

Conflict Constellations in Central Asia - Challenges for the OSCE¹

*Central Asia - A Future "Hot Spot"?*²

There are two primary reasons why, geopolitically, the states in Central Asia have received increasing attention recently: First, due to their presumed natural resources, the Caspian Sea states have strategic importance for the global energy supply in the 21st century. And second - a point that is directly relevant to the OSCE as an organization directed towards security policy - the region as a whole as well as individual states there will have to deal increasingly with how things look for consolidating their stability. This article will focus on the problem areas that are currently a concrete threat to stability in the Central Asian region.

According to press reports, the German Federal Intelligence Service has characterized the security situation in Central Asia as being threatening enough for the topic to be discussed even at the government level between Germany and Russia.³ The report "Global Trends 2015", which was worked out under the auspices of the CIA, takes an even deeper look into the crystal ball, but is not less pessimist. In this report, a series of experts from different fields of expertise extrapolate global developments and factors to a comprehensive strategic outlook.⁴ Any way you choose to assess the methodology in this global study, it is remarkable how often Central Asia is mentioned in connection with conflict potentials. According to the prognosis, social, ecological, religious and ethnic tensions will increase further and threaten to turn Central Asia into a "regional hot spot". Against this backdrop, the report predicts a growing demand for conflict management by the United Nations as

1 The statements in this article are the personal opinions of the author.

2 The text of this article was finalized in August 2001. Thus, the consequences of the tragic events of 11 September 2001 are not reflected. The US-led international military operation in Afghanistan, the defeat of the Taliban regime and the subsequent establishment of a provisional government in Kabul, as well as the presence of the military from several Western countries in some of the Central Asian states have fundamentally changed the overall security environment in the entire region. Afghanistan and the surrounding countries are now at the top of the agenda of the international community. This can provide also the Central Asian states with a unique opportunity to overcome underlying social, economical and political problems. However, there will be no automatism in overcoming many of the conflict constellations outlined in this article. More than ever before, the OSCE must meet the challenge by making its contribution to this.

3 Cf. Roland Nelles, BND warnt vor Krieg in Zentralasien [Federal Intelligence Service Gives Warnings of War in Central Asia], in: Die Welt, 15 February 2001.

4 National Foreign Intelligence Board, Global Trends 2015. A Dialogue About the Future With Nongovernmental Experts, December 2000, in: <http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/globaltrends2015/index.html>.

well as regional organizations.⁵ In addition, numerous other recent studies throw light on the Central Asian region, especially with respect to its potential conflict constellations.⁶

The five countries, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan - which within the OSCE framework have in somewhat of a generalization been designated "the Central Asian region" - were admitted to the CSCE (today: OSCE) in 1992 after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Since then a comprehensive dialogue between them and the OSCE has developed in the political bodies in Vienna and OSCE representatives have become active by making numerous visits to the region. In addition, since 1994, the Organization has continually increased its presence in the field there; likewise the institutions have increased their activities in the region.⁷ Thus the OSCE has a promising political as well as operational set of instruments to use its capacity as an organization for security and co-operation in reacting to stability risks in Central Asia.

Therefore there have been repeated calls - for example, by the German Foreign Minister, Joschka Fischer during his visit to the region in May 2001⁸ - that the OSCE play a stronger role in implementing conflict prevention in Central Asia. Against the backdrop of these preliminary considerations, in this article, the question will be discussed of how the OSCE can use its capacities to make a concrete contribution to promoting long-term stabilization in the region.

The author is aware that at first glance the topic "conflict constellations" implies that the primary view is on negative aspects and/or there is a danger that positive elements would be not given enough attention. Other regions in OSCE space, like the Balkans or the Caucasus, experienced political change and state-building processes in a manner much more marked by conflict than Central Asia. With the exception of the civil war in Tajikistan, there have not been any serious confrontations there. In addition, dramatic ethnic conflicts, which experts at times forecasted for this region with its numerous ethnic groups, failed to materialize. The political systems have proved stable up to now. While in other successor states of the Soviet Union economic transformation processes have been associated with existential social hardships, in Central Asia there are examples of family and social networks, which were able to cushion the most egregious characterizations of these. Above all, one should not forget that the enormous natural resources and energy reserves of the region offer a chance for positive development in the medium and long term.

5 Cf. *ibid.*, in particular pp. 32ff.

6 Cf. e.g. International Crisis Group, *Central Asia: Crisis Conditions in Three States* (ICG Asia Reports, No. 7), Brussels 2000.

7 Cf. Wilhelm Höynck, *A Sustainable Stabilization Policy in and for Central Asia*, in: Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy at the University of Hamburg/IFSH (Ed.), *OSCE Yearbook 2000*, Baden-Baden 2001, pp. 205-215.

8 Cf. German Foreign Office press release of 18 May 2001.

Current Conflict Constellations

How will the security situation in Central Asia develop on a medium- and long-term basis? Can one assume that the southern edge of the former Soviet Union will be transformed into a serious crisis area in which open conflicts, drug trafficking, terrorism and organized crime will create security risks extending far beyond the region itself? The increased attention being given to Central Asia, undoubtedly due to new security risks, is however not only aimed at direct threats but also at even further-reaching structural problems.

