

6th

Government-Youth Dialogue for Central Asia



Disclaimer

This publication represents a compilation of messages delivered by young people at the 6th Dialogues between Governments and Youth of Central Asian countries. UNRCCA may not necessarily endorse the views, positions, and assessments presented in this publication.

The annual Deputy Foreign Ministers (DFM) meeting is a unique informal platform convened by UNRCCA. During the event, five Central Asian Deputy Foreign ministers are invited to share analysis on security-related developments in the region, and to explore ways to address current and emerging challenges, with particular focus on the role of UNRCCA in this process. The event is an important tool for closer interaction and trust-building among the Central Asian states. The DFM meeting also serves as a platform where participating states provide guidance and feedback to the UNRCCA.

It has become a tradition for ten selected students from the Preventive Diplomacy Academy to have the opportunity to join this platform, voicing what they see as the most pressing issues for Central Asian states today in an open dialogue with government representatives. Many important topics have been raised throughout the years, including the Youth, Peace, and Security Agenda, prevention of violent extremism, climate change, and gender-based violence. Each year, the PDA students offer concrete solutions that reflect the innovative nature of the young generation.

Introduction

Dear readers,

It is no secret that humanity is facing a challenging situation. Conflicts are ranging across the continents - currently, we see the highest number of countries engaged in conflict since World War II. Climate change is already affecting our daily lives – we already know that 2024 will be the hottest year on record. We are lacking behind in SDG implementation, with half of the targets that can be evaluated showing moderate or severe deviations from the desired trajectory. While the picture I illustrated is rather grim, we are not entirely doomed.

The United Nations understands the magnitude of the problem and is actively proposing solutions to be more effective in its primary mission – addressing the root causes of conflict and holistically, integrating peace, sustainable development and human rights. Since taking on his mandate, the Secretary-General has been promoting transformative reforms and innovations under the Pact for the Future, strengthening global institutions to deal with the complex challenges the world faces. The Pact is one of the most wide-ranging international agreements in recent years, and it covers important areas relevant to the Central Asian region, including peace and security, sustainable development, climate change, digital cooperation, and youth.

Furthermore, at the UN, we understand that to bring about positive change, we must start from within. That is why the UN has introduced UN 2.0, a modernized vision of our organization with the right skills and capacities to address the challenges of tomorrow. The underlying assumption is that we can achieve a better tomorrow only through stronger international cooperation and multilateralism.

Our challenges are enormous, but I am glad to point out that we have a strong partner—the young generation —who are often overlooked but who will support our efforts.

Today, there are 1.2 billion young people aged 15 to 24, accounting for 16 per cent of the global population, and Central Asia is among the youngest regions in the world. Naturally, young people have an enormous interest in creating a better world for their future, and they must be integrated into the design of any changes and proposed solutions, as they will be directly affected by them.

The Preventive Diplomacy Academy is a unique educational program that directly responds to the calls for youth engagement in conflict prevention. The PDA unites young people from Central Asia and Afghanistan around regional cooperation and preventive diplomacy. Throughout the ten-month-long program, they learn about the UN, its key priorities, and agendas, and they acquire necessary soft skills relevant to their professional development. Crucially, the students meet their Central Asian peers and create meaningful relations and mutual understanding about important topics. This program prepares young professionals to continue their preventive diplomacy career on the regional level and make a significant difference in the future.

We feel privileged to have received the Secretary-General of the United Nations in Central Asia this July. During the tour in the region, he met with young people and listened to their views. I am proud to share that the PDA students had the privilege to meet him and deliver their remarks about the topics they feel passionate about discussing. His appreciation of the quality of these contributions highlighted the need to deliver on the commitment to engage young people as much as possible.

I am proud to remark that young people from Central Asia do not shy away from active participation in finding solutions. Moreover, they know that the current challenges are more prominent than individual countries, and we must be united in addressing them. This conviction comes naturally to them, not only thanks to their personal preferences, but also due to their participation in the Preventive Diplomacy Academy. We see the fruits of the programme: young people do not question the need for regional cooperation; they take a step further and suggest concrete bricks for its architecture.

