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**TRANSNATIONAL SECURITY CHALLENGES OF CENTRAL ASIA:
TRANSNATIONAL ORGANIZED CRIME**

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In contemporary decades the notion of security in global politics has undergone significant changes. Generally, there was a tendency to understand security mainly in terms of traditional threats. But with the collapse of USSR and at the onset of globalization, the definition of security has been broadening up to incorporate nontraditional security threats within the framework of security studies. However, it is a challenging task to define the concept of non-traditional security because of its multifaceted and complex characteristics. Although this very distinction between traditional and non-traditional threats are somewhat artificial but its required to draw different strategies and tactics to deal with them. In simple words non-traditional security deals with such challenges that are connected with the wellbeing and survival of the population. They are mainly non-military in nature such as climate change, infectious diseases, natural disasters, irregular migration, food shortages, smuggling of persons, drug trafficking and other forms of transnational crime and transnational in scope.

The former “Silk Road,” also known as the “Northern Route,” is a dominant trafficking route of illicit opiates and pre-cursor chemicals passing through Central Asia. In addition, the route is known for smuggling cigarettes, hashish, weapons, and human beings. Even though the lucrative and proliferating business of drug trafficking has undoubtedly brought these disparate groups together, the processes of globalization as well as other political changes in Central Asia have further facilitated this merger. From the dissolution of the Soviet Union to the presence of U.S. and

North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) forces since 2001, a profitable and almost risk-free environment ripe for illicit exploitation has been created. With the planned drawdown of U.S. and NATO forces from Afghanistan, warning bells have been sounding off by various groups and interested parties highlighting Central Asia as a conflict-prone region to watch both presently and beyond.

The security challenges in Central Asia are not only multi-faceted and diverse but it's also full of complexity as most of countries are newly formed and in transition from communist set up to democracy. As the region is marked by political instability, ethnic conflict etc. which in return intensified illicit trade, narcoterrorism and other forms of security challenges. In Central Asian Region religious forces always played a key role in augmenting society. Being a Muslim dominated region, when the West led by US backed NATO forces started dominating this region after the end of cold war, they have failed significantly to understand this issue. Due to these western values were perceived to be an attack on the religious faith of Central Asian States and they took it upon themselves to defend their faith by any means. Because of these non-State actors such as terrorist outfits started dominating the region often providing challenges to the State forces. Terrorist outfits such as Al Qaeda, Taliban with their powerful network, provides the most pervasive threat to Central Asian security and international stability (Joshi, 2010). Now this development is pivotal to understand the complex non-traditional threats in the postcold War environment. Most of these extremist groups may employ conventional tactics to destabilize the region at the same time non-traditional sources such as energy, drug etc. are also being used extensible by such forces to consolidate their power. For example, Central Asia, and in particular the Caspian region, is rich in minerals and other resources, and over the years there are competition between both State and Non-State actors to control these vital assets. Many terrorists' groups in order to support them financially targeted these energy resources thus greatly affecting the security framework of Central Asian Region. Another threat that is emancipating from non-traditional source is the proliferation of narcotics and narcoterrorism. After the Soviet military intervention of Afghanistan and subsequent collapse of USSR, security environment of the region underwent a fundamental change (Joshi, 2010). As most of Central Asian states are newly constituted with massive refugee problem, weak political and economic set up compelled them to rely on drug and narcotics to revive the region. Even in recent times terrorist Golden Crescent consists of Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran are being used for massive drugs supplies and monetary assistance to the jihadi groups. So, this development highlights the importance of non-traditional security threats in the overall Central Asian security architecture