The theory behind this article is that the specific challenge lies in the huge number and complexity of the risks to stability and security. In the following, the most significant *problem fields* will be described based on concrete examples. However, the goal is not so much to analyse individual cases but to describe the multilayered aspect of security risks as well as the interdependence of the problem fields. Furthermore, whenever possible, concrete OSCE fields of action are to be discussed. For the first two problem fields, internal as well as external state policy will be dealt with. Following this, a description will be made of the specific actors that have threatened the regimes with violence as well as how these threats have affected the patterns of action taken by the states involved. For the fourth problem field, the areas of tension in the structure of the individual states and in the region will be dealt with. The latter two problem fields include the special complex of Afghanistan as well as the new risks closely connected with this country jeopardizing security in Central Asia.

Problem Field 1: Internal, Structural Problems as a Result of Adverse Developments in the State-Building Process and the Reform Deficits in Central Asian States

As to the structural deficits in the internal reform process, it is not a question of whether the Central Asian states should rush, so-to-speak, to copy certain Western democratic and economic models. It should not be questioned that this type of reform process requires a considerable amount of time and the Central Asian states are justified in frequently voicing this fact. Rather, in the analysis of potential constellations of conflict, the primary focus is on the extent to which internal and structural factors - in connection with other conflict causes, as the case may be - could function to activate or intensify a crisis. However, one should not overlook the fact that in certain ways the five states differ considerably with regard to their potential as well as the dynamics of their reforms.

After having achieved independent statehood, the Central Asian states so far have not been able to adequately balance their political institutions. These states are not being supported by a representative mixture of political institutions (e.g. their political parties lack diversity and there are deficiencies in

their parliamentary systems, their civil societies are not well developed, there is a lack of political participation due to a lack of really free elections etc.) but have developed into very distinctive one-person systems which are highly centralized and organized from top to bottom. Against the backdrop of potential conflicts on succession, this concentration of the whole political system on one person is not without its difficulties as in the case when a head of state is unforeseeably unable to fulfil his duties, for example because of health problems. In addition, in almost all the countries, powerful regional elites are striving to increase their influence and access to resources.⁹

As has always been true, economic development is still a fundamental challenge for all five countries even though in certain respects they have very different prerequisites and perspectives.¹⁰ Especially in economically underdeveloped regions there is a danger that because economic development has failed to occur, this not only causes increasing individual dissatisfaction¹¹ but also progressively causes extensive and massive poverty. The rapid increase in the population of some of the Central Asian states will also put more pressure on them in future. All the states in the region have to deal with rampant corruption at all political and economic levels. Organized crime is in control of fundamental parts of the economy and is often interconnected with state structures. Of course, the limitations on economic development due to organized crime and corruption are not a specifically Central Asian phenomenon.

The lack of economic perspectives for much of the population as well as the limitations on the legal opportunities for the political expression of dissatisfaction seem to open up the path - almost as if this were a pattern - for the creation of a social basis for radical and/or religious extremist groupings like the "Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan" (IMU).¹² But there is more: There is concern that militant groups will lure young people into their ranks by offering them material incentives. For example, one can assume that in Central Asia, the radical-Islamic movement "Hizb-ut-Tahrir al Islami"¹³ (HT) is especially active in recruiting new members from the ranks of young men with no prospects in the economically impoverished regions.

Those states of the region that are more intensively affected, in particular Uzbekistan, have also recognized this development and reacted with increas-

9 The influence of the regional elites on the current power structures in Uzbekistan is described e.g. in: Alisher Khamidov, *Centre-Periphery Relations in Uzbekistan*, Cambridge 2001 (lecture manuscript).

10 For a detailed report of socio-economic development in Central Asia: UNDP Regional Bureau for Europe and the CIS, *Central Asia 2010. Prospects for Human Development*, n.p. 1999.

11 Cf. Bakhodir Musaev, *Uzbeks Losing Patience*, in: IWPR, *Central Asia Reporting*, No. 47, 10 April 2001.

12 Cf. Alisher Ilkhamov, *Support base for Islamic radicals wider than previously assumed*, in: *Eurasia Insight*, 9 August 2000.

13 Cf. Igor Rotar', *Edinaya duga nestabil'nosti - ot Izrailya do Chechni? [A Uniform Bow of Instability - from Israel to Chechnya? Translation R.H.]*, in: *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, 5 April 2001; further information also at: <http://www.hizb-ut-tahrir.org>.

ingly disproportionate repression which in turn has a kind of a spiralling effect on the radicalization process and causes parts of the population to become estranged from the political system. The official version for taking repressive action is labelled "the fight against international terrorism".