As I already mentioned at the beginning of my remarks, multinationalism and cooperation are essential more than ever. That is why we asked the young students to give us their vision of what collaboration among Central Asian countries should look like. Here are ten ideas about what Central Asian countries should prioritize in their regional cooperation according to the PDA students. These ideas reflect their vision of the world, sometimes different from older generations. Nevertheless, it is worth exploring, listening to, and being inspired to make the world better for future generations.



Kaha Imnadze

Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General for Central Asia, Head of the United Nations Regional Centre for Preventive Diplomacy for Central Asia (UNRCCA).

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Strengthening the role of youth in regional cooperation in Central Asia



I believe that regional cooperation in Central Asia should be youth-centred.

Central Asia is a young region. Young people under 30 make up more than 50% of the population.¹ Thanks to modern technology, we, young people, have access to information, people and events around the world, but we sometimes lack communication with our closest neighbours and regions.

The youth of Central Asia are very diverse and dynamic. We have great potential to use innovation and research on complex problems that transcend borders. In order for regional cooperation to be truly youth-centred and to unleash our full potential, we propose the following actions:

- Create new regional events, projects and meetings where young people from Central Asia can interact and learn about each other's culture, society and history to create strong interpersonal ties. Moreover, existing initiatives need to be strengthened through additional funding and human resource support.
- Support regional educational exchange programmes through scholarships. Building on the successful example of the European Erasmus+ academic exchange programme, we believe that a similar programme in Central Asia could contribute not only to our academic excellence, but also to social cohesion and regional identity.
- Increase the competitiveness of young people by gaining work experience in other Central Asian countries. Learning first-hand about different working styles and mentalities will improve our understanding of different cultures and create strong ties with colleagues from other Central Asian countries.
- Fund a regional digital platform for youth engagement focused on intercultural exchange. While face-to-face interaction is crucial, young people prefer to use digital and innovative technologies: approximately three quarters of 15–24-year-olds have used the internet this year, which is higher compared to other age groups.²

Strengthening ties between Central Asian countries through young people can be a significant tool for ensuring sustainable peace and development. We are the most interested ones in promoting regional stability and economic prosperity, because it is us who will live in the world we are building today.



Approximately three quarters of 15–24-year-olds have used the internet this year, which is higher compared to other age groups.

by Dilnaz Yesbolatova from Kazakhstan

Cooperation in Environmental Protection and Climate Change Mitigation



I believe that regional cooperation in Central Asia should be sustainable and focused on nature conservation.

In 2023, the Asian region became the most affected region in the world by natural disasters, devastating storms, floods and droughts with significant human and economic losses.³ This year, we realized more than ever that the countries of Central Asia are not immune to the impact of extreme weather events. According to the World Bank, natural disasters in Central Asia can lead to estimated annual economic losses of up to \$10 billion.⁴ We have practically no time left to plan and adapt to abrupt climate changes. We need to start acting here and now, and, most importantly, unite the entire Central Asian region.

