

# Central Asia

## Regional perspectives for the White Paper on Peacebuilding

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### Introduction

Throughout the last decade, Central Asia has remained largely stable, albeit with periodic outbreaks of spectacular violence. These have affected the eastern region, the Ferghana Valley, comprised of the states of Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Although poor, these countries are not heavily dependent on international assistance, but rely primarily on labour remittances, aid and loans from Russia and China. The price for stability has been strong authoritarian rule, in which the regimes maintain their legitimacy through a combination of performance-based and symbolic means.<sup>1</sup> Kyrgyzstan, the only country where the inherited Soviet institutions have been dismantled to give way to democratisation, has been affected by interethnic conflict and social turmoil. It has also experienced two forceful regime changes, as a result of which its neighbours came to regard it as a source of chaos and instability. The situation in the cross-border areas of the Valley has been deteriorating since 2013 when clashes occurred around Sokh enclave (Uzbekistan/Kyrgyzstan). This was followed by incidents on the Kyrgyz/Tajik border, which in January 2014 escalated into armed hostilities. The first casualties were sustained in July 2014, leading to a sharp deterioration in interstate relations.

The region has been a subject to international peacebuilding since 2001 when the War on Terror was launched in Afghanistan. International non-governmental organisations (NGOs) entered the region in around 2008, but few interventions beyond the community level have been successful due to a lack of established relationships and the inability to navigate through the difficult context and build ties with the national governments. The Organisation of Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) has done better in Kyrgyzstan, both in its 'Peace Messengers' peacebuilding programme and in working on border issues.

Recently, the majority of the international community's attention has been geared towards Afghanistan, a country that faces the region from the south. The withdrawal of the Coalition Troops in 2014 provided the grounds for an apocalyptic scenario of instability spillover into Central Asia, which would

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<sup>1</sup> See A. Matveeva, 'Legitimising Authoritarian States in Central Asia: Political Manipulation and Symbolic Power,' *Europe – Asia Studies*, September 2009.

The Geneva Peacebuilding Platform is a joint project of four institutions:



destabilise the entire region. The West feels responsible for first intervening in the country and then abandoning its neighbours to deal with the consequences of the pullout. The Central Asian governments also view this as a key moment when the West's attention is at its height and gains of security assistance should be capitalised upon. Thus, they present the challenges from Afghanistan at their maximum, knowing that the donors are likely to listen and deliver the desired security assistance. Otherwise, the international spotlight is already moving towards Iraq and Syria.

In the author's opinion, the situation in Afghanistan is unlikely to affect Central Asia to the point of a destabilisation, because:

- The region is outside of the Taliban's traditional Pashto belt and the movement has more significant targets within Afghanistan. The Taliban has also evolved into a different political force from that which existed at the onset of the international intervention.
- The northern areas of Afghanistan present no credible military threat to the Taliban nationwide, unlike at the time of Ahmad-Shah Massoud in the 1990s when he could lay a claim to the whole country.
- Central Asian states are more prepared to resist an attack. Border defences have been reinforced, and the capacities of the border troops were beefed up both by Russia and the West. For Tajikistan, the river is a natural obstacle. In the case of a direct danger, the government would not hesitate to blow up the bridges erected with international support.
- In the worst-case scenario, Russia has a military base in Tajikistan and is bound by the Collective Security Treaty Organisation provision to render assistance at the onset of an external intervention.

## Challenges to building peace in Central Asia

**The decay of inherited institutions and the value system that promoted internationalism.** The potential for conflict grows in the Ferghana Valley as states move further away from the shared Soviet past and ideologies of nationhood clash with each other. Escalation and violence inside the region is more probable than a major destabilisation coming from Afghanistan as, while tensions are on the rise, preventative measures lag behind.