Thanks to its field missions and institutions, the OSCE has an extensive set of instruments to support the Central Asian states in coping with their reform processes. The OSCE already has diverse forms of co-operation and successful collaboration albeit with differing intensities depending on the individual state. In the area of legislation, expert opinions worked out by OSCE institutions were repeatedly taken into consideration, for example in implementing the right to freedom of religion or freedom of the media. In all five states the local OSCE offices with the support of ODIHR are making efforts to promote the creation of non-governmental organizations and their dialogue with governments. For example, the OSCE Mission to Tajikistan promoted local institutions through the concrete support of independent media agencies. The OSCE can make a positive contribution to the internal dialogue in the participating States if the parties involved accept this. A concrete example of this are the "round tables" encouraged by the OSCE Centre in Almaty in conjunction with ODIHR and the Parliamentary Assembly. After the ODIHR election-monitoring mission was plainly critical of the parliamentary elections of October 1999, representatives of the government and the opposition in Kazakhstan have been endeavouring at these round tables to achieve improvements in election procedures. We could extend the list of examples of concrete OSCE activities in Central Asia significantly. However, one must also consider that the OSCE field missions have reached operational limits due to the low number of mission members there.

As diverse as OSCE activities in the area of the human dimension are, the dialogue in this area has proven difficult against the backdrop of human rights practices, which have not been satisfactory with respect to OSCE standards. The Central Asian states have repeatedly called on the Organization to balance its approach by taking their own specific security concerns further into account. However, the OSCE should make clear that better balance can only mean strengthening the economic and security dimensions, but can in no case mean being less engaged in the area of the human dimension.

Problem Field 2: Deficits in the Search for Co-operative Solutions to Differences in the Interests of Individual Countries in the Region

In the course of obtaining their independence, the Central Asian states had to define their relations among one another: Formerly, Moscow acted as a kind of corrective, but now the Central Asian states must solve mutual problems among themselves. There is a concern related to this that the Central Asian states will not succeed in regulating their relations in a co-operative manner nor are they based on partnership. The five states are very heterogeneous with

regard to their individual sizes, populations, economic strengths etc., which manifests itself in partly very unequal relationships. In particular, the relations between Uzbekistan and Tajikistan have recently become increasingly tense.

Numerous issues on the regulation of borders in the region are particularly critical and controversial. Today, there are differing views on where practically all the border lines run that in former times lay within the Soviet Union and thus had no real significance. The fact that Uzbekistan placed mines on parts of its border during the autumn of 2000 provided additional fuel for conflict. It caused the mood between Uzbekistan and Tajikistan as well as between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan to become considerably more disgruntled. While Uzbekistan maintains that it is meeting its own security interests and in this manner protecting itself from terrorists and drug traffickers, in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, it is largely pointed out that there have been numerous civilian victims. What is more: Uzbekistan has been reproached for unilaterally claiming disputed border sections for itself.¹⁴ A characteristic example of the complexity and difficulty of border issues in Central Asia is the enclave of Sokh located in the region of Batken in south Kyrgyzstan but belonging to Uzbekistan. Uzbekistan is afraid that IMU fighters will plan activities against Tashkent from Sokh and thus insists on having overland access to the enclave.¹⁵

A phenomenon recurring every year, particularly in winter, is that mutual cross-border energy deliveries are cut off. This indeed often involves outstanding debts, however the gas pipelines are sometimes shut off a little faster when certain other goals are being pursued. At the beginning of 2001 for example, the week-long interruption of Uzbek gas deliveries caused widespread freezing in Kyrgyzstan. The official reason for this was a defective pipeline; however, observers believe that the dispute over Sokh was the real motive for this Uzbek action.¹⁶

It seems there is also a current tendency to solve problems in one's own interest rather than co-operatively. An example of this was the reintroduction of a visa requirement for the Central Asian states with respect to one another and thus limitations on the freedom of movement for people and commodities. Particularly in the border areas, this led to considerable hardship as well as dissatisfaction among the people involved.

The forced return of former civil war refugees, who have in the meantime settled in Uzbekistan but have no legal status, has been a sensitive issue for Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. Yet these refugees were often ethnic Uzbeks. In a cloak-and-dagger operation during the spring of 2001, a group of 55 people

14 Cf. Sultan Jumagalov/Vladimir Davlatov/Galima Bukharbaeva, Storm Over Uzbek Landmines, in: IWPR, Reporting Central Asia, No. 33, 12 December 2000.

15 Cf. Arslan Koichiev, Batken Residents Furious Over Uzbek-Kyrgyz Border Deal, in: Eurasia Insight, 25 April 2001.

16 Cf. Arslan Koichiev, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan Map Out Their Differences, in: Eurasia Insight, 5 March 2001.

including numerous children were deported from Uzbekistan. However, Tajikistan refused to admit these people into their country thus forcing them to remain in no-man's-land for weeks.¹⁷ During this time, the OSCE and the UNHCR attempted to find a solution on-site. According to estimates, 10,000 to 30,000 people live in Uzbekistan whose status is similarly unclear.

This example shows that conflicts of interest have up to now not always been solved reflecting the *co-operative security* of all those involved. One of the difficulties here is that in the perception of certain countries, especially Uzbekistan shows little consideration for its weaker neighbours.