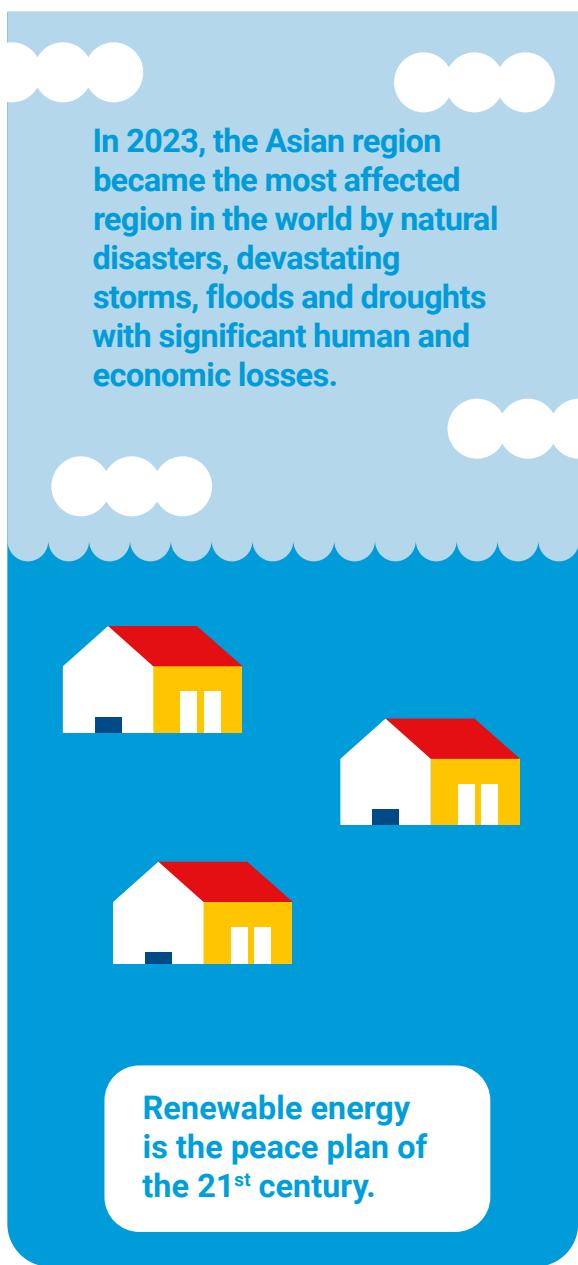
How can conservation and sustainability become a unifying topic, rather than a divisive issue, in Central Asian relations? We propose the following:

- Establish a regional mandate to reduce carbon emissions. Support this through annual meetings between governments and innovative businesses. Jointly attract funding to achieve this goal.
- Increase investment in renewable energy initiatives across Central Asia. As UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres has noted, "renewable energy is the peace plan of the 21st century."⁵ Central Asia is well positioned to play a leading role in the global transition to green energy, given its abundant solar, wind and hydropower resources.
- Encourage scientific dialogue and research on climate change, water management and the transition to renewable energy by organizing regional expert forums and through funding to implement these solutions. These topics should stimulate more informed regional decision-making based primarily on facts and science, rather than political considerations.
- Support environmental education from an early age. While Central Asian countries are already doing a lot at the national level by organizing youth climate conferences, this approach should also be implemented at the regional level, since climate change knows no national borders.

Our generation will inherit the region's natural resources and use them responsibly. Environmentalists meet at national and regional conferences to discuss this issue together. However, involving young people in decision-making on the environment and natural resources still remains a major challenge.

I firmly believe that by working together to address these common environmental issues, Central Asian countries can build trust and solidarity among themselves. It is not appropriate to consider global environmental issues secondary to economic growth. Addressing the environmental crisis is not just a choice, it is a necessity.

by Dilnaz Yesbolatova from Kazakhstan



Strengthening the Role of Women in Regional Cooperation



Involving women in peacebuilding significantly increases the likelihood of ending violence by 24%.



The global economic cost of discrimination and violence against women is estimated at approximately \$6 trillion per year.

I believe that women, along with men, should have the opportunity to become leaders in the field of international cooperation in Central Asia.

Gender equality is a fundamental human right necessary for living in a peaceful, inclusive society, realizing the full potential of people and supporting their sustainable development. Research shows that involving women in peacebuilding significantly increases the likelihood of ending violence by 24%. ¹²In addition, empowering women not only enhances gender equality, but also stimulates economic growth. The global economic cost of discrimination and violence against women is estimated at approximately \$6 trillion per year.¹³

How can gender equality become a central force for advancing peaceful cooperation in the region?

