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Developments in Central Asia and the Role of the UNRCCA

Summary: Global processes have influenced the Central Asian region and exacerbated existing problems, although the impact of these processes has not been the same for all Central Asian states. The idea of creating a UN structure for Central Asia constituted a defining moment for the region. An understanding was reached that Central Asian countries faced common challenges and threats which, if left unaddressed, could cause tensions and become obstacles to their sustainable development. The positive image of the United Nations, considered by Central Asian states as an impartial body, able to create conditions conducive to finding mutually acceptable compromises and to support their implementation, was also a determining factor.

Central Asia, defined as a geographical region uniting the five former Soviet republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, is increasingly attracting the attention of the world community. The proximity of Afghanistan and Pakistan, a soil rich in energy resources and exposure to international terrorism and other trans-boundary threats are all factors that have contributed to a growing awareness of Central Asia and the states that compose it.

Although the Central Asian region is sometimes viewed as a new player in the geopolitical processes affecting the Eurasian space, the emphasis placed during the post-independence period on political consolidation and state-building has left little room for the affirmation of a 'Central Asian way' deriving from collective action. The result has been that solutions to regional challenges have

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been sought by each state individually and on the basis of perceived national interests.

Among the most serious challenges are illicit cross-border threats associated with terrorism and organized crime. Central Asia, and specifically the Ferghana Valley region encompassing Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan, has been the target of military incursions by armed extremist groups in recent years. Although the governments of the region have so far managed to effectively thwart attempts at destabilization, these groups are still active and their actual strength and following among the population remains an object of speculation.

Adding to the threat of armed groups is the existence of organized crime, generating profits through the drug trade, with the ability to influence the economic and political life of the countries, reduce the effectiveness of law enforcement, and undermine the rule of law. The Afghan conflict and the regional implication of a potential spill-over are also current concerns. The security conditions in Afghanistan, the production and export of illegal drugs, and the associated challenges posed by terrorism and organized crime have an immediate impact on Central Asia. Efforts have been made by the governments of the region to enhance border controls, but the multiplicity of trafficking networks and routes has not allowed to substantially reduce smuggling of drugs and weapons. Occasional armed skirmishes involving traffickers and border guards, notably on the Afghan-Tajik border, are a reminder that the security environment remains volatile.

Of considerable importance to the region are issues related to environmental security and management of common resources such as water and energy. Environmental problems in Central Asia are the result of a number of factors, including the fragmentation of the unified system that formerly governed regional water and energy exchange, and past industrial practices. The effect on populations is severe and, in such cases as nuclear contamination and desertification, has no regard for borders. The five countries experienced particular difficulties over the allocation of energy and water resources, while global environmental and financial trends led to worsened conditions for agriculture and food shortages. In the case of the Aral Sea disaster, the consequences extend beyond the Central Asian region. Despite numerous efforts among the Central Asian countries, no

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comprehensive solutions have been found. The absence of workable agreements in this area has become an obstacle for cooperation in other spheres as well.

Global processes have influenced the Central Asian region and exacerbated existing problems, although the impact of these processes has not been the same for all Central Asian states. Kazakhstan has been severely affected by the global financial crisis because of the country's strong integration in the world economy. Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have seen their GDP plummet, due to a decrease in remittances and a return of part of the labor force to these countries. By contrast, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, with their limited exposure to globalization and specific economic development, appear to have been less affected. Experts put their expected growth rates for 2009 at 7%-8%.

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On the occasion of a visit by the UN Secretary General Kofi Annan to Kazakhstan in October 2002, President Nursultan Nazarbayev suggested that the UN could facilitate the emergence of a regional security mechanism in Asia and called for the creation of a UN center for the prevention of regional conflicts.¹

Late Saparmurat Niyazov, the first president of Turkmenistan, was the original advocate of a peace center in Ashgabat. In an article published in 2004 he wrote: "In the context of strengthening the effectiveness of the instruments of preventive diplomacy, it is necessary to establish in Central Asia a United Nations Center on preventive Diplomacy. Turkmenistan is ready to provide all assistance in its establishment in its capital"².