Political observers and diplomats on-the-spot have repeatedly reported on how complicated the personal relationship between the five Presidents is. Due to the fact that foreign policy in Central Asia is also presidential policy, this does not make it any easier to come to a mutual understanding in all cases. On the other hand, it is a part of the political culture in Central Asia that disputes and declarations of eternal friendship can occur practically simultaneously. Apparently insurmountable difficulties can be cleared up at short notice with a telephone call between two Presidents.

The search for common solutions through an inter-state dialogue based on partnership is part of OSCE "philosophy". Therefore also in Central Asia, the OSCE should make it a primary task to support any kind of dialogue and co-operation. There are already a considerable number of regional initiatives¹⁸ that have the potential to contribute to security and co-operation in the region. Thus the OSCE together with the Central Asian states could investigate how these mechanisms might be reinforced, should the occasion arise, for instance by exchanging experiences, political support or through common projects in specific areas. Also the Personal Representative of the OSCE Chairman-in-Office for Central Asia, first appointed in 1999 by the Norwegian Chair,¹⁹ could move towards discussing regional issues within the OSCE framework and launching comprehensive initiatives across the countries.

OSCE regional initiatives do not always find the undivided assent of the Central Asian states; "special treatment" of Central Asia within the Organization is not always welcome. For example, not all Central Asian states thought it made sense to appoint a Personal Representative for Central Asia. Also when it comes to solving concrete problems, the involvement of an external actor like the OSCE is not always looked upon favourably. For example, a British initiative within the framework of the OSCE aimed at discuss-

17 Cf. Report of Forced Deportation Could Heighten Uzbek-Tajik Tension, in: Eurasia Insight, 28 March 2001.

18 For example the "Shanghai Co-operation Organization", the "Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia", "Economic Cooperation Organization", the "Central Asia Economic Forum" etc.

19 In 1999, a "Personal Representative" of the Chairman-in-Office was appointed for the first time, the German diplomat and former OSCE Secretary General, Wilhelm Höynck. In 2000, the current Secretary General Ján Kubiš took over this post. In May 2001, Wilhelm Höynck was again appointed to this position.

ing long-term regulation of water management in the region was rejected by Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.

Problem Field 3: The Threat of Radical Armed Groups

The most direct threat potentially leading to a violent conflict in Central Asia is currently the above-mentioned "Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan" (IMU), whom many spectators expected to invade Uzbekistan during the summer of 2001.²⁰ The IMU is an armed group that originated in the Uzbek part of the Fergana Valley. In the course of newly won independence at the beginning of the nineties, Islam experienced a renaissance initially in the Fergana Valley. Local, religiously motivated groups became established that increasingly also assumed social functions. At the end of the day, the government in Tashkent began to consider these a threat after the loyalty of the local administrations towards the central government was increasingly brought into question. In the Fergana Valley, the so-called "Adolat" movement under the leadership of Tahir Yoldashev was particularly influential. Representatives of the religious movements including Yoldashev were expelled from Uzbekistan and fled to, among other places, Tajikistan during the civil war there. In Tajikistan, these Uzbeks made contacts with the United Tajik Opposition and some of them fought on their side. This circle also included Jumaboi Khojiev, better known as Juma Namangani, who became the military leader of the IMU. Later, these groups escaped to Afghanistan to areas controlled by the Taliban. The vague political goal of the IMU is to create a "Fergana Caliphate".²¹ Additionally, the IMU was blamed for the attempted bomb attack on President Islam Karimov in February 1999 in Tashkent. During the summer of 1999, the IMU invaded the region of Batken in southern Kyrgyzstan, and during the summer of 2000, they invaded both southern Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. Also during the summer of 2000, a group of US citizens were kidnapped for a short period leading the US State Department to put the IMU on the list of terrorist organizations.²²

After the "shock of Batken"²³ during the summer of 1999, in particular Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, but also Kazakhstan became much better prepared for the potential activities of rebel groups. It has to be seen as a security-relevant side effect that the Central Asian states, which have been particularly affected, have been forced to adapt the security apparatus they had inherited

20 Cf. e.g. Gregory Gleason, IMU Offensive Fears, in: Institute for War and Peace, Reporting Central Asia 43/2001.

21 Cf. Uwe Halbach, Sicherheit in Zentralasien. Teil II: Kleinkriege im Ferganatal und das Problem der "neuen Sicherheitsrisiken" [Security in Central Asia. Part II: Small Wars in the Fergana Valley and the Problem of "New Security Risks"], Berichte des Bundesinstituts für ostwissenschaftliche und internationale Studien [Reports of the Federal Institute for Russian, East European and International Studies] 25/2000, in particular pp. 13-17.

22 Cf. the statement of Richard Boucher, Spokesperson for the US State Department, SEC.DEL/264/00, 15 September 2000.

23 Halbach, cited above (Note 20), pp. 7-13.

from the Soviet period to these new threat potentials.²⁴ Although it is not hard to understand this, it did also lead to considerable militarization of the region. The Central Asian states felt compelled to divert economic resources, which were urgently needed in other areas, to the security apparatus.

In informal discussions with Western military observers in the region, the view is often expressed that the IMU is less of a danger because of its military potential (depending on the source, they are said to have an estimated 1,000 to 5,000 armed fighters) than because of the increasing backing it is receiving from society, which is due to generally growing dissatisfaction among the population.

