

# Hybrid Wars and “Color Revolutions” in the Central Asian Heartland: Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan

## Part 3

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Global Research, April 11, 2016

[Oriental Review](#) 8 April 2016

Region: [Asia](#), [Russia and FSU](#)

Theme: [Oil and Energy](#), [US NATO War](#)

[Agenda](#)

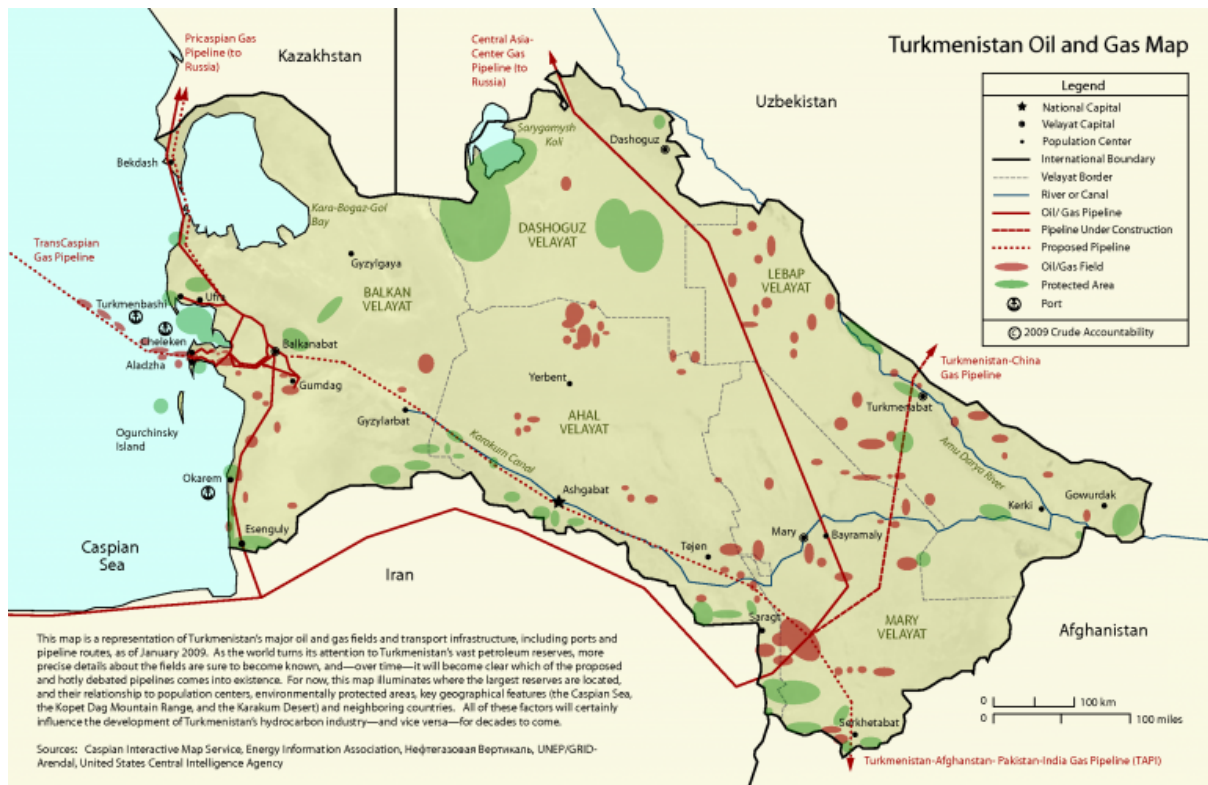
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Turkmenistan:

The threat facing Turkmenistan is less of a Color Revolution than an Unconventional War. The catalyst for this conflict would be a terrorist invasion coming from Afghanistan that unexpectedly sweeps northwards along the Murgab River. Such an offensive doesn't even have to reach the national capital in order to be successful, since all that it really needs to do is capture the city of Mary, the capital of the resource-rich Mary Region. This part of the country contains the [lion's share](#) of Turkmenistan's gas reserve, which includes the massive and decades-long functioning Dauletabad Field and the newly discovered Galkynysh Field, the latter being the [world's second-largest find](#).