- Encourage women to actively participate in politics, business and civil society through gender-responsive budgeting at the national level. Women bring unique perspectives that are often sadly overlooked. Their knowledge and experience in solving local problems are also important at the regional level.
- While noting the positive changes in recent years, it is critical to recognize that gender-based violence still remains a serious problem. We propose to continue working to strengthen legislation that protects women and girls from any form of violence or danger in their homes and communities. Ensuring the safety of women and girls not only has a positive impact on their lives, but also contributes to economic growth, social stability and security at the national and regional levels.
- Women in Central Asia have a unique opportunity to advance the Women, Peace, and Security agenda beyond the region by engaging with disenfranchised Afghan women and drawing on their experience and knowledge to support and protect their rights. The UN-RCCA Women Leaders' Caucus in Central Asia could serve as a potential platform for such cooperation.

Women's participation in diplomacy, international relations and decision-making is often underestimated. Yet, women and girls make up half the world's population - and half of its potential. They bring different leadership styles, experiences and priorities, which broaden the range of issues addressed and enhance their impact. Women's activism reflects the diversity of society, leading to policies that represent all sectors of the population, including the most vulnerable, and benefit all citizens of countries and the region.

by Tolgonai Zhanykulova from Kyrgyzstan

Cooperation in Preventing Violent Extremism



In 2023, we saw an alarming 22% increase in deaths caused by terrorism, the highest figure since 2017.



I propose regional cooperation in Central Asia in preventing violent extremism and terrorism.

Terrorism and violent extremism pose significant asymmetric threats to the security of our citizens. In 2023, we saw an alarming 22% increase in deaths caused by terrorism, the highest figure since 2017.⁶ Building resilience to these threats is essential to maintaining peace in Central Asia. The international community has recognized that defeating terrorism requires more than military force; prevention is critical, especially for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds who may fall prey to extremist ideologies. Moreover, we understand that terrorism knows no borders, and only a regional approach can offer sustainable solutions.

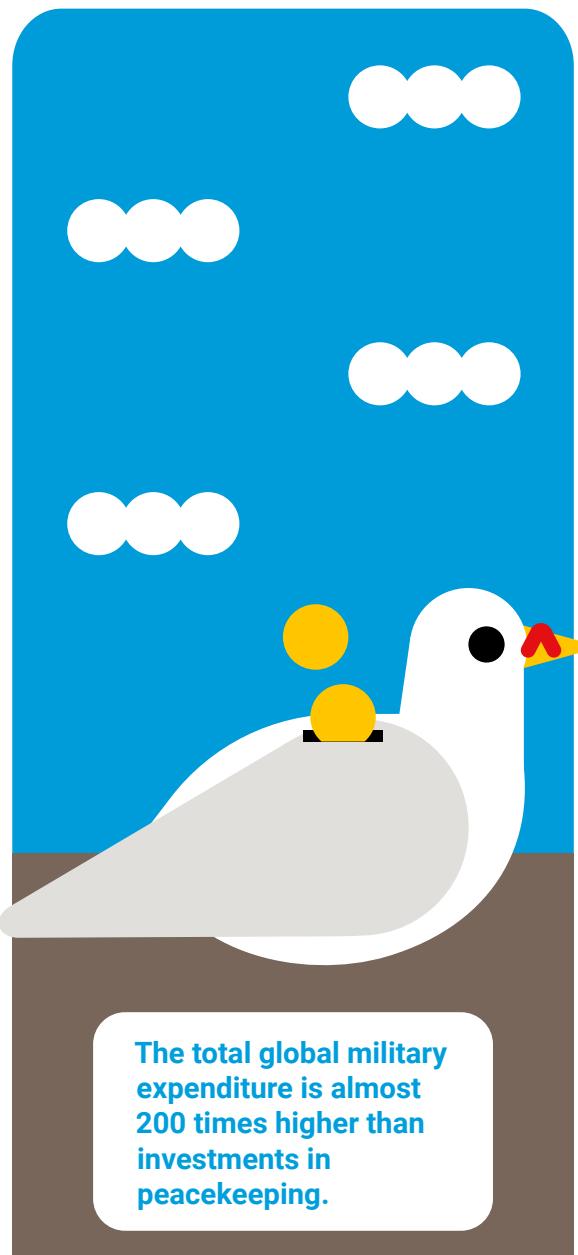
To effectively combat the spread of extremism and terrorism in the Central Asian region, we propose the following measures:

- Promote a culture of tolerance and respect by engaging communities in projects that promote economic empowerment, social inclusion, and trust. By financially supporting grassroots initiatives, we can develop a culture of tolerance that strengthens social cohesion, particularly among vulnerable groups.
- Terrorist groups are adept at exploiting online platforms for recruitment, often outpacing law enforcement. While technological solutions are important, it is equally important to create and promote educational programs to raise awareness of the dangers associated with online spaces among vulnerable communities. Moreover, such measures should take into account that women and girls are particularly vulnerable to terrorism and violent extremism.
- Apply international human rights standards when designing and implementing counter-terrorism measures. A comprehensive approach to countering terrorism should include inclusive dialogue, ensuring that efforts to strengthen security do not compromise the principles of democracy and human rights.

Since terrorism is a global issue, Central Asia can benefit from the experiences of other regions. For example, countries in sub-Saharan Africa, which face significant challenges with terrorism and violent extremism, can provide valuable lessons on soft approaches that enhance prevention and community engagement, which can benefit our region. The key to success is unity and joint action across the region.

by Daniil Akaev from Kyrgyzstan

Peaceful Cooperation in the Region



I believe that regional cooperation in Central Asia should be based on peaceful coexistence.

The total global military expenditure is almost 200 times higher than investments in peacekeeping.⁷ Yet, peace is the essential prerequisite for effective implementation of major economic and social activities - something we understand acutely in Central Asia from our historical experience since independence. Currently, there are no open violent conflicts in our region, but we recognize that peace is not simply the absence of war. It encompasses a complex set of measures, institutions and structures to maintain a peaceful society, which must be developed before, during and after a conflict.

To maintain peace in Central Asia, we propose:

- Actively involving women and youth in peacebuilding, prioritizing the localization of the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) and Youth, Peace and Security (YPS) agendas at the local level. We propose facilitating the implementation of national plans for the implementation of the Women, Peace and Security agenda.
- Create a Regional Youth Mediation Platform to enhance the professional skills of young negotiators and foster their collaboration, with the aim of increasing youth participation in conflict resolution. Young women and men of the region will thus be able to make their unique contribution to peacemaking in accordance with the YPS agenda. This would build on UNRCCA's experience of working with young people at the Preventative Diplomacy Academy and would be based on the signed Agreement between the Central Asian countries on common directions of youth policy.
- Engage with local communities that have suffered from past conflicts. Post-conflict reconciliation is a necessary starting point for sustainable peace. Only through appropriate legislation can we resolve long-standing grievances that do not contribute to achieving lasting peace both within and between countries.

The participants of the Future Summit emphasized that closer and more effective cooperation between all countries based on inclusiveness and effective multilateralism is necessary to ensure peace and stability. For Central Asia to remain an oasis of peace, it is important to hear every voice, taking into account the diverse needs and views of all sides, even if they differ from the majority. Ultimately, peace begins in a harmonious family, which is the foundation of a prosperous society and region.

by Adam Ishimgaliyev from Kazakhstan

Cooperation in Countering Drugs and Organized Crime



I believe that regional cooperation in Central Asia should focus on combating drugs and crime.