In this sense, however, the "*Hizb-ut-Tahrir*" (HT), which claims to have originated during the fifties in the Middle East, seems to be a much greater danger potential because in contrast to the IMU, its arguments are much more ideological. The HT considers itself a party and works conspiratorially in small cells. It is estimated - also by official sources - that in Central Asia it has several tens of thousands of members and that above all young people from economically underdeveloped regions are actively recruited. In the pamphlets distributed illegally by its supporters, it has repeatedly spoken out against violence; instead it is seeking to achieve its goals by changing people's consciousness. Similar to the IMU, the HT is striving to create an Islamic Caliphate in which Sharia law rules. It is unclear what the links between the HT and the IMU are.

The Central Asian states, especially Uzbekistan (with first signs also in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan) are concerned that their populations will become increasingly susceptible to radical Islamic ideas, in particular because the groups mentioned are said to have links to orthodox religious groups in Arab countries. Against this backdrop, the Central Asian states have reacted to a certain extent with massive repression and suppression even of moderate Islamic groups. Foreign observers, who have visited the Fergana Valley since 1999, have reported repeatedly that due to exaggerated massive arrests the atmosphere in the population has been very tense. It has also been frequently implied that the threat posed by extremists is used as a pretext to justify the use of a strict internal control apparatus against political opponents.

On the one hand, the emergence of groups willing to use violence and terror have induced the Central Asian states, especially when it comes to fighting terrorism, to co-operate more closely on a regional basis. On the other, the attendant circumstances of the IMU invasions of 1999 and 2000 led to considerable discord between Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. It was Uzbekistan's position that Tajikistan was not taking enough action on its territory against Namangani's fighters. Tajikistan denied repeatedly that the IMU was operating from its territory. However, especially a further IMU military operation

24 Cf. Tamara Makarenko, Central Asia commits to military reform to counter changing internal and external security threats, in: *Jane's Intelligence Review* 2000, September 2000.

could give Uzbekistan the opportunity to take measures against Tajikistan. In connection with this, rumour-mongers delight in mentioning the name of a field commander in the Tajik civil war, Mahmud Khudoberdiev. Already in November 1998, he had made a futile attempt to advance from the province of Leninabad in the northern part of Tajikistan into Dushanbe. Khudoberdiev is purported to have good contacts with Tashkent.

The threat of armed groups is a very real concern for the Central Asian states. The OSCE has repeatedly and clearly condemned the use of terror and the then OSCE Chairperson-in-Office also made a press statement denouncing the IMU invasions during the summer of 2000.²⁵ In particular, the Austrian Chair pushed ahead with the topic of Central Asia within the OSCE and backed the Central Asian states by encouraging them to point out security threats as well as enlist support and understanding. However, in its dialogue with the Central Asian states, the OSCE should make clear that in the use of repressive measures, there is a danger that certain groups will become more radical. An important aspect of this is that the great majority of the population in all the Central Asian states rejects violence and terror. In the strategies to fight terrorism in the countries involved, more emphasis could be placed on how to mobilize this potential in a positive manner thus also stigmatizing support for radical organizations. OSCE know-how in the area of strengthening civil society could be a way in which the OSCE could support the Central Asian states in a broadly structured fight against terrorism. In addition, within the framework of the OSCE, the relationship between anti-terror measures and the principles of states founded on the rule of law as well as exercising freedom of religion could be addressed to be able to prevent overly drastic anti-terror measures from producing a counter-productive effect on certain parts of the population. Co-operation with the OSCE in this manner would give an important signal to other countries which are concerned that the fight against terrorism could be used to suppress any form of opposition.

Problem Field 4: Latent Tensions in Inner-State and Regional Structures

Born of the republics of the former Soviet Union, the five new Central Asian states also inherited formidable challenges that are intrinsic to its inner-state as well as regional structures. Therefore, it has to be taken into consideration that this has often been an additional burden for these countries in coping with the already difficult process of state-building and system transformation. These tensions, inherent in inner-state structure, were most violent in Tajikistan where ten thousands of people were the victims of a bloody civil war from 1992 to 1997. Fundamentally, the causes of this civil war were the highly pronounced conflicts of interests between the various regions of Tajik-

25 Cf. Press release of the former OSCE Chairperson-in-Office Benita Ferrero Waldner on 16 August 2000.

istan and the differences between the regional elites. The regions have also developed in very different ways economically. A peace plan negotiated by the UN and backed by the OSCE, which has been aimed at balancing regional interests, has since the signing of the "General Agreement" in 1997 enabled the country first to declare an armistice and then undergo a phase of gradual stabilization and improvement in the internal security situation.²⁶ Nevertheless, there are still numerous questions as to whether inner-Tajik peace is sustainable. For instance, the economic situation of this geographically isolated country is extremely critical. As has always been the case, there are still influential groups in the country who are striving to gain significant political influence and better access to resources. During the spring of 2001, the country was shaken by the assassination of the deputy interior minister, Khabib Sanginov, a prominent representative of the United Tajik Opposition. Other external factors like the tense military situation in Afghanistan could lead to more destabilization.

