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Uzbekistan's Strategic Approach to Ensuring Security and Stability in Central Asia

At present, the world community is going through an exceptionally difficult stage of its development marked with great responsibility, namely the formation of a new world order in which, in the era of globalization, it is frequently confronted with the fundamental problems and challenges of international security like international terrorism, religious extremism and illicit drug trafficking. Moreover, it is precisely Central Asia that has suffered the direct effect of these threats due to its closeness to Afghanistan, the main source of instability in the region.

A similar assessment of the challenges and threats of international terrorism, religious extremism and drug trafficking demands that the Central Asian states combine their efforts in order to achieve equal security conditions for all. The support provided by the Central Asian states in the anti-terrorist campaign in Afghanistan has moved the region from the periphery to the centre of world attention. It has also changed the region's significance as a basis for combating the further proliferation of international terrorism, religious extremism and drug trafficking at the global level.

The prospects for a normalization of the situation in Afghanistan and the emergence of long-term conditions to create security in Central Asia as well as a growing interest by the international community in the Central Asian region have, in effect, generated unique opportunities for its all-round development. The world community, for its part, needs to provide adequate support to the Central Asian states and to facilitate their joint efforts as well as providing external backing for the positive developments taking place in the region.

The speed of further development in regional co-operation will mostly depend upon the capabilities of the Central Asian states to confront the types of threats and security challenges described in the following.

Threats to Security in Central Asia

Terrorism and drug trafficking. Despite the latest achievements of the anti-terrorist operation in Afghanistan, the terrorist threat remains a destabilizing factor for the Central Asian states.

Uncoordinated groups of international terrorists and religious extremists are still operating in the territory of Afghanistan. Despite the neutralization of the military and administrative structures of the Taliban, the aims of the international anti-terrorist coalition have not been completely achieved. The military

and terrorist threats emanating from Afghan territory have only been minimized. As the Commander in Chief of the United States Central Command (USCENTCOM), General Tommy Franks, remarked in a briefing to journalists on 26 February 2002, “the process of providing stability in the territory of Afghanistan will last much longer”, and the situation in this country remained “dark and alarming”. Further, the General stated that 120 locations had been counted in Afghanistan where, according to US intelligence, Al-Qaida fighters may be hiding.¹

It is also important to take into account that, according to some estimates, the Taliban had a large military force totalling 45,000 men before the anti-terrorist operation had started.² These armed forces, at least some parts of them, have not yet been eliminated, which means they still represent a serious threat.

In addition, the creation of a strong centralized power in Afghanistan capable of controlling the situation in all provinces of the country and ensuring the process of national reconciliation has not yet been achieved. According to the estimates of many Western observers, Afghanistan may once again “fall into anarchy”, as the field commanders “have renewed internal conflicts, which the provisional government has been unable to stop”. A further escalation of the internal conflicts in Afghanistan may eventually lead to military clashes, which could not only jeopardize the peace process in Afghanistan, but may also again turn the country into a safe haven for international terrorists and advocates of extremist ideas.

Furthermore, there is still a large number of arms and a large amount of military equipment in Afghanistan. According to UN figures, the population of the country possesses approximately ten million pieces of light infantry weapons.³ The absence of adequate state control over the use of arms and the availability of stable channels for arms supplies, therefore, could cause any local clash to escalate into a military conflict.

The difficult socio-economic circumstances and the lack of alternative sources of income for the Afghan population are among the main reasons for the flourishing drug trafficking in Afghanistan. Despite the provisional government’s official ban on cultivating opium poppy, the number of opium poppy plantations has been increasing since the beginning of spring. Particularly in the east of Afghanistan, one third of the agricultural acreage is sown with opium.⁴ The financial benefits from cultivating opium poppies for the Afghan farmers are obvious: One hectare of opium poppy yields ten times as much revenue as one hectare of grain. According to the estimates of the United Nations Office for Drug Control and Crime Prevention (UNODCCP),

1 Komsomol of 26 February 2002 (all quotations in a foreign language have been translated by the author).

2 Cf. The Taliban’s military forces, in: Jane’s Information Group of 8 November 2001.

3 Cf. Daniel Smith/Rachel Stohl/Reyko Huang, Afghanistan: Re-emergence of State, Center for Defense Information, 21 December 2001.

4 Cf. BBC News Online of 27 February 2002.

the harvest of opium poppy in Afghanistan in 2002 may be 1,900 to 2,700 tons and thus reach the level of the year 2000.⁵ Moreover, during the anti-terrorist operations in Afghanistan “neither the stocks of heroin, nor any of the mini-plants where it is produced were damaged”.⁶

The “extraordinary” location of the Central Asian states for drug distribution to Europe remains one of the main reasons for the increased activity of terrorist elements in the region. It is indisputably evident that the aim of international terrorists is to maintain stable trafficking channels in existence from Afghanistan through Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan to Russia and further on to Europe.