The principle of a UN Center based in Ashgabat was rapidly endorsed by the other four Central Asian states. The agreement between Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan on friendship, strengthening of trust and development of

¹ "UN Secretary-General Visits Kazakhstan", *Eurasianet.org* (October 2002); <http://www.eurasianet.org/resource/kazakhstan/hypermail/200210/0029.shtml>.

² S. A. Niyazov, "Strategic Partnership in the Ideals of Peace and Humanism", *UN Chronicle* No. 2/2004 (online edition), p. 5; <http://www.wwan.cn/Pubs/chronicle/2004/issue2/0204p62.asp>.

cooperation, signed by Presidents Niyazov and Karimov on November 19, 2004 in Bukhara contains an explicit reference to the UN Center.³ On December 29, 2004, President Nursultan Nazarbayev of Kazakhstan sent a letter to Turkmenistan, expressing his full support for the peace center in Ashgabat.⁴ Tajik President Emamoli Rahmon was present during the inauguration of the Center⁵ and Kyrgyzstan also offered its support in no uncertain terms.

The establishment of the Regional Center has been preceded by several years of consultations between the United Nations and the governments of Central Asia, which were successfully concluded in 2007. In that sense, the Center is an example of political engagement and preventive efforts by the United Nations, in support of Member States. In informing the UN Security Council in May 2007 of his intention to set up the Center, the Secretary General noted that the five governments of Central Asia had reached a consensus on the creation of a United Nations Regional Center for Preventive Diplomacy for Central Asia (UNRCCA) in Ashgabat. Elaborating on the reasons underpinning this decision, he stated: "While initiating this proposal, the Governments of the region took into consideration the multiple threats that face Central Asia, including international terrorism and extremism, drug trafficking, organized crime and environmental degradation."

The inauguration took place on December 10, 2007 at the outset of a two-day international conference on *International Cooperation in Preventive Diplomacy and Conflict Resolution* hosted by the new President of Turkmenistan, Gurbanguly Berdimukammedov, and attended by the Tajik President and the Foreign Ministers of Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. The United Nations were represented by B. Lynn Pascoe, Under-

³ "The high contracting parties attach special importance to the further strengthening of the role of the United Nations and its Security Council [...] in the task of prevention and settlement of conflicts, questions related to safety and stability, strengthening of trust. In this connection the high contracting parties recognize the necessity to create a Regional Center of the United Nations on Preventive Diplomacy with its headquarters in Ashgabat and a Central Asian Regional Information Center of the United Nations on the struggle against trans-national crimes connected with trafficking in narcotics, in Tashkent."

⁴ "Our countries need to select the most convenient location for the Center. Given Turkmenistan's important geostrategic position in the region, its consistent policies of neutrality and developing friendly relations with neighboring countries, I would like to confirm Kazakhstan's previous support for locating this center in Ashgabat."

⁵ The Tajik leader defined opening the UN Regional Center for Preventive Diplomacy as an "event of exceptional significance for the countries in the region and another vivid evidence of Turkmenistan's adherence to the policy of peace and good neighborliness".

Secretary-General for Political Affairs, who delivered an inaugural message on behalf of Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon.

The UNRCCA became operational in June 2008. The Center is a unique entity in the UN system. It is entrusted with a mandate to assist the Central Asian states to address common regional challenges and threats of a trans-boundary nature by using the tool of preventive diplomacy. The UNRCCA is mandated to liaise with the Governments of the region on issues relevant to preventive diplomacy; to provide monitoring and analysis; to maintain contact with regional organizations and facilitate coordination and information exchange. In addition, the Center is to provide an overall framework and leadership for the preventive activities of the UN country teams and to maintain close contact with the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan.