It wouldn't be all that difficult for terrorists to take over this plot of land either, since the Murgab River is scattered with tiny villages along its banks that could provide cover from government airstrikes and places to provoke pitched battles from. The fertile land nearby is endowed with agricultural potential that's surely being stored somewhere closely accessible, and this could help feed the occupying forces until greater conquests are made. In short, the Murgab River is the most militarily and logistically sustainable route for an ISIL-like invasion of Turkmenistan, and it leads straight to the gas heart of Eurasia that's critically connected to China and will possibly be linked to India in the coming decade as well.

The risk of terrorists gaining control of the largest source of China's gas imports and possibly even destroying the facilities is too much for multipolar strategists in Beijing and Moscow to bear, and it's assured that they've already engaged in some sort of unofficial contingency planning with their counterparts in Ashgabat. An anti-terrorist Chinese intervention is largely precluded due to geographic distances and a lack of support and logistics facilities en route, but the Russian military has no such hindrances and would be much more likely to assist the Turkmen authorities if called upon to do so. This is of course a last resort and would only be commissioned if Turkmenistan proves itself unable to stem the terrorist tide and defend its gas infrastructure, but such an event is most assuredly being planned for just in case the Turkmen-Afghan border proves to be just as fragile of a defense against terrorists as the Syrian-Iraqi one was before it.



## Kazakhstan:

Kazakhstan and the other three remaining states of former Soviet Central Asia are greatly at risk of a “Central Asian Spring” breaking out in the Fergana Valley, and Part IV of the Greater Heartland series will focus exclusively on this ever likely scenario. Accordingly, the rest of this section will explore the other Hybrid War vulnerabilities facing these four countries.

The geographically largest state in the Greater Heartland region is surprisingly immune from many of the conventional socio-political factors that lead to Hybrid Wars (excluding the variables that will later be discussed about the “Central Asian Spring”). If one was blind to the domestic and international contexts pertinent to Kazakhstan, then they’d be inclined to believe that the Russian population constitutes the greatest threat to the country’s sovereignty, although this couldn’t be anywhere further from the truth. Theoretically speaking, this demographic satisfies all of the criteria necessary for sparking a Hybrid War, but Kazakhstan’s multipolar alignment with the Eurasian Union and respectful treatment of this influential minority group precludes any chances that they or Russia would ever try to move forward with this scenario. On the reverse, the very inclusion of such a large Russian minority within Kazakhstan ties Astana and Moscow closer together than just about any other state in the former Soviet Union and works to enhance, not deteriorate, relations between them.

The only vulnerability in this relatively secure setup is if the US and its proxy NGO affiliates succeed in brainwashing the Russian-Kazakh population with Pravy Sektor- and Navalny-esque extreme nationalism, which could then create a delicate geopolitical situation where the raucous Russian minority agitates against Astana and attempts to drive a wedge between Kazakhstan and Russia. Security officials in both states are likely well aware of this obvious scenario and can be predicted to have rehearsed coordinated contingency measures for responding to it. Nonetheless, if such a virulent, discriminatory, and destructive ideology as “Greater Russian Nationalism” is allowed to fester in multicultural

Kazakhstan and parts of the Russian Federation itself, then a scandalous outbreak in the Near Abroad could provoke a simultaneous cross-border event inside of Russia, especially if 'sleeper sympathizers' organize anti-government protests against Moscow's "betrayal" of its compatriots out of its refusal to replicate the Crimean scenario in Northern Kazakhstan.



Debris is scattered in front of the headquarters of the OzenMunayGaz energy company in Zhanaozen, Dec 2011.