It is well-known that up to now Afghanistan has produced 70 per cent of the world’s total opium output. Statistics show that, lately, the Central Asian heroin route from Afghanistan to Europe is becoming one of the most important. According to the statistics for the last decade, nearly 30 tons of narcotics and 77 tons of acetic anhydrite (one of the main components required to produce heroin) have been confiscated by the Uzbek customs officials alone.⁷ The Russian frontier troops seized nearly four tons of narcotics and 1,400 kilograms of heroin at different parts of the Tajik-Afghan border in 2001. In fact, Central Asia has already become a huge trans-shipment base for drug distribution to Europe. This will undoubtedly lead to increasing drug consumption in the states of the region themselves.

Therefore, the scale of drug trafficking and the links of Islamic radical groups to drug trafficking are evidence that a strike against drug trafficking in the region would mean a direct strike against terrorism and vice-versa.

Religious extremism. A serious threat to the stability of Central Asia is posed by the activity of the religious extremist group *Hizb ut-Tahrir*, which under the guise of Islam, is attempting to achieve its political aim, the overthrow of the constitutional regime of the Central Asian states.

As a result of the world community’s determination and consistency in its fight against terrorism, extremist organizations may for tactical reasons abandon armed forms of attacks and violent actions. At the same time, the centres of religious extremism and terrorism, in the short and medium terms, may concentrate their material and financial resources on the ideological aspects of their activities in different regions, including that of Central Asia.

Hizb ut-Tahrir could become the main advocate of the interests of the religious-extremist forces in the region. The threat posed by the *Hizb ut-Tahrir* is in its strategic goal, which is the creation of a single theocratic state not only in one particular Muslim state or region, but in a state encompassing the whole Muslim world as the ideology of this organization is oriented towards

5 Cf. Afghanistan UNDCP Opium Poppy Survey, at: http://www.odccp.org:80/pakistan/report_2002-02-28_1.pdf.

6 ITAR-TASS of 11 February 2002.

7 Website of Gazeta SNG of 9 January 2002.

the creation of a world caliphate. To achieve this goal they appeal to all Muslims "to live permanently (until the Day of Judgment) in a state of *jihad*".

The existence of this threat in the Ferghana Valley, located at the crossroads of several Central Asian states, makes the issues of national and regional security a sphere of special responsibility. Because the threat not only extends to specific states or regions, but also to the entire civilization of the world, the common position of the states in the region on this issue should be to neutralize religious extremist and terrorist threats with legal and all other available means.

To combat this evil, complex measures are needed: political, military, financial, diplomatic and legal as well as strengthening the different public and non-governmental organizations. These measures could be either bilateral or regional and international. Greater significance should be given to the legal measures of those states, where societal causes for the problems of extremism and terrorism have been recognized.

From the viewpoint of the Uzbek leadership, being on constant standby and permanently alert to different forms of political and religious extremism must become a paramount and permanent task of the world community.

The geostrategic situation. In geostrategic terms, Central Asia lies in an area that is of vital interest to the major world powers and the power centres, which have been struggling to increase their sphere of influence in the region. Geo-economic factors - a struggle for energy resources in the region - may turn the region into one of the "nerve centres" of world politics in the near future.

Under these circumstances, the states of Central Asia must demonstrate a strong interest in strengthening the geo-economic presence of the West in the region, while taking into account the interests of other power centres as well. A transformation of the region into an organic part of the global economic and political space will not, however, remove the objective contradictions that exist. Nevertheless, it would help to be able to predict and manage the development of events. The formation of a zone of interlinked economic interests in Central Asia would strengthen the enormous importance of stability for all actors in the political process.

Inter-state relations. Several unsettled aspects of inter-state relations like, *inter alia*, the issues of border delimitation and the joint use of transborder rivers have had negative effects on the security and stability of Central Asia. At the same time, one should note that the state of affairs relating to this issue has been highly dramatized in the media. During a time when the situation in and around the region is changing rapidly, the Central Asian states have definitely recognized the objective necessity of developing co-operation in the political sphere as well as widening and deepening co-operation in the economic, scientific and technical, cultural and humanitarian, and other spheres.

The Difficulties in Rebuilding Afghanistan

Recognizing the depth and characteristics of the threats mentioned, the Republic of Uzbekistan intends to develop its strategy on the assumption that it is an objective necessity to form a broad system of regional security in Central Asia based on the principles of mutual trust, openness, adherence to the rational balance of national and regional interests and strict implementation of all decisions.