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During an initial phase, active consultations were conducted with the leadership of Central Asia, regional organizations (SCO, OSCE, CIS, CSTO, EU, NATO, EurAsEc), and the UN system (UN Resident Coordinators, UN Country Teams, Heads of Programs, Funds, and Agencies both in the region and at Headquarters). Given the need for a comprehensive approach to the region, consultations also took place with senior officials from neighboring countries, representatives of civil society, and the UN Assistance Mission to Afghanistan. In addition to establishing the proper channels for coordination and information exchange, the purpose of these discussions was to identify

the main challenges for peace, security, and development in the region, the existing mechanisms and capacities, and priorities for preventive action.

These meetings confirmed the need for a regional engagement, given the cross border nature of the challenges facing Central Asia, and emphasized the catalytic role that the Center could play in developing initiatives with the UN system, regional organizations, and Member States. Equally important, these interactions led to the development of a *3-Year Program of Action (2009-2011)* that constitutes the basis of the UNRCCA activities.

The program has three priorities:

- promoting an integrated approach to the management of essential common resources such as water and energy in order to prevent tensions and environmental degradation;

- supporting regional cooperation to counter cross-border threats such as terrorism, organized crime and drug-trafficking;
- supporting the efforts to stabilize Afghanistan.

In implementing its *Program of Action* the Regional Center maintained close coordination with UN agencies and relevant regional organizations to ensure better synergy and complementarity of action. Specialized meetings were organized with members of UN Country Teams operating in Central Asia to discuss strategic approaches to emerging challenges. Regular exchanges were held with representatives of OSCE, CIS, SCO, EurAsEc, EU, CSTO, NATO, ECO and other organizations.

UNRCCA implements its programmatic priorities through the conduct of joint activities involving Central States. It bases its approach on the following principles:

- It acts as a platform for dialogue and exchanges between Central Asian states with a view to assisting them in finding solutions that would be equally acceptable to all.
- It is neutral and impartial. It does not insist on pre-determined models, but tries to foster the elaboration of local solutions based on models that conform to the development and traditions of Central Asian societies. This increases the chances that solutions found will be sustainable.
- It favors an inclusive approach. UNRCCA reaches out to all relevant domestic and international stakeholders to foster international cooperation and ensure transparency in the conduct of its activities.
- It seeks to equally involve all five states in regional projects by organizing events in each of them.

The activities conducted so far ranged from a specialized forum for dialogue building among the Central Asian countries to targeted projects for capacity building and technical assistance. In designing these activities, the UNRCCA coordinates closely with regional organizations and UN entities that have ongoing projects. The Center has neither the intention nor, given its small size, the possibility to duplicate their work. Rather, the political engagement and preventive efforts by the Center, in support of the Central Asian Member States, have already brought some positive results.

Water Energy and Environment

The sector of water and energy is critically important for the development needs of Central Asia and long-term stability. About 80% of the region's water supply originates in mountainous Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. These

two countries, which suffer from lack of electricity during the cold winters and have little hydrocarbon resources, have been pursuing the construction of hydropower projects on the upper streams of the Amu Darya and the Syr Darya rivers as a means of becoming energy-independent. Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan, situated downstream, rely on water from their neighbors for their important cotton industries, as well as for agriculture. They fear that the construction of hydropower stations and new dams will reduce the flow of water for their farming industries. In Soviet times a system of exchange enabled the five states to share water and energy resources, such as electricity and gas, but this barter scheme is no longer active and the five states have been unable to devise a new one.

In order to assist in finding workable solutions, the UNRCCA has been exploring various approaches. Its actions have been aimed at stimulating an

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exchange of ideas, reducing barriers to constructive dialogue and inspiring effective decisions taking into consideration the interests of all the parties concerned. The Center has been working to establish a common understanding within the region of the causes of the problem and the processes that may contribute to its resolution.

