

Central Asia, Kashmir Face New Jihadi Threat; Concerns in Russia

by Ramtanu Maitra

Oct. 6—Along the Line of Control (LoC) in the disputed state of Jammu and Kashmir, Indian troops have been engaged now for more than a month, battling the terrorists who are infiltrating from Pakistan. India claimed that rebel incursions into Kashmir have risen over the past year, feeding an armed revolt there. Early this week, at a press conference in Srinagar, the principal city in the Kashmir Valley, Lt. Gen. Gurmit Singh, leader of the Indian Army's 15 Corps, which is responsible for operations in the Valley, told a news conference, "The army is fighting the largest group of infiltrators, including some special troops on the Line of Control with Pakistan in Indian territory." "It's one of the longest operations in Kashmir," he added.

There are also reports that hundreds of jihadis, controlled by organized terrorist groups and aided by Pakistan's military and intelligence, are now poised to enter the Indian part of Kashmir, before Winter snow makes such infiltration more difficult.

In Russia, worries about increasing terrorist infiltration have been expressed at the highest level. On Oct. 5, Viktor Ivanov, head of the Federal Drug Control Services, told the Russian media that experts believe "foreign legionnaire mercenaries in

Syria ... will rush toward the Caucasus," once they have nothing to do in Syria. These mercenaries pose a threat to Russia's North Caucasus region, and may, in the future, organize Afghan drug-trafficking routes through the region, Ivanov added.

These developments may be seen as harbingers of things to come, as British-Saudi terror networks rede-

FIGURE 1
Kashmir Region



The Line of Control is shown as a broken line, separating the Pakistani and Indian sections of Jammu and Kashmir.

ploy and expand with the winding down of the U.S./NATO Afghan war.

Russian Concern

It is likely that Ivanov's statement stems from a recent report that Dokku Umarov, a jihadi leader in the southern Russian/North Caucasus provinces of Chechnya, Ingushetia, Dagestan, and Kabardino-Balkaria, has agreed to a deal with Emir Salautdin, who controls North Caucasus fighters in Syria, for those militants to return to Russia to fight under his command. Umarov has proclaimed the North Caucasus to be an Islamist state, calling it Imarat Kavkaz, which means "Caucasus Emirates" ("Russia's 'outsourced' jihadis come home,"

Dmitri Shlapentokh, *Asia Times*, Sept. 23 2013).

Worries in Moscow about the ISAF (International Security Assistance Force) troop withdrawal from Afghanistan, and the prospect of jihadi fighters returning from Syria, are not without substance. There has been deterioration in security in the troubled North Caucasus. Gunmen, in late August, assassinated the top regional security official in Ingushetia as he was being driven to work, AFP reported. Pro-Kremlin authorities in Ingushetia have been fighting an extremist-tinged insurgency that claims dozens of lives every year.

Umarov, in July, called for militants to stage attacks against a range of targets which include the 2014 Sochi Olympic Games. Sochi is in immediate proximity to the Caucasus, which also includes the regions of Dagestan and Chechnya where the Kremlin fought two separatist wars over the past 20 years (Shlapentokh, *Asia Times* Sept. 23 2013).

The home-grown terrorists who operate in the North Caucasus, added to the infiltration by terrorists funded by Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and other Gulf states, and sheltered and harbored by Islamabad, are an additional worry for the Russians. Last October, while visiting India, Deputy Prime Minister Dmitri Rogozin told the Indian media that "thousands of terrorists and fundamentalists will seek refuge in Afghanistan as well as the region around the country... It [Afghanistan] may



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Jihadi leader Dokku Umarov has called for attacks against a range of targets which include the 2014 Sochi Olympic Games.

change the situation drastically around the region and for countries like Tajikistan, Kazakstan, and Central Asia."

Efforts To Strengthen Central Asian Security

In recent days, Russian President Vladimir Putin has expressed his concerns over the draw-down of multi-national troops from Afghanistan, which he said might cause more instability along Russia's southern flank. Last month, he warned former Soviet allies that the Islamist militancy fueling the war in Syria could reach their countries, some of which have Muslim majorities. On Aug. 2, the Russian news agency RIA Novosti reported Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu saying that Presi-

dent Putin has instructed the Russian military to assess the risks of the withdrawal of U.S. and international coalition troops from Afghanistan, and to help Tajikistan face potential threats after the pullout.

"President Vladimir Putin's orders are straightforward: to assess all risks and to help the Tajik armed forces face these risks," Shoigu said. GRU (Main Intelligence Directorate) head Lt. Gen. Igor Sergun told RIA Novosti that the situation in Afghanistan posed a "serious challenge to international stability," and that the ISAF withdrawal in 2014 could also increase the threat of terrorism and religious extremism.