Another destabilization possibility that mustn't be discounted in Kazakhstan is a repeat of the [Zhanaozen riots](#), the 'localized' Color Revolution attempt that was sparked by a simmering labor dispute in 2011. The oil field workers were fed up with what they complained to be poor working conditions, low wages, and unpaid salaries, and this created an attractive atmosphere for Color Revolutionaries to exploit. Keeping with Color Revolution tradition, the riots [started](#) on 16 December, the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Kazakh independence, and were presumably expected to signal the beginning of the regime change attempt to other cells across the country, almost one year to the day that the "Arab Spring" Color Revolution first broke out in Tunisia.

Seething with preexisting anger, the workers were extraordinarily easy to exploit, and the carnage they committed killed over a dozen people and injured more than 100 before a state of emergency and necessary military intervention restored order. The authorities' decisive reaction and the multicultural, patriotic identity of most Kazakhs can be credited with preventing the spread of the Color Revolution virus from the distant Turkmen border all the way to centrally located capital, but the strategic lessons that can be learned from this episode are that: labor disputes and organizing could be both a cover and spark for a Color Revolution; and that destabilizations could start outside of the major cities and originate in the far-flung provinces.

#### Kyrgyzstan:

This tiny mountainous republic is notably split along a steep North-South divide, with the capital of Bishkek being located along the northern plains while the major population centers of Jalal-abad and Osh reside in the southern Fergana Valley. The clan-based nature of Kyrgyz society has played a strong role in influencing the political system, and this has consequently created identity resentment among whichever group was disproportionately underrepresented at the given moment. Although the situation has relatively stabilized and become somewhat more 'equitable' since the 2010 Color Revolution, clan-based tension and

its geographic affiliations are still deeply ingrained in the national psyche, and any visible calmness simply belies the aggravating tensions that lay just beneath the surface. As confirmation of this assessment, one need only remember the misleading “stability” that many had inaccurately judged to be prevalent in the country just prior to the 2005 and 2010 Color Revolutions, and after witnessing the ferocious clan-based and ethnic violence that exploded after each of them, it’s improbable to assume that the individual drivers of such identity conflicts simply disappeared on their own after only half a decade.

What really happened is that they went underground as usual and abstained from the national discourse, while still remaining psychologically mobilized and ready to act the moment a future destabilization distracts or dissolves the security forces and provides another strategic opening for settling unresolved blood feuds that still linger from last time. The most violent-prone area of Kyrgyzstan is its southern Fergana region that abuts Uzbekistan, and it’s here where radical Islamic elements have taken root. The difficulty in forcibly eradicating them is that any major Kyrgyz security operation so close to the Uzbek border, let alone one that potentially targets ethnic Uzbeks, could create a hostile impression towards much-stronger Uzbekistan, which in turn could use the events as a pretext for activating a prearranged plan to mobilize in response to the ‘human rights violations’ allegedly being committed against its ethnic compatriots. Tashkent’s geopolitical loyalty has always been nebulous and ill-defined, and the country’s been working more closely with the US ever since the 2014 drawdown in Afghanistan. Washington needs a Lead From Behind partner in Central Asia, and it’s possible that Uzbekistan has been designated this role, which if it doesn’t comply with, could lead to the “Central Asian Spring” scenario that will soon be discussed.



To return to the Hybrid War threats facing Kyrgyzstan, it’s important to highlight that the country’s mountainous terrain is very accommodating to guerrilla warfare. The southern mountain ranges are sparsely populated and the government barely has any presence in some of the more isolated areas. Looking at the regional geography at play, it’s conceivable that Fergana-based terrorists [could receive weapons and fighters](#) from Afghanistan by taking advantage of the lack of governance present in Southern Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan’s Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region. After all, this route is already used to smuggle tons of drugs, so it’s certainly possible that it could be used to transport terrorists and weapons along the way as well (if this isn’t being done already). It’s very difficult for the Kyrgyz authorities to exert full control over this region because of tight financial and human resources, a current prioritization on the more populated areas, and the inhibitive geography involved.