A very prominent catchword in connection with the current conflict potential in Central Asia is the Fergana Valley, which apparently contains all conceivable ingredients for a future regional conflict.²⁷ Islam has very deep roots in the Fergana Valley. Around ten million people of highly diverse ethnic composition are concentrated in this narrow strip of land stretching across three different countries. This primarily agricultural region is an economic problem zone characterized by high unemployment. There are disputes on the division of workable land as well as the distribution of jobs along ethnic lines that are seen as being potential sources of conflict. The city of Osh and its surrounding areas, which lie in the section of the Fergana Valley belonging to Kyrgyzstan, were already haunted by violent ethnically motivated turmoil during the summer of 1990.

The inner structures of Kyrgyzstan are also characterized, alone geographically, by differences between north and south, which are not always easy to reconcile politically. The southern part of the country feels it has economic disadvantages in comparison to the north and this perception, as has already been mentioned, also follows along ethnic lines: Ethnic Uzbeks make up a large part of the population in the south, but are clearly underrepresented in the municipal authorities. Thus it is suspected that there is the potential here that the population would back the IMU or even the HT. The north-south divide has also had an effect on the central government in Bishkek, which has been forced to take the south into consideration in its policies.

One aspect that should not be overlooked in the wider region - likewise against the backdrop of potential conflict constellations - is the issue of the Uighurs, and in this connection, separatist efforts in the autonomous Chinese

26 For detailed treatment of the conflict and the peace process in Tajikistan see: Kamoludin Abdullaev/Catherine Barnes (Eds.), *Politics of compromise. The Tajikistan peace process*, London 2001.

27 Cf. Sam Nunn/Barnett R. Rubin/Nancy Lubin, *Calming the Ferghana Valley. Development and Dialogue in the Heart of Central Asia*, New York 1999.

province of Xinjiang. Kazakhstan as well as Kyrgyzstan have significant Uighur minorities. It is said that the HT has been appealing directly to ethnic Uighurs in Central Asia to enlist their support.²⁸ Moreover, during the spring of 2001, rumours circulated that the IMU had changed its name to "*Hizb-e-Islami Turkestan*" (Islamic Party of Turkestan) to underline their claim to being a relevant regional influence.²⁹

In connection with the structural problems of the region, in particular, one must point out the aspect of the distribution and consumption of natural resources. For example, all five countries are highly dependent on one another in their use of hydro-systems and energy supply.³⁰ Independent of the environmental effects of inefficient water use, the existential distributional battles over water are deemed to be one of the most important potential conflict causes in the region. On the other hand, the countries of the region often call attention to the fact that they have hundreds of years of experience in utilizing their water resources in common.

As was mentioned above, co-operation between these countries is a central element in the search for joint solutions to regional conflicts of interests. This includes in particular the questions of the use of natural resources or coping with environmental crises. Important donors such as international financial institutions, development aid organizations and bilateral donor countries must make international endeavours that go beyond small projects and aim for example at a de-escalation in particularly tense regions (e.g. the Fergana Valley) by making developmental contributions affecting structure. Realistically, the OSCE can only have a very limited role in this process. It can only make other partners aware, from its own perspective, of the risks in the region and encourage development measures that prevent crisis and conflict.

Problem Field 5: The Conflict in Afghanistan Has Increasingly Had Direct Effects on the Security in Central Asia

Repeatedly, the Central Asian states have pointed out that without a solution to the Afghanistan conflict security will not be sustainable in their countries and thus each of them will be forced to align their policies according to this *external* risk. Time after time, they have started initiatives to support UN peace efforts. Of course, the OSCE does not have a mandate to directly contribute to a solution to the conflict in Afghanistan. In point 14 of the Istanbul Summit Declaration, however, there is a clear reference to threats from neighbouring countries.

The war, which has lasted over 20 years, has changed Afghanistan into a chaotic country in which there is no semblance of order. The Taliban, which

28 Cf. Igor Grebenshchikov, Kyrgyz Exploit Uigur Minority, in: IWPR, Reporting Central Asia, No. 49, 27 April 2001.

29 Cf. RIA Novosti, 21 May 2001.

30 An introduction to water issues: Philip Micklin, Managing Water in Central Asia, London 2000.

appeared as a new actor on the international scene during the mid-nineties, are also increasingly relevant for the Central Asian states.³¹ The military situation in Afghanistan changed during the summer of 2000 when the Taliban offensive was remarkably successful. Especially the capture of the city of Taloqan was characterized as decisive in weakening the Northern Alliance. While fighting during former years had taken place mainly during the summer months, during the winter of 2000/2001, for the first time, there was no break in the war. At the same time, the Taliban summer offensive meant a bitter setback for the UN in its peace efforts.³² Their lack of flexibility in the "Osama bin Ladin question" further drove the Taliban into international isolation, in the end leading the UN Security Council to a resolution on 19 December 2000 placing sanctions on the Taliban.³³ These sanctions then pushed the dispirited Northern Alliance forward politically and especially militarily; for instance, they were able to improve their fighting capacity due to foreign weapon deliveries. At the same time, the Taliban continued to show reluctance towards participating in peace negotiations. Against the backdrop of these developments, the UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan's Special Representative, the Spaniard Francesc Vendrell, repeatedly voiced the fear that the most violent clashes could be expected during the summer of 2001, and that only after this a new assessment of the situation - also with regard to international peace efforts - could be made.³⁴ However, currently it seems rather improbable that the inner-Afghan conflict will spread to Central Asia. Nevertheless, the present situation in Afghanistan encourages the activities of those groups who are interested in exporting radical and extremist ideas to Central Asia.

