forces will consider the possibility of helping their ideological brethren and recent fellow combatants, who have left to organize an underground resistance in Central Asia. Communications will be maintained between the main AGE forces, their sponsors and the underground resistance fighters in Central Asia. If the underground organizations are strong enough to stage attacks, particularly in relative proximity to the Afghan border (in eastern Turkmenistan, southern Uzbekistan, Tajikistan or southern Kyrgyzstan), the main AGE forces are likely to render them support. If so, this will amount to a major attack by AGE forces on Tajikistan (or via its territory on Kyrgyzstan), Uzbekistan or Turkmenistan.

Tajikistan's Approaches to Defending Itself from Threats in the Afghan Sector

Tajikistan has traditionally focused on protecting its border with Afghanistan, viewing instability beyond the border as dangerous for itself. After 1993, when units of the United Tajik Opposition (UTO) left for Afghanistan, border protection has been important for the safety of the official authorities. Following the seizure of power by the Taliban in Kabul in 1996 and the signing of peace agreements with the UTO in 1997, Tajikistan, in cooperation with Russia, Iran and India, played an important role in supporting the Northern Alliance in northern Afghanistan. Even then, border protection was a priority

for the Tajik government. Russia closely cooperated with Tajikistan in this regard, with its border guards directly involved in border protection efforts.

After the Taliban was toppled in the fall of 2001, moods began to shift. Leaders of Tajikistan believed that peace and order could be established in Afghanistan. As before, Dushanbe was focused on border protection, but it reduced its cooperation with Russia by having Russian border guards withdrawn from the Tajik-Afghan border in 2005. Simultaneously, Tajikistan was being carried away by the idea of "a pivot to the south."

Transport links between Kazakhstan and Russia via Uzbekistan have always been complicated on account of the difficult relations between Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. Roads passing through Kyrgyzstan that circumvent Uzbekistan are in the mountains, and even their most intense exploitation cannot replace a railway. It was believed that a way out of the predicament, which was even described as a “transport blockade,” could be found in routes leading to Pakistan and India via Afghanistan. In line with these moods, Tajikistan joined bridge and road construction projects that would ensure it closer ties with Afghanistan. The cultural and linguistic affinity between Tajiks and Afghans (particularly Afghan Tajiks) was only contributing to the growth of these moods. Tajikistan and Afghanistan established broad unofficial human contacts. According to some statistics, Tajik consulates in Afghanistan have issued between 20 and 30 thousand visas per year during the last decade.

At the same time, Tajik border guards sought to keep the border protection regime at an appropriate level. Moreover, Tajikistan again began expanding cooperation with Russia and the CSTO after 2010. It is fair to say that Tajikistan emphasized national border protection efforts, albeit in close cooperation with the regional security organization, the CSTO. In cases where promoting economic ties with Afghanistan clashes with security interests, Dushanbe opts for security.⁴ In recent years, border-crossing regulations have been made

more stringent, which caused complications and displeasure on the part of Afghan business people. However, in strengthening the Afghan border, Tajikistan refused to bring back Russian border guards, which was discussed in 2010–2011. Experts believe that Tajikistan did so in deference to the US stance.⁵

Dushanbe felt the sting of security threats in the fall of 2015, when AGE units not only became entrenched in the Badakhshan, Tahar and Kunduz provinces bordering on Tajikistan, but also took under their control some areas located in direct proximity to the border. On October 6, 2015 (with AGE in control of the city of Kunduz for a week and consolidating their positions in six border districts in the Kunduz and Tahar provinces), President Emomali Rahmon of Tajikistan met with President Vladimir Putin in Sochi. He told his Russian counterpart: “Today I would like to talk about security issues in the CSTO’s area of responsibility, because the Tajik-Afghan border is part of this area. The situation in Afghanistan grows worse with each passing day. In fact, there are hostilities along more than 60 percent of the border opposite Tajikistan and the neighboring countries. We are highly concerned, and therefore, during our meeting today, I would like to discuss precisely the security issues in the region.”⁶

However, while cooperating with the CSTO on security issues, Tajikistan

⁴ Сафранчук И.А. Таджикистан и Туркменистан: разные подходы к защите границы с ИРА // Большая Игра: политика, бизнес, безопасность в Центральной Азии. 2015. № 6(45). P. 39.

⁵ George Gavrillis. *Afghan Narcotrafficking. The State of Afghanistan's Borders*. East-West Institute. April 2015. P. 22-23.

⁶ Transcript (excerpt): Meeting with President Emomali Rahmon of Tajikistan. The President of Russia's Official Web Resource. October 6, 2015, 19.45. Sochi. <http://www.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/50453> (last access May 3, 2016).

continues to pin great hopes on Kabul preserving a viable government that would be able to maintain order in the country. Spring 2016 provided Tajikistan some hope in this regard. In the course of several operations, the ASF managed to expand governmental control in the Kunduz, Tahar and Badakhshan provinces.

It is of particular importance for Dushanbe that in the spring of 2016, AGE were dislodged from areas in direct proximity of the Tajik border. Active combat operations are no longer conducted, with AGE units shifting their camps to the south. However, it is too optimistic of the official Afghan authorities to claim that they have completely cleared of AGE the districts in Tahar and Kunduz that border on Tajikistan. As is evident from the experience of the last two years, the ASF can scatter AGE units and frustrate their plans, but they are unable to cripple them or undermine their positions. Though retreating under government pressure, AGE retain their combat capability.

As mentioned, it is doubtful that AGE would at this stage storm the borders of the Central Asian countries. They are focusing on establishing governments in the border provinces and therefore tend to take control over administrative centers. So far, they need access to the border for general political (to show off their power) and economic (to derive additional benefits from legal trade and smuggling) reasons. Therefore, dislodging AGE from the border is good news. But they are still firmly entrenched in Kunduz, Tahar and Badakhshan, this despite the successful ASF operations in the spring of this year.

In the last decade, Tajikistan has sought to strike a balance between reliable border protection and promotion of economic/humanitarian ties with Afghanistan. In different periods, Tajikistan has shifted this balance, but it has once again prioritized security in the last few years. In so doing, Tajikistan provides border security in cooperation with the CSTO.

At the same time, Dushanbe, for all its border protection efforts, doesn't seem to be willing to build an impenetrable wall between itself and Afghanistan. To some extent, it will be inclined to become involved in Afghan affairs and "play" on the Afghan territory to minimize risks for its borders.

For the time being, Tajikistan prioritizes cooperation with the official authorities in Kabul. But if the central authorities are ultimately paralyzed by a political crisis, Tajikistan is likely to vacillate between coming to terms with certain representatives of AGE and supporting friendly field commanders fighting AGE. The latter policy could both be pursued on a limited scale and escalate into a program to organize a full-blown "buffer zone" in northeastern and northern Afghanistan that would contain AGE on distant approaches to the border. The "buffer zone" can be handled with both hard and soft power methods, the latter including aid programs for local populations to maintain their practical interest in and moral resolve for resisting AGE.

Thus, Tajikistan can consider several options with regard to Afghanistan, but will eventually end up with whatever can be carried out if partners prepared for an active regional policy are found.