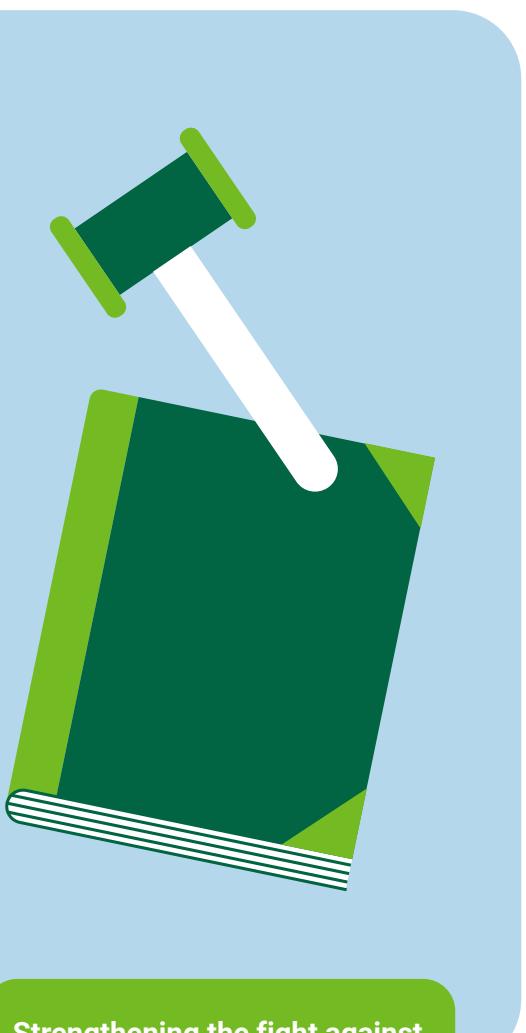
In Central Asia, as elsewhere in the world, drug trafficking and organized crime pose a significant threat to security and stability. Organized crime has many faces, and we must also pay attention to those crimes that are less well known to the public. These include illegal wildlife trade, smuggling of cultural heritage, and new trends in drug production and use. Recognizing these common problems would facilitate regional cooperation.

What opportunities are there for Central Asian governments to cooperate in combating the potential spread of drugs and crime?

- A commitment to strengthening the rule of law, an impartial judiciary, and strong institutions are critical to creating an environment free from corruption, one of the root causes of organized crime. Strengthening the fight against corruption by institutionalizing regular exchange of experience and information can play an important role in addressing regional and transnational security challenges.
- According to best practices, treating drug abuse as a public health problem rather than as a criminal offence has proven to be more effective in preventing, treating and mitigating negative social consequences. Reducing the demand for drugs among young people and families would lead to a reduction in health problems, which in turn would reduce the burden on health care and law enforcement agencies in Central Asia.
- As elsewhere in the world, young people in Central Asia, especially in economically disadvantaged areas, are at risk of recruitment by criminal organizations. We propose increasing investments in regional youth policy through joint programs, vocational training and entrepreneurship support for vulnerable young people. Such activities at the regional level can create more opportunities for young people and divert them from joining criminal groups. By investing in young people, Central Asian countries can jointly combat organized crime.

Preventing drug use and combating crime offer an opportunity to build trust, increase transparency in joint actions, and ensure that the region works toward the shared goals of stability, peace, and prosperity. Recognizing the complex nature of organized crime and drug trafficking, Central Asian governments can turn common threats into opportunities for cooperation, strengthen resilience, and improve security for all citizens of the region.

Strengthening the fight against corruption by institutionalizing regular exchange of experience and information can play an important role in addressing regional and transnational security challenges.



by Aziza Tashliyeva from Turkmenistan

Strengthening the Role of Analytical and Expert Processes in Cooperation



I propose strengthening the role of analytical and expert processes in regional cooperation in Central Asia

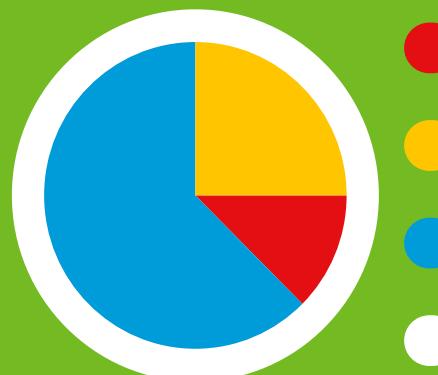
The UN Secretary-General, in his innovative concept of UN 2.0, emphasizes that the formation of modern skills, and a culture of working with data is an integral part of the UN. According to the UN, by 2025, the world will generate about 180 trillion gigabytes of data annually.⁸ Modern digital analytics help us understand the causes, effects and consequences of what is happening, and this knowledge gives us a competitive advantage. I believe that such a modern view of data can also inspire Member States that are striving to follow similar principles of efficiency and innovation.