This Russian concern showed up in Central Asia when Tajikistan's parliament ratified a deal with Russia on Oct. 1 to prolong the rent-free lease on Base 201—Russia's biggest military deployment abroad. A total of 7,000 Russian troops are stationed at three military facilities, collectively known as Base 201, which opened in 2004: in the capital, Dushanbe; the southwestern city of Qurgonteppa, some 100 kilometers from Dushanbe; and Kulob, about 200 kilometers to the southwest of the capital.

The agreement was signed in the presence of Putin and his Tajikistan counterpart Imomali Rakhmon last October. In addition to extending the lease for Base 201, the agreement said Russia will also help modernize Tajikistan's army with equipment and officer train-

ing, Tajikistan Defense Minister Sherali Khairulloyev told reporters.

Though not as threatened as India or Central Asia, China has reasons to feel concerns as well. Jean-Pierre Cabestan, a specialist in Chinese foreign policy in Central Asia at Hong Kong Baptist University, said the recent visit of President Xi Jinping to Central Asia was “a signal China wants to send that this region is a priority.” “Beijing views stability in Xinjiang and Central Asia as interlinked,” said Deirdre Tynan, Central Asia project director for the International Crisis Group. “China’s approach to Central Asia’s security issues has been one of caution and it has resisted becoming involved. But Beijing may find that its role in the region becomes more complicated as the U.S. drawdown in Afghanistan gets underway,” Tynan added (“Impending Afghanistan drawdown heightens China’s Xinjiang worries,” *The Siasat Daily*, Oct. 1, 2013).

In April 2012, Zhang Chunxian, Communist Party secretary of the Muslim-majority Xinjiang-Uighur autonomous region, had alluded to the same threat. At the time, he addressed a high-level government meeting in Urumqi, capital of China’s western Xinjiang province, outlining new plans to boost security deployments in remote areas and towns near the border with the Pakistan-held part of Jammu and Kashmir, to combat “growing” and “imported” extremism. At the time, Xinhua quoted an unnamed security expert saying the government was concerned by “growing religious extremism” that was “imported from neighboring volatile central and southwest Asian regions.”

Larger Regional Threat

Rohan Gunaratna, professor of Security Studies at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), agrees that the global threat that worries Russia, India, Central Asia, and, to some extent, China, is emerging with the impending 2014 withdrawal of the U.S.-led coalition forces from Afghanistan. This threat configuration will be shaped by the renewed activities of the Taliban, al-Qaeda al-Jihad, and a dozen like-minded groups located on the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, which have survived a decade of global counterinsurgency and counterterrorism measures. They are slowly but steadily returning to Afghanistan, and re-establishing the sanctuary they had pre-9/11 (“The Emerging Global Threat Landscape—Analysis,” RSIS, Jan. 14, 2013).

Gunaratna says that the number of insurgents in

conflict with the state will turn Afghanistan into another Syria by late 2013, and into 2014. The complex and deadly mixture of competing forces will include over 20,000 fighters from two dozen jihadist groups on the Pakistan-Afghanistan border, mostly in North Waziristan. These include the Afghan Taliban, the Haqqani network, Hezb-i-Islami, Pakistani Taliban (TTP), al-Qaeda al-Jihad, Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), Islamic Jihad Union (IJU), and Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP).

Gunaratna points out that the present metastable situation will change following the withdrawal in 2014 of the bulk of the U.S./NATO troops. He says the developments in Afghanistan will be the most influential. If the jihadists regain sanctuary in Afghanistan, it will affect not only Western security, but Asia’s rise. Driven by success, returning fighters will reignite conflicts in Kashmir, Xinjiang, Uzbekistan, Pakistan’s tribal areas, and other Muslim lands. Battle-hardened fighters will threaten Asia. Seasoned by fighting Western armies in Afghanistan, they will contest Asian armies, law enforcement, and intelligence services, which are 20 years behind Western militaries.

While some of the terrorists have made their way into the area of the LoC separating the Pakistan-held part of Jammu and Kashmir from the India-held part, the porous northern Afghanistan border with Uzbekistan and Tajikistan will enable the IMU to wreak havoc in Central Asia. Its collaborators in Central Asia such as the Jundullah (Soldiers of Allah) have bared their fangs in countries such as Kazakstan. Like the IMU, the Jundullah has its base in border areas of Pakistan and Afghanistan, and is active in Balochistan.

Moreover, these Central Asian organizations, with their international links to al-Qaeda and various Af-Pak organizations such as the TTP, Lashkar-e-Toiba, Hizbul Mujahideen, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, and the Haqqani network, make them more mobile and lethal in conducting violent operations. Besides fermenting terrorist activities in Central Asia and Afghanistan, these Central Asian organizations have been accused of bombing Pakistani cities.

