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# The Afghanization of Central Asia

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President Barack Obama's decision to escalate the US military presence in Afghanistan has generated heated debate. Largely lost in the swirl of discussion is the surge's hidden cost on neighboring Central Asian states.

US officials now view Central Asia as instrumental to operations in Afghanistan. Over the last year, the US military has established the so-called Northern Distribution Network (NDN) - a set of commercial agreements with each of the Central Asian states to allow the transit of cargo to supply US forces in Afghanistan. The creation of this web of re-supply routes was deemed essential after militants succeeded during summer of 2008 in seriously disrupting the main US supply routes from Pakistan into Afghanistan. [[For background see the Eurasia Insight archive](#) <sup>[4]</sup>].

A key assumption that underpins NDN, as envisioned by the US commander, Gen. David Petraeus, is that the provision of economic benefits to Central Asian states will give their governments a clear stake in the coalition campaign in Afghanistan. NDN proponents also claim that the network will improve Central Asia's ailing transportation infrastructure and improve the economic fortunes of remote and impoverished parts of the region by linking them to trans-national trade routes.

Already, the US military is shipping an estimated 30 percent of its Afghan supplies through NDN and hopes to move tens of thousands of containers a year. Under the troop surge, NDN will become even more critical to US war efforts.

But by conceptualizing Central Asia as a logistical appendage to Afghanistan, US planners are missing an opportunity. The Pentagon, and Washington in general, is not formulating a longer-term strategy that confronts the internal challenges of each of the region's countries. Even worse, US policy planners may be unwittingly exporting Afghanistan's security and governance crisis to its Central Asian neighbors. [[For background see the Eurasia Insight archive](#) <sup>[5]</sup>].

First, NDN supply routes within Central Asia may become potential targets for militant groups that are aligned with the Taliban. In September, the Taliban hijacked two fuel tankers near Kunduz that had just been shipped via the Tajikistan route. German forces called for air strikes, but the ensuing attack killed over one hundred civilians and turned into a public relations nightmare for the US and ISAF forces.

As militants currently destabilize areas of Northern Afghanistan, areas that had been secure for years, the Afghan theater of conflict threatens to expand to the areas bordering Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan.

Second, NDN is likely to further mute US criticisms of the Central Asian countries' deteriorating democratic and human rights records. For example, in July the United States remained conspicuously silent about deeply flawed presidential elections in Kyrgyzstan because of Washington's need to maintain good working relations with the Kyrgyz government, especially to retain access to the Manas Transit Center.

Moreover, Central Asian regimes now have an incentive to highlight, or even exaggerate threats to the NDN in order to secure additional engagement and military assistance from the United States. [[For background see the Eurasia Insight archive](#) <sup>[6]</sup>].

Finally, at a time when various US federal agencies are accelerating their anti-corruption efforts in Afghanistan, NDN threatens to feed corrupt practices in Central Asia through its contracting procedures across the border. NDN's expansion could replicate the "Karzai problem" - externally supported leaders who are viewed as corrupt and illegitimate by their citizens -- in Central Asia. The US military has waived standard contracting procedures in order to include more local Central Asian firms in these supply accords.

"Contracting locally," however, means funneling hundreds of millions of dollars to businesses that are reportedly owned or controlled by members of the region's ruling elites. [[For background see the Eurasia Insight archive](#) <sup>[7]</sup>].

Some US officials acknowledge the potential problems that NDN may create, but argue that supplying troops in Afghanistan must take priority over concerns about Central Asia's human rights, democracy and governance. If that is the case, then the surge's negative impact on Central Asia should be assessed honestly and tabulated as part of the mounting cost of implementing President Obama's new Afghanistan strategy.

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