How can capacity building in data and analytics benefit Central Asia?

- Identifying national and regional priorities based on data and statistics. By using measurable indicators, countries can more effectively evaluate their plans and policies, identifying pitfalls and risk patterns. Only by relying on data can we create joint regional initiatives that will truly improve our readiness to find solutions to transnational problems such as climate change, terrorism and economic development.
- Leveraging accumulated data allows Central Asian countries to get a comprehensive picture of progress in implementing the Sustainable Development Goals. Using reliable evidence and expert opinions, we can identify the root causes of problems such as poverty, inequality and environmental degradation.
- Expertise and analytical power contribute to the formation of a culture of trust between countries. Estonia is a leader in open data, providing a significant amount of public data through online platforms, allowing those interested to gain insight into government policies, which is very important for increasing public trust.

It is worth noting that our region already has successful programs that offer solutions based on data and expert assessments. The Central Asia Regional Economic Co-operation Programme is a good example of how measurable indicators and analytical power can advance cooperation in Central Asia in the field of transport and infrastructure. Such examples demonstrate the effectiveness of using data in policy and planning.

by Abdykerim Annayev from Turkmenistan



Future-Oriented Cooperation



The use of strategic foresight can help Central Asian countries identify opportunities, challenges, risks and disruptions that may arise in the coming years.

I believe that regional cooperation in Central Asia should be future-oriented.

We are witnessing growing uncertainty in an interconnected world caused by climate change, technological advances, emerging conflicts and social problems. In this rapidly changing landscape, it is becoming increasingly clear that old strategies may no longer be effective. We are faced with a multitude of possible, probable and preferable futures that we must not only anticipate, but also actively shape. To address this, we need to develop new, forward-looking capabilities and methodologies that can help us better navigate uncertainty and lead us to a more peaceful future. By adopting a strategic technology for anticipating the future development of the system – referred to as “foresight” – Central Asia will be better prepared to anticipate and identify early signals and apply a systemic approach to address potential problems before they emerge.

We, the youth of Central Asia, strive to ensure that our region is prepared for future problems and remains competitive.

- The region needs to actively anticipate and prepare for possible futures using tools such as horizon scanning, trend analysis and scenario development. The use of strategic foresight can help Central Asian countries identify opportunities, challenges, risks and disruptions that may arise in the coming years. This will allow them to make informed decisions about their potential impact. Institutionalizing foresight methodology in regional cooperation through academic workshops and conferences dedicated to this topic contributes to strengthening the resilience of countries and will ensure that they are better prepared for future uncertainties.
- Central Asia can ensure that foresight is mainstreamed into society by including diverse perspectives from the private sector, non-governmental organizations and civil society. Adopting this whole-of-society approach will ensure long-term thinking and forward-looking solutions that benefit everyone.
- Furthermore, strategic foresight can be integrated into the education system and widely disseminated among young people. Foresight training empowers young people to bring their unique perspective and experience to shaping a better future for all. A prime example of this is UNICEF’s global youth network Innocenti, which empowers young people through forecasting and analysis of global trends.

The UN recognizes strategic foresight as a key component of its Quintet of Change initiative, emphasizing its intersectional value. Through strategic foresight, Central Asian governments could explore a multitude of potential challenges and opportunities, benefiting the entire region and its people.

by Madzhid Khamidov from Tajikistan

Digital and Innovative Approaches in Regional Cooperation



I believe that regional cooperation in Central Asia should be innovative and digital.