Terrorist Linkages Within Pakistan

Due to its well-organized involvement in the Afghan opium and heroin trade, the Taliban and the Haqqani network have used Pakistani Taliban operatives as surrogates and helpers. There were also reports that the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, the Taliban, and the

Haqqani network members interchange roles and perform activities for each other. It is most likely that, if the Taliban returns in some form, the destructive role of IMU and Jundullah will grow in Central Asia and the surrounding regions. The IMU issued an official statement in August, titled, "Today We Need Your Prayers," which, aside from the group's name, never mentioned Uzbekistan. Instead, it advertised its recent battles alongside the Taliban in Badakhshan (Afghanistan), and emphasized the IMU's role in fighting against Pakistan's central government ("The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan Issues a New Threat," Noah Tucker, *registan.net*, Aug. 22, 2013).

As of now, terrorist activities within Central Asia have not increased noticeably. While Russia's North Caucasus is experiencing increased terrorist activity, mostly originated by local networks, India is facing the first wave of terrorist violence in the India-held part of Kashmir.

What has made the situation more complex, is Pakistan's perilous internal security situation, which is not expected to improve in the near future. It is anybody's guess how many organized terrorist groups presently function virtually unchallenged within Pakistan, and whom they plan to target in the coming days. It is known that some of these groups were created, nurtured, and protected by the powers-that-be in Pakistan, with the sole purpose of killing the Shi'as, considered as "apostates" by the jihad-spawning Sunni terrorist groups, who have been brainwashed and funded by the Saudis, who promote the extreme Wahhabi/Deobandi varieties of Islam. To these "jihadis," killing fellow Muslim Shi'as is serving the cause of Allah. Other groups were created exclusively to take on "Hindu India" by undermining and "bleeding" India in the state of Jammu and Kashmir, with the help of willing locals.

A case in point is Ilyas Kashmiri, whose reported death by a U.S. missile attack in 2011 is yet to be confirmed; Kashmiri founded Brigade 313, later an operational arm of al-Qaeda, within his jihadist organization Harkat ul-Jihad al-Islami (HuJI). After the killing of Osama bin Laden, Kashmiri formed a new terror group called Lashkar-e-Osama to avenge the death of the al-Qaeda leader. In August 2011, India's junior Minister for Home Affairs, Jitendra Singh, told the Rajya Sabha (the upper house of the Indian parliament) that Ilyas Kashmiri was plotting to attack India: "There are some intelligence inputs, though not spe-

cific, regarding a plan to target India by al-Qaeda and Ilyas Kashmiri, an al-Qaeda-HuJI operative, and his group," Singh said.

What is disturbing is the direct ties between the Pakistani military and the terrorists, particularly the anti-India terrorists such as Kashmiri, who was a commando in Pakistan's Special Services Group (SSG), and was once rewarded by Gen. Pervez Musharraf as a hero for a terror attack in Indian Kashmir.

Moreover, a slew of terrorists, who were recruited from the Mideast, North Africa, and Asia, and funded, trained, and harbored by the Americans, British, Saudis, and Pakistanis, continue to flourish inside the vast, virtually ungoverned areas of Pakistan. These terrorists had been supplied with small arms by China and other countries, to beat back the Red Army from Afghanistan in the 1980s. Now, they can be found in Lahore, Karachi, Quetta, Peshawar, and most parts of the Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa province of Pakistan.

The payroll for the terrorists is not met by Islamabad, but by Riyadh and other Sunni Gulf countries. Pakistan, however, shelters them. The Gulf countries oppose the establishment of a supranational Muslim Caliphate because it would take away their cushy family-run "kingdoms," but they fund the jihadis who seek a Caliphate. Most of these jihadis are paid to convert all Muslims to the Wahhabi doctrine, and to do whatever is necessary to set up a Caliphate that would stretch from the Maghreb in Africa, to the Volga River in Russia—a dream that will never materialize, no matter how many hundreds of thousands are slaughtered, but pursuit of which keeps the jihadis away from the Gulf kingdoms. The aim of this "jihad" is to eliminate all those who either do not accept, or oppose, their mission.

Intelligence reports indicate that terrorists have begun their migration northward from Pakistan's ungoverned FATA (Federally Administered Tribal Areas). The Aug. 6 killing of the Senior Superintendent of Police, Muhammad Hilal Khan, and two army officers, in an ambush in the Diamer District of Gilgit-Baltistan in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir, is an indicator that Gilgit-Baltistan, bordering the Indian-held part of Kashmir, has become a stronghold of jihadi terrorists. The assassinated officials were involved in the investigation of the June 22, 2013, massacre of ten foreign climbers, among them Ukrainians, Chinese, and a Russian, at Nanga Parbat, by 16 militants, reportedly dressed as Gilgit-Baltistan scouts.