As a result of the military escalation, the refugee problem has acquired a new dimension. According to estimates of the UN Special Mission to Afghanistan, alone since the autumn of 2000, because of the hostilities, there were again up to 150,000 refugees in northern Afghanistan fleeing the conflict. This state of affairs deteriorated due to the catastrophic drought in the inner-Asian region during the summer of 2000.

Because the OSCE has not had the opportunity to become directly involved in Afghanistan, it can only give backing to UN diplomatic activities politically. In the analysis of the conflict constellation in Central Asia, it is soberingly apparent that there is no short-term solution to the Afghanistan conflict. Even if there were an armistice, the political and economic rehabilitation of this country, which has been completely destroyed by war, would still have a very long way to go. Therefore, for the Central Asian countries, the focus is

31 For a history of the origins of the Taliban see: Ahmed Rashid, *Taliban: Islam, Oil and the New Great Game in Central Asia*, n.p. 2000.

32 Cf. Ahmed Rashid, *Afghanistan: The Year in Review*, in: *Eurasia Insight*, 16 January 2001.

33 Cf. UN Security Council, Decision no. 1333 (2000).

34 Statement by Vendrell within the framework of an informal meeting with the delegations of the OSCE participating States on 11 April 2001 in Vienna.

on the question of how to deal with security risks radiating from Afghanistan in the short and medium term.

Problem Field 6: New Security Risks

The Central Asian states are directly affected by "new threat potentials", which are also closely connected to the afore-mentioned problem field: These include international terrorism, drug trafficking and organized crime. Afghanistan has developed into the most important country in international drug trafficking with all its negative implications for the region. During 1999, according to UN estimates, almost four fifths of raw opium manufactured worldwide came from Afghanistan and increasingly heroin production has also been transferred there. It is assumed that a large amount of the drugs produced there is smuggled into the West through Central Asia.³⁵ It remains to be seen what effect the Taliban interdiction on opium cultivation will have. Although the Central Asian states have taken certain major steps in the fight against drugs, the fact that border and customs authorities have inferior technical equipment remains a problem as does omnipresent corruption. A large part of the operations of armed groups is in all likelihood financed by drug trafficking. These groups, in turn, find an ideal environment in Afghanistan, where military instruction takes place in training camps.

The OSCE is not an organization specifically designed to fight drug trafficking, organized crime and terrorism, as it does not have the technical expertise or the corresponding resources for these activities. On the other hand, in view of their security relevance, it cannot ignore these topics, principally because the core of the entire drug problem in Central Asia lies not least in the fact that the demand for these drugs rests in the European and American markets. The OSCE gives support to the activities of other organizations politically in the sense set out in the Platform for Co-operative Security in the European Security Charter of 1999, in this context especially to the UNODCCP. Based on this and because of the topicality of the new security risks, in October 2000, the Austrian OSCE Chair and the UNODCCP, together with the five Central Asian states, organized an international conference - which was given broad coverage - in Tashkent on enhancing security and stability in Central Asia.³⁶ Within the framework of this conference, the five Central Asian states adopted two documents on the improvement of co-operation in the fight against organized crime, drug trafficking and terrorism. These documents had been prepared under the auspices of the OSCE and UNODCCP. In addition to this, the OSCE also has the capacity to introduce its comprehensive security approach - which was one of the goals of the Austrian Chair within the

35 Information given by a UNDCP representative at the 9th OSCE Economic Forum, cf. EF.DEL/78/01.

36 International Conference on Enhancing Security and Stability in Central Asia: An Integrated Approach to Counter Drugs, Organized Crime and Terrorism, Summary Report, Vienna 2001.

framework of the Tashkent Conference - by implementing, for example, its experience in strengthening the rule of law and civil society or by promoting approaches to regional co-operation.³⁷ The Central Asian states, in turn, could utilize the OSCE and its bodies as a platform to gain bilateral support among the other participating States, for example, in the areas of training and providing equipment.

Especially in the countries of Central Asia where state security organs are often forced to operate under difficult economic conditions, the problem of the uncontrolled distribution of small weapons to organized crime groups including those involved in drug trafficking is also particularly important.³⁸ Thus the OSCE could make a contribution to backing the Central Asian states in the fight against new security risks by establishing concrete co-operation based on the OSCE Document on Small Arms and Light Weapons³⁹, for example in the form of training programmes or an exchange of ideas.