**Geopolitics** play an enormous role in Central Asia, with the Great Game replayed as the US/UK, Russia and China are vying for power and influence over the region, often undermining each other's efforts towards peace and stability. China, as a regional player, has not participated in peacebuilding efforts either through the UN or the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, despite it being in its mandate. There is a lot of speculation on China's role, but this expectation is arguably misplaced, as Beijing is not interested in peacebuilding due to the high sensitivity of such interventions.

**Justice Agenda.** An unaddressed justice agenda provides grounds for further conflict in Kyrgyzstan. We witness young men from the prosecuted Uzbek minority becoming radicalised, entering *jihadi* movements and fighting in the Middle East. There will be time when they return home. This is a relatively new phenomenon in Kyrgyzstan that emerged after the 2010 interethnic conflict. The 'peace versus justice' dilemma is very potent for peacebuilding, but the international community has not yet engaged with it seriously. Yet, if justice issues are left

unattended, many other efforts are in vain. While it is unfeasible that the UN would take officials presiding over the massacre of civilians to The Hague, it is within our power to prevent them from being taken on study tours to learn European democratic practices.

**The root causes of conflict.** The key conflict issues – some of which led to the 2010 clashes and others that were created by it – remain largely unaddressed. The exclusion of minorities from civilian administration and the security sector has only worsened. Political dialogue between the conflict parties was never attempted. Justice and human rights in the conflict aftermath made little progress. Harassment of the Uzbek minority by security agencies continues unchallenged by UN human rights professionals. The presence of the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNOHCHR) helps to keep these issues on the agenda, although its reluctance to tackle them and the weak leadership from the headquarters are problematic. UNOHCHR decided to distance itself from the findings and recommendations of the international Kyrgyzstan Inquiry Commission (KIC), although it would have been a natural body to lead the follow-up. It appears that its staying power in the country has superseded normative considerations.

**UN focus.** The purpose of the UN presence in Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan is unclear. Both are middle-income countries and Kazakhstan is, in fact, a donor. They have problems that could lead to instability, such as Islamist cells and an identity split in Kazakhstan, but the states do not see a role for outsiders in resolving them. Nor are the regimes interested in a reform agenda along the international community's lines, viewing 'peacebuilding' as an unnecessary and potentially dangerous game.

Exclusive international focus on Afghanistan has distracted attention from pressing internal problems. This mood affected the UN, sometimes resulting in the creation of artificial programmes and connections with Afghanistan, for which there is no real demand. Tajikistan is better connected to Afghanistan now than within its own country, although one of the main reasons for the civil war of the 1990s was a hopeless regional split among the Tajik nation. In Kyrgyzstan, the UN works on projects connecting the country with Afghanistan, despite the fact that the countries share no common border.

**It's the bureaucracy, stupid!** The UN system is not well suited to conflict prevention because it is very slow. For example, an assessment conducted for the UN in August 2013 identified conflict potential in cross-border areas as considerable and, indeed, in January 2014 armed hostilities broke out. UNDP eventually designed a cross-border regional strategy in February 2014 and by June the proposal was submitted, yet in July the first fatality occurred. The operations will start a year after the initial assessment. Even when the money arrives, undertaking quick impact projects, such as improving markets in cross-border areas to keep the channels of inter-communal interaction open, would perhaps be challenging because UNDP procurement procedures must be followed. This is likely to take time, by which point local people become accustomed to traders from the other side not coming to their markets and cross-border trade enters the illicit domain. Rebuilding relations when they are broken is far more difficult than giving them a chance when they are still warm.

**A legacy of past problems.** In the past, UN peacebuilding has had three programming challenges. The first was a disconnect between its work with communities and local authorities in conflict-prone areas (e.g. Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan) and its security sector work (e.g. the Border Management Programme in Central Asia, BOMCA). The second was insufficient conflict- and context- analysis, resulting in an inability to recognise the signals of impending crises. This was reinforced by the then leadership's lukewarm interest in conflict and peacebuilding issues. The

third was the UN's rural bias, largely overlooking the role of cities in conflict and peacebuilding. Whereas cities play a key role in conflict gestation, escalation and subsequent resolution, most agencies, such as UNDP and UNICEF, concentrated on the countryside. These problems are being overcome, but their legacy is not entirely over.