Today, digital technologies shape our lives, creating new opportunities and challenges. The governments of Central Asian countries are driving a range of ambitious digital initiatives and there is growing enthusiasm for innovation. Developing a culture of innovation and enhancing innovation skills is essential to encourage creativity, progress and lifelong learning, which can bring significant economic and social benefits.

How can digitalization and innovation strengthen regional cooperation for peace in Central Asia? We propose focussing on the following key areas:

- According to UNESCO, for every 10% increase in the population receiving digital skills education, countries experience a 1.5% increase in GDP on average.⁹ Given the significant proportion of young people in Central Asia, prioritizing digital education is vital to enhancing the future competitiveness and economic potential of the region. We propose holding more regional competitions to improve the digital skills of young people and increase the competitiveness of the region.
- In 2022, around 5,000 tech startups were launched in the region, however this does not reflect the full innovative potential of Central Asia.¹⁰ We propose that our governments provide more funding, training and incentives for the creation of startups working in the field of technology and innovation. Establishing a regional network of startups and innovation hubs, along with a regional fund to finance them, can facilitate cooperation between companies and enhance their competitiveness compared to the world's innovation superpowers.
- Digitalization is vital for improving cooperation in areas such as water management and monitoring. The introduction of digital solutions, such as early warning systems for natural disasters and advanced irrigation techniques, can lead to more coordinated and cost-effective responses. A regional monitoring system will not only enhance cooperation, but also facilitate efficient resource management.

By promoting innovation and digitalization, Central Asia can strengthen its regional cooperation and become a more competitive player on the global stage. However, it is important to recognize that the success of digitalization and innovation depends on improving digital connectivity and reducing the digital divide in the countries of the region. Expanding digital connectivity is a fundamental prerequisite for opening up new opportunities for the development of human and economic capital.

by Bioysha Barotova from Tajikistan



In 2022, around 5,000 tech startups were launched in the region, however this does not reflect the full innovative potential of Central Asia.



Cooperation in Developing a Humane and Inclusive Region



I believe that regional cooperation in Central Asia should be based on humanism and inclusiveness.

With its rich diversity of cultures, ethnicities and languages, Central Asia can only reach its full potential if an environment is created where everyone has a voice and is treated fairly. The people of Central Asia share common challenges. Regional cooperation based on the principles of inclusiveness and humanism can play a decisive role in preventing conflicts, reducing inequalities and promoting peace. According to UNDP, societies that integrate diverse voices in decision-making processes experience less conflict and demonstrate higher levels of trust between citizens and government.

To further promote these values, we propose that the Central Asian countries do the following:

- Ensure everyone has a voice and a right to be heard, regardless of their background or views, through dialogue, surveys and consultations. Human dignity is the cornerstone of peace and prosperity in the region. The UN Human Development Report shows that countries with strong protection of human dignity and rights tend to experience higher economic growth, better social outcomes, and less conflict.¹¹
- Central Asian states can use cultural diplomacy efforts to promote social harmony within and across borders by encouraging initiatives that celebrate the rich cultural heritage of their communities. The region can enhance its international status by promoting the richness of its peoples and the uniqueness of their traditions and customs, supporting existing initiatives such as the Nomad Games and creating space for new, independent projects.
- Civil society organisations and NGOs have an important role to play, but they often lack the funding or training to realise their full potential. Governments can do more to encourage cross-border cooperation between NGOs and CSOs, focusing on capacity building and networking, so that they can then contribute to solving regional challenges.

Regional cooperation in Central Asia must be inclusive and people-centered, ensuring that all citizens - regardless of background or status - can participate in and benefit from development efforts in the region. Young people support the governments of Central Asia in their commitment to international human rights conventions and standards.

by Otabek Turgunboev from Uzbekistan



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The PDA Team



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Michaela Zeleňánská

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