

Tajikistan officials seized 67 kilogrammes of synthetic drugs in Tajikistan on May 22, one week after the head of Russia's Federal Drug Control Service, Viktor Ivanov, called drug production and trafficking in Central Asia a pressing issue. Ivanov said up to 40 per cent of Central Asian gross domestic product comes from criminal activities, especially from narcotics, and that Russia should fight the problem more actively. He added that Russia plans to implement 22 new counternarcotics programs in Central Asia to help protect its interests in the region. The flow of drugs from Central Asia into Russia is a significant problem for Moscow. Though completely eradicating drug trafficking is impossible, Moscow would like to gain as much control as it can over the illicit trade. This would let Moscow justify increasing its presence and influence in Central Asia, allowing it to counter U.S. activity there and preparing Russia for increased volatility in the region following the United States' exit from Afghanistan.

Several major drug trafficking routes begin in Afghanistan and enter Central Asia before moving north into Russia, northwest into Europe and east into China. Ninety-percent of the drugs bound for Russia from Central Asia are not cultivated in the region, but rather in Afghanistan. Rampant drug abuse in Russia contributes to an already poor demographic situation and relatively low life expectancy. Significant numbers of men also fail to qualify for military duty due to addiction and failed drug tests.

The government hopes to gain as much control of the trafficking networks as possible by removing organized criminal gangs that operate against Russian interests. Given the money to be made from drug trafficking, Moscow stands to profit from getting involved, something the blurry lines between the Kremlin and Russian organized crime will facilitate.

Counternarcotics efforts in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan offer Russia more than just money. Russia already wields significant influence in this crucial buffer zone, influence it would like to expand to offset the power of outside actors like the United States. U.S. activity in the region increased before and following the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan, when several Central Asian countries provided military bases for logistical assistance.

While the United States has scaled back its military presence, Washington recently has become more active in counternarcotics efforts in Central Asia. Some of these efforts have been undertaken jointly with Russia. However, Russia did not respond warmly to a new joint program, the Central Asian Counternarcotics Initiative (CACI), which the United States proposed in February.

CACI called for task forces in all five Central Asian countries to combat drug trafficking and share information with U.S. forces in Afghanistan, but Moscow reportedly convinced the Central Asian countries not to participate. Ivanov said that while Washington and regional governments may welcome the program, Moscow considers it inconvenient. It is not that Russia objects to

specific programs, though Moscow typically opposes any initiative not coordinated in advance with Russia. Instead, Moscow fears the programs could serve as a springboard for greater U.S. involvement in the region.

An unnamed Russian official hinted at this in an interview with Kommersant, calling the CACI plan a new tool for infiltration into Central Asia and a means of strengthening U.S. military and political influence in the region. Greater involvement in counternarcotics efforts gives Russia a reason to expand its own presence in the region and to curb the power of other players such as the United States, which sometimes embeds intelligence assets in counternarcotics programs.

Though Russia is set to increase its already sizable military and security presence in the region, particularly in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, this does not mean everything has gone Russia's way. For example, individual countries, especially Kyrgyzstan, continue to engage in bilateral counternarcotics cooperation with the United States. As recently as May 23, a counternarcotics checkpoint funded by the United States was set up on the Kyrgyz-Tajik border.

Tajikistan has also rebuffed Russia's requests to let the Russian military resume patrolling the Tajik-Afghan border after the Tajik military replaced it in 2005. Even so, Russian advisers are still active on the border -- a crucial crossing for regional smuggling routes -- and Tajikistan has cooperated with Russia on border control in other areas, such as the Tajik-Uzbek border.

Moscow also has assisted Dushanbe with security and counternarcotics sweeps within Tajikistan. Though increasing its counternarcotic efforts allows Russia to check outside powers and prepare for regional volatility following the NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan, going too far in these efforts carries risks, including angering traffickers and creating friction with regional governments. Given that Central Asia is seeing rising instability due to regional tensions and growing Islamist militancy, Russia will pursue its counternarcotics efforts with caution.