## **Opportunities for building peace in Central Asia**

Since the countries of the Ferghana Valley have been affected by conflict and instability during their post-independence history, talk of peacebuilding resonates, albeit differently in each case. In Uzbekistan, it is possible to speak in terms of regional conflict, but the internal situation is a taboo. Still, Central Asia is a hard political terrain for the UN to function. Kyrgyzstan is the only free country where the UN has considerable room for manoeuvre; in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, it has to operate within tight parameters imposed by the government.

Three main conflict drivers are the deterioration of interethnic relations reinforced by ideologies of ethnically-based statehood, the establishment of borders and an increased appeal of Islamist movements. The trend in the border areas is towards further segregation, despite border delimitation emerging as a root cause for conflict. Meanwhile, in the past the UN saw the root cause as being the deficiency of basic services. Inter-communal relations in a number of areas are at a boiling point and it would not take much to trigger bloodshed. While it is unlikely that UNDP would be able to significantly influence the spread of religious radicalism, it has assets and opportunities to make a positive difference regarding the former two issues.

The UN is still the best instrument the international community has in Central Asia, exceeding contributions of the regional organisations, bilateral donors and international NGOs in the quality and scope of its efforts. This is explained by the ability of the UN system to work with state institutions, given the strong state-oriented nature of the countries and its extensive operations throughout the region.

Unlike in other contexts, in Central Asia the UN runs many programmes itself. This gives it the buy-in not only of the top echelon, but also of the authorities and communities on the ground. It also gives provides the UN with insights into the intricacies of the political and security context. That said, the UN agencies are also the objects of spying by the state, and its local staff can be under pressure by the security apparatus to inform.

In the past, the UN's strategic weakness has been its disconnect from Russia's presence and influence in the region, resulting in two parallel streams of assistance. This situation has been rectified lately with Russia becoming a UNDP donor and a strategic alignment in political messaging emerging. The UN is seen less and less as a US organisation in the region where suspicion of American intentions is a factor.

The high degree of support for regional programming by the UN Resident Coordinators (RCs) who threw their combined weight behind the need for a peacebuilding intervention across border is an opportunity. Such rapport among UN leadership is unusual, as the common attitude towards regional programmes is that of caution – it is easier to work at the national level.

The UN is present in the region in a development rather than peacekeeping or humanitarian capacity. On a positive note, the UN leadership has invested in managing (highly personalised) relationships with the major power-holders. The role of the UN RCs is crucial and much depends

on finding the right person for the job. Thus, while discussing what could be done for conflict prevention and peacebuilding, we have to be mindful of the constraints of an authoritarian state and the personalities of UN officials. The RCs are supported by 'Peace and Development Advisers' in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, and a regional centre in Istanbul.

## Required support for building peace and the role of the UN

**Strategic approach to peacebuilding.** An Immediate Response Facility of US\$3 million was deployed in two phases after the 2010 conflict in Kyrgyzstan. In 2013, the UN Peacebuilding Fund (PBF) entered its second-generation phase. The Peacebuilding and Recovery Facility (PRF) funding of US\$15.1 million for 2.5 years (2014-2016) has been approved with the aim of supporting 'innovative' projects. The PRF was an opportunity to venture into the difficult areas where the weight of the UN was essential. The PBF was interpreted as a source of funding to be dispersed by means of an internal grants competition. 24 applications from 17 agencies were received, and an uneasy distribution process followed.

Although drafting concept notes was a positive experience, no strategy was worked out in advance to fit proposals from the UN agencies and the background study was a general overview rather than a baseline and gap analysis. A possible place to start would have been a reflection on the recommendations of the KIC, but this did not happen. The result has been a sum of projects, some better than others, with no underlying strategic concept, an absence of the programme rationale and limited innovation, driven more by UN agencies' supply of capacities and expertise than by analysis.