The Greater Goal of Long-Term Stabilization Policy - Comprehensive Action in a Complex Environment

It is not infrequent at academic gatherings on the topic of conflict prevention in Central Asia that one hears the question: "What is the OSCE strategy in Central Asia?" Unfortunately, there is no straightforward answer to this question for the simple reason that "the OSCE" is made up of 55 states including the five Central Asian states and has very different interests and concepts on the region. Moreover, the environment is not static, but again and again, additional challenges arise demanding new answers. However, it is clear that the region requires security and peace to be able to achieve a social and economic order in the long term offering the people of the region a worthwhile life. Therefore the Central Asian states as well as the OSCE and its institutions must make long-term sustainable stabilization policy their primary goal.⁴⁰ In the following only a few of the elements of this kind of stabilization policy in Central Asia, designed to create a framework for OSCE engagement, will be addressed:

- *Comprehensive security*: The presentation of the conflict constellations based on six problem fields in this article is neither complete nor does it give sufficient coverage of all relevant details. Central Asia is not threatened by a restricted monocausal conflict, but is characterized by a

37 The Austrian OSCE Chair published a background paper on the Tashkent Conference in which the capacities and limitations of OSCE engagement in the fight against drug trafficking, organized crime and terrorism are discussed: OSCE Chairmanship 2000, The OSCE and Security Aspects in Central Asia, in: Summary Report, cited above (Note 36).

38 Cf. Bobi Pirseyedi, *The Small Arms Problem in Central Asia: Features and Implications*, UN publications, n.p. 2000.

39 Reprinted in this volume, pp. 503-519.

40 See also: Wilhelm Höynck, cited above (Note 7).

multilayered mixture of interactive internal and external areas of tension. Measures for a long-term stabilization policy should therefore include all aspects of security. Crisis and conflict prevention measures are necessary for all problem fields mentioned above. A few of the options have been mentioned that the OSCE could take, utilizing the instruments at its disposal, to make concrete contributions to the various dimensions.

- *Co-operative approach:* The OSCE and its instruments can only be successful in those states where the states themselves want it to be successful. It would also be wrong to point a finger at "the Central Asian states" or to develop plans in the offices in Vienna or in other Western European capitals that stipulate what would allegedly be "good" for them. This does not mean, however, that one should not look latent problems directly in the eye. It must be part of an approach based on partnership that state policies on the wrong track having an effect on the security of the region are made a topic for discussion.
- *OSCE as political platform:* The Central Asian states can use the OSCE as a possible forum to give their concerns a better hearing. In the meantime, the issue of Central Asia has gained considerable importance within the OSCE and the understanding of their problems has increased remarkably; in particular, the Austrian OSCE Chair during the year 2000 was very active in this respect making Central Asia a focus. In addition, the Central Asian states can give evidence to third-party states and international actors of their willingness to reform by openly participating in the OSCE and complying with OSCE standards.⁴¹
- *Regional approach:* Many of the challenges not only affect single countries and therefore require co-operative solutions taking into account the interests of the different actors concerned. The promotion of regional dialogue and co-operation should therefore be a priority in the OSCE stabilization policy in and for Central Asia. In this context, particularly the office of the Personal Representative for Central Asia must be mentioned. Under certain circumstances it would also make sense to strengthen already existing regional initiatives outside the OSCE.
- *Continuity and long-term perspectives:* Because the OSCE Chair changes every year, OSCE priorities are periodically reset. A single Chair is not in a position, even through intense involvement in Central Asia, to solve the complexities of the security challenges there on a truly sustainable level. Long-term perspectives and continuity in political dialogue as well as operational activities are therefore the prerequi-

41 For example, in article 1 of its statute, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development makes an explicit reference to democracy based on a multi-party system, pluralism and a market economy. The country strategy for Uzbekistan, published by the bank a short time ago, refers for example to the OSCE/ODIHR report on the parliamentary and presidential elections in Uzbekistan. Cf. EBRD, Strategy for Uzbekistan, 3 April 2001, p. 29.

site for a serious stabilization policy. A fundamental element of this are the field presences and the different institutions, which through their long-term mandates guarantee coherence in OSCE activities. Placing an even stronger accent on long-term programmes rather than single smaller projects that have limited effect could contribute further to continuity and long-term perspectives. However, one should not overlook the fact that the OSCE presences in Central Asia are extremely small offices that already fulfil comprehensive tasks and are therefore limited in their operational capacities.

- *Co-operation with other partners:* Realistically, the scope and range of OSCE involvement will always remain limited. Specialized organizations and institutions have far better capacity to implement many of the concrete measures required. Especially in the areas in which the OSCE does not have its own resources, for example in the economic dimension, it is dependent on co-operation with other partners. However the OSCE can take on the role of a political catalyst and - on the basis of its comprehensive security concept - make technical and special organizations aware of the problems of the region.

The answer to the question at the beginning of this article of whether Central Asia will become a regional hot spot depends on a whole host of actors and factors within and outside the region. The OSCE does have concrete options to have an effect on the problem fields described above and is thus able to contribute to the stabilization of the region, but one should not overestimate the OSCE's scope in its current form.