Transnational organized crime is another cause of security concern for the regional governments as it has political, economic and societal consequences for the Central Asian societies. Illicit drug trafficking originating in Afghanistan and reaching all the way to Russia and Europe via Central Asia is the most dangerous transnational crime as it has implications not only for the region, but also for the entire world. Similar to Afghanistan, where the absence of viable economic opportunities pushes the local population towards opium production and trafficking, Central Asian nationals are engaged in the illicit multi-billion-dollar drug trade, which is facilitated by both militants and corrupt officials. According to the UN Office on Drugs and Crime, in 2017, compared to the previous year, the area under opium poppy cultivation in Afghanistan increased by 63% to 328,000 hectares, and the estimated total production of opium grew by 87% to 9,000 metric tons (UNODC, 2017). This dramatic increase in the production of Afghan opiates creates multiple security challenges for Afghanistan, its Central Asian neighbors and other transit and destination countries. There are other crimes that transcend the borders, such as human trafficking, sex slavery, illegal migration, illicit arms trade, smuggling of goods, etc., which not only damage economies and domestic stability but also exacerbate corruption undermining the nascent efforts to install good governance and the rule of law. Transnational organized criminal groups are linked to

terrorists, extremists and other non-state actors with violent agendas, providing them with funding to support subversive activities that adversely affect government authority and threaten regional security. Therefore, the Central Asian states need to continue strengthening their law enforcement and security capabilities and engage in active international cooperation to eradicate serious non-traditional threats posed by transnational organized crime, which exerts negative influence on the Central Asian societies by weakening state institutions and hindering long-term economic development. To combat the proliferation of transnational organized crime, the Central Asian countries should adopt an integrated and comprehensive program of action and share best practices and lessons learned, with the support of the relevant UN agencies and the regional organizations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO).

In Central Asian region security of all the states are threatened by Narcotics and illicit drug trafficking. This Non-traditional threats to security in post-communist Central Asian region are complementing traditional threats. Entwined with the traditional threats such as arm production, ethnic clashes, terrorism, black-marketing, Narcotics now-a-days is a major destabilizing factor and security concern for all five Central Asian states (Joshi, 2010). Over the years there has been a tremendous increase in the production and trafficking of drugs, which are routed from the path of golden crescent. Afghanistan who is the producer of opiates accounting for 93 per cent of the world's entire production of opiates. Illegal Drugs and narcotics are major source of extremist and terrorist groups Even though governments are already aware of it they are more or less unsuccessful to stop these illicit narcotics transactions that runs from Afghanistan and Central Asia to markets in Europe. At the same time criminal groups such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) in order to financially gain from narcotics' used terrorism to maintain and secure routes for transporting narcotics (Rashid, 2002; Joshi, 2010). The Taliban initially considered drug trafficking un-Islamic, but later encouraged its production for financial reasons, particularly after 9/11 (Joshi, 2010). These illicit drug trade have a larger consequences both socio-politically and economically (Swanstrom, 2010). As most of these Central Asian states have weak economic and political infrastructure this drug trade is not only threatening regional security but also affecting the conventional national interests of the states concerned.

Post-Soviet Central Asia opened to the world after the collapse of the USSR and found itself in a zone of intense cross-civilization influences. Several processes – of modernization, Westernization, spread of Islam and other religions, and national rebirth – began to simultaneously unfold in the region, which was historically part of the ancient Silk Road, but played no role in contemporary international affairs before 1991. Because of the so-called 'power vacuum' and destabilization of regional security created by Russia's partial military and political departure from the region, Central Asia faced various security related issues having become an arena for major powers and regional players to compete for influence. Although much progress has been achieved in securing and guarding the national borders in the region, nowadays, in terms of security, Central Asia still confronts a number of serious threats and challenges, ranging from terrorism to climate change. To be able to successfully tackle them, the Central Asian states must improve their mutual cooperation and coordination. In the interest of future stability and prosperity, they should focus on their converging interests, promote mutual trust, build an equal dialogue and solve outstanding issues that prevent effective regional security collaboration. It is also important to obtain necessary assistance from interested foreign partners, as well as international and regional institutions. Such assistance would help the Central Asian governments to resolve the issues inherited from the Soviet Union and develop adequate responses to the present-day challenges and threats. Cooperation with Central Asia is also in the best interests of the leading powers because it contributes both to reducing regional security risks and strengthening their political and economic positions in the region.

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