

Russia's plays up the Afghan threat in Central Asia

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On 13 May the Collective Rapid Reaction Forces of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) launched exercises in Tajikistan. Over two days approximately 1,500 troops were sent to Tajikistan from Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan, among other countries (2,500 soldiers in total participated in the exercise to test the capacity to rapidly dispatch CSTO troops). Turkmenistan, in turn, is militarising its border with Afghanistan – additional military forces are being pulled in from other regions of the country, local inhabitants are being conscripted under the pretext of military exercises, reinforcements and fire positions are being constructed around strategic objects. In Tajikistan foreign tourists were forbidden to enter the Gorno-Badakhshan region bordering Afghanistan.

Commentary

- The situation in the north of Afghanistan has deteriorated since the beginning of the year. Following an effective operation by Pakistani forces in North Waziristan in summer 2014 the terrorist organisations based there and originating from Central Asia – the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) and the Islamic Jihad Union – were forced to flee to the north of Afghanistan, mainly to the provinces of Kunduz, Badghis and Badakhshan. Working in cooperation with Taliban forces, they carried out a series of spectacular attacks on government forces and seized control of certain areas (including those bordering Turkmenistan).
- The response from the states of Central Asia has been dictated by the fear that the IMU and their Taliban allies from Afghanistan might attack. In the short term this scenario is quite unlikely above all because these organisations have not attained their objectives in Afghanistan, which is a priority for them. Despite this, instability in the Afghan provinces bordering Turkmenistan and Tajikistan is aggravating the already troubling situation on the border, above all due to cross-border criminal activity (mainly drug smuggling).
- Regardless of whether it is well-founded or not, the leaders of Central Asia are genuinely fearful of being attacked by Islamist radicals from Afghanistan. Russia is trying to take advantage of this to increase its influence in the area of security in the region. Moscow is intensifying co-operation within the CSTO, presenting it as the only military force capable of neutralising the above mentioned threats and attempting to force the states which are not CSTO members (Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan) to enter into institutional collaboration. Furthermore, Russia is trying to compel the countries in the region to make concessions in exchange for arms supplies or security guarantees (e.g. the issue of the Russian

Border Patrol returning to the Tajik-Afghan border is constantly being raised—the Russian Border Patrol was withdrawn here in 2005). Russia is also playing the Islamic State (IS) card, since this organisation has been receiving more and more volunteers from Central Asia to fight in their ranks in Syria. Although in the case of Afghanistan this issue is purely declarative (some local commanders in the north of Afghanistan who are in conflict with the Taliban have declared that they are part of IS, but they have nothing in common with them), Moscow is using it for propaganda purposes in order to increase the atmosphere of threat in Central Asia.