To emphasize the last point, wintertime typically renders all of the few north-south roads impassable and strands the mountainous southern-based citizens in their villages for the duration of the season. This effectively splits the country into two, and if timed to coincide with a Hybrid War, then it could give the regime change insurgents active in that region



enough time to consolidate their gains and prepare for the hostilities that would inevitably recommence after the snow melts in spring. When one thinks of a terrorist-driven “caliphate”, the last thing that probably comes to mind is a mountainous, snow-covered retreat, but this is exactly what ISIL or any likeminded group could feasibly create in Southern Kyrgyzstan if they played their cards ‘right’. It would be extremely challenging to dislodge the terrorists in such a scenario, and the danger in doing so would critically spike if it were revealed that they had access to anti-aircraft weapons. The Kyrgyz military would obviously be unsuited for such a difficult task and would have to resort to their Russian partners in the CSTO for assistance, with Moscow predictably helping through a combination of drone surveillance and air strikes just as it’s currently doing in Syria at the moment.

#### Tajikistan:

The threat facing Tajikistan is structurally similar to the one in Kyrgyzstan, and it’s that the country’s large swath of mountainous geography could be exploited by terrorist groups in facilitating smuggling routes or providing cavernous shelter. It goes without saying that Tajikistan’s border with Afghanistan is perhaps its greatest vulnerability, but some respite could be found in the fact that there are more ethnic Tajiks in Afghanistan than in Tajikistan, and that if this community were properly mobilized to its fullest extent, then it could provide an effective bulwark against the Taliban and other terrorist groups. At the moment, however, this doesn’t seem to be the case, since the Taliban was able to [briefly capture](#) the northern provincial capital of Kunduz at the end of September and achieve their greatest military success since 2001.



Tajik border guards

Up to this point, it had been largely assumed that this part of Afghanistan was the least welcoming to the Taliban owing to the valiant history of the Northern Alliance and the relatively secular Tajik community that inhabits the region. What Kunduz taught observers is that these two factors are no longer the strongest determinants of regional security, and that the Taliban has succeeded in the past decade and a half in proselytizing their ideology, gaining sympathizers, and infiltrating enough fighters into the area so as to set up an effective base of operations. The converts that they’ve claimed, the supporters that they’ve acquired, and the terrorists that they’ve relocated to Northern Afghanistan all played an integral role in the Taliban’s capture of Kunduz, and just because they had to conventionally retreat from the city doesn’t mean that they’re soft infrastructure had to withdraw as well. The reason that this is relevant to Tajikistan is that it proves that the Taliban have a strong presence right along the Amu Darya river border and that fears about their cross-border militant potential are not misplaced.

More domestically, however, the greatest threat comes from the Islamic Renaissance Party, the [newly banned](#) organization that represented the last legal party of political Islam in the region. The process was in the works for a while, but ultimately it was decided that the group was [full of terrorists](#) and needed to be shut down as soon as possible, with the decision being spurred by rogue former Deputy Defense Minister Abdukhalim Nazarzoda's [coup attempt](#) earlier that month. He and a group of followers [slaughtered](#) over 30 soldiers in the capital of Dushanbe before fleeing into the mountains where they were finally [hunted down](#) and [killed](#) a week later. The subsequent investigation revealed that the deputy head of the Islamic Renaissance Party, Mahmadali Hayit, had consorted with the coup plotters earlier in the year and that 13 members of the party were suspected of being involved in the attacks, so it makes absolute sense that the organization would be outlawed soon thereafter in the interests of national security. At the same time, however, the proclamation came so abruptly that the authorities didn't have time to completely extinguish the organization, and countless sympathizers and probable sleeper cells can be assumed to be embedded in society. Whether they'll make the transition to militant action on behalf of the terrorist organization or repent for their prior allegiance to it and disown its ideology remain to be seen, but the actionable threat remains nonetheless and is obviously a destabilizing factor that could be leveraged in any coming Hybrid War against Tajikistan.