An international seminar was organized in Kazakhstan on *International Water Law and the Negotiation of Mutually Beneficial Multilateral Water Agreements in Central Asia*. The event provided a forum of discussion about water problems where representatives of upstream and downstream countries in

the Central Asian Region and international experts shared best practices in negotiating successful trans-boundary water agreements in light of existing international water conventions and interstate agreements. As a result of this initiative, a consultative process was launched. Its purpose is to facilitate the search for a common approach to water management issues by encouraging local ownership and the elaboration of long-term sustainable solutions.

The UNRCCA was a regular guest of regional forums where water-energy issues were discussed. It was the only international structure to attend the special consultations of the five heads of the Central Asian states in Bishkek, in October 2008, dedicated to the management of water and energy resources. The Presidents reached a number of preliminary understandings on regional arrangements in advance of winter and the planting season. In April 2009,

it was invited to the Summit of the founder states of the International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea (IFAS), and delivered a message on behalf of the UN Secretary-General. The Joint Statement of the Summit called on state parties to strengthen the IFAS and develop cooperation with the UNRCCA, other UN structures and international organizations. The express reference to the Regional Center was tantamount to an explicit mandate given by the Central Asian states to the UNRCCA to pursue its preventive mediation efforts in the water and energy sphere.

The Center also worked to establish partnerships through its participation in international events⁶, advocating enhanced regional cooperation in the management of energy resources and its link to sustainable development. Future activities will be aimed at facilitating the search for a common approach by highlighting the potential shared benefits of an efficient management of natural resources. It is hoped that by providing a permanent platform for multilateral and bilateral exchanges, the Center will secure a dynamic that will allow moving from *ad hoc* to more durable solutions to water/energy problems based on consensus between the countries of the region.

Using its convening power, the UNRCCA provided a political framework for the preventive activities of UN country teams and promoted an integrated approach to environmental challenges facing the region. One of the greatest risks to the region is posed by dozens of uranium tailings throughout Central Asia left as a legacy from the former USSR military-industrial complex. These tailings contain massive amounts of toxic uranium and other extremely hazardous wastes. The state of virtually all the sites where the wastes are stored has significantly deteriorated. The risks are exacerbated by the location of the majority of tailings near populated areas, in the upper watersheds of trans-boundary Rivers and in areas that are vulnerable to earthquakes, landslides and mudflows. Should significant volumes of toxic waste contaminate the waters flowing through the Valley, the possibility of a major catastrophe for the communities located near these sites as well as for the broader Ferghana Valley, with its 12 million inhabitants, is real.

In order to support streamlining of international efforts to address this regional security concern, the UNRCCA co-chaired with the Prime Minister of Kyrgyzstan an international forum dedicated to the threat posed by uranium tailings in Central Asia⁷. The forum gathered high-level delegations from all

⁶ It participated in the *5th World Water Forum* (Istanbul, March 16-22, 2009) and the international conference on *Reliable and Stable Transit of Energy for Sustainable Development and International Cooperation* (Ashgabat, April 23-24, 2009).

Central Asian countries and donor countries, high-level officials of Headquarters, regional bureaus and representative offices of international organizations and finance institutions, representatives of the expert community and private sector. By highlighting the urgency of the problem and prioritizing preliminary proposals elaborated to-date, the event generated support and momentum to move the uranium tailings cleanup initiative forward.

Trans-Boundary Organized Crime

The overall security situation in Central Asia can be considered as generally stable but fragile. The Governments of the region have shown determination to prevent criminal trans-boundary activities. Border controls were stepped up. Isolated but deadly armed incidents were reported on the Afghan border. Against

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this background, the *Agreement on the establishment of the Central Asian Regional Information and Coordination Center (CARICC)* entered into force on March 22, 2009 following its ratification by the parliaments of Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan. CARICC is a regional interstate agency working under UNODC auspices that will assist in coordinating joint

international operations to combat illicit drug trafficking and in exchanging information on trans-border crime. The UNRCCA provides political support to the work of CARICC and facilitates streamlining of international assistance in support of its activities.