Some argued that the role of New York in strategic steering could have been greater, as it had almost withdrawn from the process. The absence of guidelines, as well as the inclusion of all UN agencies irrespective of their mandates, resulted in a very 'political' process that has consumed the product.<sup>2</sup> The agencies interpreted the PBF terms of reference as funding guidelines, looking for provisions under which they could enter their projects.

**Role of the government.** The government has been extensively involved in decision-making. It was not entirely happy with the first PBF allocation because it could not see big results for so much money: 'These cultural festivals. OK, they sang together – what changed?'<sup>3</sup> This time it decided that things would be different: about 20 officials participated in the PBF Steering Committee and each expected to benefit their agency. This was another barrier to doing anything controversial and innovative. In some cases, the UN ended up undertaking small-scale field projects similar to those of NGOs.

**Coherence.** In addition to the UN Country Offices, there is another establishment. The UN Regional Centre for Preventive Diplomacy (RCPD) in Ashgabat does not have 'peacebuilding' in its mandate, but applies 'preventive' in relation to diplomacy, development and UN activities. The problem is that the Centre is in Ashgabat, the capital of Turkmenistan, one of the most closed and authoritarian states on the planet, which adheres to strict 'neutrality,' meaning minimal relations with its neighbours. Initiatives emanating from Ashgabat are not taken very seriously by Central Asian leaders, who feel that if the UN meant business, it would have

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<sup>2</sup> For instance, some heads of agencies who did not obtain grants are not on speaking terms with the members of the grants' committee six months after the distribution.

<sup>3</sup> Author's interview with a representative of Presidential Administration, Bishkek, November 2013.

deployed a regional centre either closer to the main theatre of action (Ferghana Valley) or at a regional hub, such as Almaty in Kazakhstan. Ashgabat has few direct flights (only to two other states), while travelling over land borders is virtually impossible. Moreover, it is difficult to persuade highly qualified people to be posted to Ashgabat. Sensitive political dealings typically bypass the UN RCPD in favour of the country officers. Key support would be a relocation of the regional political office to a more appropriate place.

The UN needs to be on alert to avoid overlooking potential conflicts, but its perspective has been more reactive than proactive and forward-looking. In the past, its operations sometimes equated 'peacebuilding' with conflict-sensitive development projects, which is not enough. The focus on a government's buy-in can turn into an obstacle to addressing the root causes of conflict and developing better programming. In general – and this applies to all international interveners – peacebuilding that is meant to address internal problems is often based on a wrong premise of avoiding politics and controversy, working around the conflict, and on a rather vague notion that development brings peace somehow. Regional and cross-border tensions would perhaps be the arena where the UN is more prepared to take a decisive stance and include security and politics into its peacebuilding agenda.

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**About this Paper:** This paper is part of a series providing regional peacebuilding perspectives for the White Paper on Peacebuilding. The authors' task was to provide an authentic, original and honest analysis about three questions: (1) What are the main challenges for building peace in your region? (2) What are the key opportunities for building peace in your region over the next one or two years? (3) What would be the key support necessary to build peace in your region over the next one or two years? Is there any specific role for the UN?

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**About the White Paper on Peacebuilding:** The White Paper on Peacebuilding is a collaborative, multi-stakeholder process initiated by the Geneva Peacebuilding Platform and supported by the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs. It has the objective to situate UN peacebuilding within the broader peacebuilding universe and to articulate visions for the future for building peace in violent and fragile contexts. The White Paper places peacebuilding within the changing characteristics of armed violence and security, and within the practical evidence of engagements in peacebuilding contexts emanating from a diversity of fields. Ensuring a better relationship between UN peacebuilding and the broader peacebuilding field is a complementary effort to the existing work surrounding the 10-year review of the UN peacebuilding architecture and an effort to take stock of the nature and evolution of the broader peacebuilding universe.

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