#### Uzbekistan:

Aside from the "Central Asian Spring" scenario that will be detailed in Part IV, there are still quite a few other Hybrid War threats facing the region's largest country. Uzbekistan is first and foremost threatened by a complete breakdown in law and order stemming from a successionist crisis after the passing of Islam Karimov. The author previously explored the contours of these chilling possibilities in his piece "[Uzbekistan's Bubbling Pot Of Destabilization](#)", but to concisely summarize, the clan-based nature of Uzbek society coupled with the competition between the National Security Service and the Interior Ministry creates a cataclysmic scenario where a black hole of disorder arises in the heart of Central Asia and rapidly spreads throughout the rest of the region.

The only thing that could stop the previously held-together society from dramatically decentralizing down to Somalian-style warlordship would be the rapid reconsolidation of power under one of the two competing security agencies, but since their rivalry could predictably intensify in the days following Karimov's death (and with the resultant security breakdown this would entail if they focus more on one another than on their designated subjects), it can't be precluded that Uzbekistan could unravel before anyone realizes what even happened. Of course, if Karimov publicly designates a successor prior to his death or steps down and allows his designee to rule before then, this could potentially assuage the risks inherent in this scenario, but it doesn't look too likely that this would happen, nor would these steps prevent the rival agency from attempting a major power play the moment the 'head honcho' inevitably dies anyhow.

Parallel with this possible tumult could be an explosion of terrorism from the [Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan](#), Hizb ut Tahrir, ISIL, the Taliban, some yet-to-be-named organization, and/or a combination of these groups, which would exacerbate the already deteriorating security situation in the country and divide the security services' focus even more. There's also the likelihood that the Taliban or ISIL might even make a conventional move on Uzbekistan amidst the greater breakdown of regional order, which in that case would usher in a global crisis similar to the one that transpired when ISIL crossed into and began conquering Iraq.

Therefore, true to the theory of Hybrid War, any type of social disruption in the tightly controlled Uzbek society, be it through a Color Revolution, successionist crisis, or a combination of factors, would create a tantalizing opportunity for Unconventional Warriors to rise up against the state and increase the odds of regime change. In this case, if there's no real government in power at the moment, then it would prolong the "regime vacuum" and amplify country's disorder until it reaches the critical point of spreading to its neighbors. Therefore, in such a scenario as the one previously described, it's important for some leader or leading entity (e.g. military junta) to assume power as soon as possible in order to preempt a regional breakdown. In hindsight, it was precisely this quick emergence of leadership, however weak and fragmented, that emerged in Kyrgyzstan after the 2010 Color Revolution that helped to miraculously contain the chaos and prevent it from turning into a "Central Asian Spring".

Before addressing this curious concept that's been alluded to a few times already, it's necessary to briefly touch upon a minor socio-political factor in Uzbekistan that shouldn't be overlooked when discussing forthcoming disorder there. The autonomous republic of Karakalpakstan is a little-known administrative entity in the former Soviet Union that handsomely sits atop [rich oil and gas reserves](#) and provides transit to [two energy pipelines](#) to Russia. The dried-up majority of the Aral Sea has endowed the region even more [oil](#) and [gas](#) than was previously accessible, meaning that Karakalpakstan will likely become more important than ever to the Uzbek state.

Still, its energy potential isn't the exact reason why the autonomous republic is brought up when discussing Hybrid War scenarios, since there lately have been [whispers](#) of a Karakalpakstan "independence" movement that [provocatively](#) wants to join Russia. In all probability, this isn't a genuine movement but rather a proxy front controlled by the US to advance the objective of straining the already frayed ties between Russia and Uzbekistan. The appearance of a "pro-Russian" separatist organization at the crossroads of Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan isn't incidental, and it's designed to destabilize the entire region if ever given the opportunity. On its own, the Karakalpakstan "independence" movement is powerless to do anything to upset the Central Asian balance, but in the event that the eastern more populated part of the country descends into bedlam following one or some of the above-mentioned scenarios, then it's likely that this group will emerge from the shadows (or more likely, be parachuted or infiltrated into the theater) to violently lay stake to its secessionist claim so that it can then transform into an American protectorate.



To be continued...

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