The continued threat posed by terrorist groups in Central Asia remains at the center of attention. Almost every month, law enforcement officials in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan announce new arrests of suspected terrorist militants. Individuals accused of propagating extremist ideas are tried. Measures are taken to prevent the spread of religious extremism, particularly in schools. The UNRCCA has closely followed all security-related developments in the region and plans to support Central Asian states to jointly address the threat of terrorism in all its forms and through enhanced international cooperation.

In order to facilitate cooperation in the area of counter-terrorism, it will organize, together with the UN Department of Political Affairs and the UN

⁷ International Forum *Uranium Tailings in Central Asia: National Problems, Regional Consequences, Global Solution*, Palais des Nations, Geneva (June 29, 2009).

Counter Terrorism Implementation Task Force, a series of expert meetings dedicated to the implementation of recommendations contained in the *UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy*. The expected outcome would be the adoption, at a regional Ministerial conference to be held in 2010, of a joint plan of action on implementing the *UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy in Central Asia*. The EU, SCO and other relevant organizations have shown interest in this project.

On March 21, 2009, in a landmark development, the treaty on a nuclear weapon-free zone in Central Asia came into force. The treaty was ratified by all five Central Asian states. By agreeing to adhere to a legally binding instrument, Central Asian authorities demonstrated clear commitment to address the greatest potential threat to human security. The UNRCCA is associated with efforts aimed at strengthening regional security against terrorist threats coming from weapons of mass destruction. It will mobilize efforts to raise awareness about international and regional legal instruments related to the suppression of acts of terrorism, be it nuclear, chemical or biological. For that purpose, a joint workshop on non-proliferation and international legal cooperation against biological, chemical and nuclear terrorism will be organized with UNODC in December 2009 in the presence of senior legal experts and Central Asian Diplomats.

Afghanistan

The situation in Afghanistan is one of the essential factors for the stability of Central Asian countries. Although there has been no noticeable deterioration of the security environment in connection with the war in Afghanistan, the threat of destabilization is taken very seriously by all Central Asian states. In order to ensure a comprehensive and integrated analysis of the situation in the region, in line with its mandate, the UNRCCA has maintained close contact with UNAMA.

A series of events was also organized. The UNRCCA and UNHCR highlighted problems related to Afghan refugees in Central Asia. They held a joint seminar in March 2009 with the participation of law enforcement officials of the five Central Asian states, during which security developments were also discussed. The UNRCCA promoted the role of preventive diplomacy as a conflict resolution tool by holding a workshop on global challenges in Central Asia. Experts from various Institutes of Strategic Studies in the region debated the situation in Afghanistan and the effects of the global crisis. The UNRCCA also used its participation in various regional and international forums dedicated to the situation in Afghanistan (Moscow, Islamabad, Rome, Tashkent) to advance regional security cooperation and its preventive diplomacy activities. In its future

initiatives related to Afghanistan, and coordinated with UNAMA, the UNRCCA will emphasize the positive contribution that Central Asian states can play in stabilizing and reconstructing the war-torn country through joint ventures, development projects and capacity building support.

Conclusion

The UNRCCA is operational and fully engaged. It has acquired visibility, gained acceptance and found its place in the regional landscape. It is a regular guest of international and regional events focusing on the multifaceted threats facing Central Asia. It cooperates with entities of the UN system as well as other international and regional organizations active in the region and has demonstrated its convening power in the area of preventive diplomacy. It has played a role in reducing tensions on the divisive water-energy issue by creating an atmosphere conducive to the search for mutually acceptable solutions. It plans to strengthen the ability of Central Asian states to address potential causes of conflict and use mechanisms to diffuse them, by organizing a series of trainings in Central Asia about preventive diplomacy. All in all, the UNRCCA has a *Program of Action*, initial achievements, future plans, and a clear sense of the direction its activities should take. Building upon this solid foundation, the Regional Center will continue acting as a neutral facilitator and mechanism for preventive mediation, fostering dialogue and cooperation in support of peace, stability and development in Central Asia.

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