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US Secretary of State in Central Asia

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On 21-22 October, the US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton paid a visit to Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, where she met with presidents Islam Karimov and Emomalii Rahmon. The talks were focused on Afghanistan, particularly these countries' participation in the so-called 'Northern Distribution Network' (NDN), a corridor of supplies to coalition forces, and on economic cooperation with their southern neighbour, including energy projects.

Commentary

- Central Asia is playing an increasingly important role in American policy towards Afghanistan. The northern supply corridor, which was activated in 2009, serves as a logistics base for US and NATO operations. Currently, approximately 60% of cargo for the mission in Afghanistan comes through the Central Asian countries, giving the US and NATO an alternative to a politically and militarily unstable Pakistan. (The aim is to raise that figure to 75%, excluding weapons and ammunition.) The northern corridor may also be used as a route for gradual withdrawal from Afghanistan by 2014. After that date, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan may also act as a buffer zone, which US military aid is intended to support.

- Secretary Clinton's visit to Tashkent (her second since last December) is a continuation of the process of repairing relations with Uzbekistan, which after a period of close cooperation in the years 2001-2005 cooled dramatically against the background of the Andijan massacre in May 2005. Relations thawed in 2009 when Tashkent agreed to participate in the NDN and allowed US forces to use the German-leased air base in Termez, as well as the Navoi airport administered by a Korean airline. Currently, despite sharp criticism from human rights organisations, Washington is taking a number of steps aimed at further rapprochement with Uzbekistan. These include the abolition of restrictions on military aid, introduced after the Andijan massacre; in addition to its purely military dimension, this move also has political significance.

- For Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, cooperation with the US on issues concerning Afghanistan is profitable from the economic, political, and security standpoints. The US supports the transport and energy projects which link these states to Afghanistan, and has been buying local goods and services and paying transit fees. Examples of this cooperation include the construction of the railway line to Mazar-i-Sharif in Afghanistan, and US

support for the planned CASA 1000 project (the transmission of electricity to Afghanistan from Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan). In political terms, cooperation with the US strengthens these countries' legitimacy in the international arena, and increases their room for manoeuvre in external policy.

- The USA's current good relations with Uzbekistan and Tajikistan do not presuppose continued cooperation with these countries, even during the withdrawal from Afghanistan by 2014. Both countries have unpredictable policies, and are vulnerable to pressure from Russia and China who disapprove of the American military-political presence in the region (although Beijing's pressure is much more discreet). The internal stability of both Central Asian countries is also uncertain, for reasons including internal tensions in Tajikistan, and the growing problem of who will succeed President Karimov.