The establishment of effective regional mechanisms against the threats of international terrorism, religious extremism and drug trafficking will largely depend on the developments of the peace process in Afghanistan. In this connection, the initiatives of the Republic of Uzbekistan to settle the Afghan crisis, which were announced by President Islam Karimov during a press conference attended by foreign journalists on 20 December 2001, are timely and well founded. In particular, it was emphasized that the following prerequisites should be taken into account to achieve peace and stability in Afghanistan as well as creating a legitimate and representative Afghan government:⁸

The demilitarization of the country. The presence of large amounts of arms in Afghan territory has created conditions which could lead to a new outbreak of internal confrontations, primarily between the regional and tribal leaders, and thus could lead to renewed threats to both regional and global security. The urgency of a solution to this problem was stressed in President Karimov's address to the Secretary-General of the UN, Kofi Annan, on 18 December 2001. It is imperative that as many weapons as possible be decommissioned and destroyed in Afghanistan, as this would be the only manner to at least reduce probable attempts to undermine the state-building process there as well as decreasing the crime rate.

The federalization of the Afghan state. There is no disagreement that a united and indivisible Afghanistan with strong state power, capable of controlling the situation in the country, serves the security interests of both Central Asian states and the world community. Nevertheless, one should take into account that the specifics of internal politics in Afghanistan at present leave little chance of success for creating a state system, if the interests of all the main military-political and ethnic groups are not considered. Under present conditions, all attempts to strengthen the Afghan government and build a new Afghanistan by relying solely on military force are doomed to failure, as they will eventually lead to a direct military dictatorship and renewal of inner-Afghan conflicts as well as to the growth of separatist tendencies and disintegration of the country into small principalities. The attempts to ensure genuine long-term stability in Afghanistan through "gentlemen's agreements" on guarantees of security with separate regional leaders in exchange for direct financial and other assistance are also unacceptable. It seems that only federal

8 Cf. Press Release of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Uzbekistan of 20 December 2001.

structures would ensure the fundamental conditions to achieve a balance of interests between the main internal Afghan forces.

Creation of a single international fund for the reconstruction of Afghanistan. Providing long-term security in Afghanistan will be impossible without the realization of complex programmes of humanitarian, economic and technical assistance. However, it should be noted that in view of the present socio-economic situation in Afghanistan, the allocation of financial assistance might prove an effective lever in influencing one or the other internal Afghan force positively or negatively. In this connection, providing any kind of international assistance within the framework of a single strategy for the post-conflict reconstruction of Afghanistan would be crucial in achieving genuine peace and prosperity in this long-suffering country.

In the medium term, it seems, the solution of these problems must become one of the priorities of the international anti-terrorist coalition in Afghanistan. If it does not, it will be hard to speak of creating the prerequisites for normal political and economic development in Afghanistan and achieving long-term stability in the country, and consequently, providing full security for the Central Asian region will also be impossible.

Regional Security in Central Asia

Under these circumstances and taking into consideration its geopolitical location and potential, Uzbekistan will be able to become the main initiator of measures on establishing a regional security system. The Republic of Uzbekistan pays a significant amount of attention to the practical realization of the Tashkent Treaty (21 April 2000) between Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan on joint actions against terrorism, political and religious extremism and transnational organized crime.

This Treaty may be considered as a basis for establishing a regional security system in Central Asia, as in its initial stages it could achieve the following:

- unification of national legislation on measures to counter terrorism, any form of extremism and transnational organized crime;
- creation and implementation of practical measures to prohibit any terrorist bases in Central Asian countries;
- information exchange on crime and terrorism (on planned and committed actions, suspected individuals and organizations, forms and methods of activity);
- if necessary, conducting joint operations of the special forces of the Central Asian states.

Taking into account the special features of the present geopolitical situation and configuration of the centres of power in the region, the regional security

system must be divided into several levels and should be in harmony with the existing international institutions for co-operation in this field.

In this regard, a new regional institution - the Shanghai Co-operation Organization (SCO)⁹ - should be mentioned, which is considered by the Central Asian states as a multilateral mechanism of co-operation. Participation of Russia and China as permanent members of the UN Security Council in this organization provides additional opportunities for the Central Asian states to use the potential of these states against terrorism, religious extremism, aggressive separatism and illicit drug trafficking.

Despite its advantages, the participation of the Central Asian states in the SCO may also limit their political leeway and force them to co-ordinate their foreign policy with Russia and China, which could decrease Central Asia's interaction with the Western countries, especially with the US. Moreover, the SCO is not a military-political alliance that can provide security guarantees for its member states.

Therefore, military and political co-operation between the Central Asian states, including Uzbekistan, and the US and NATO countries is important. In this regard, the development of military and technical co-operation is a priority. A key element of this process could be co-operation in enforcing border security and upgrading the technical infrastructure.

The US has already begun co-operating with the states of the region to combat terrorism. Since announcing its Border Security Assistance programmes in April 2000, the US Government has granted 70 million US dollars for the training of customs officers and border guards, for anti-terrorist assistance and for communication, control and intelligence equipment. These programmes have created a basis for conducting the US anti-terrorist operation in Afghanistan.

At present, virtually all Central Asian states recognize the necessity for American participation in the regional security system, which has been strengthened by their agreement that the US forces and their allies use their airspace and airbases. This reflects the change in the relationship between the US and the Central Asian states and demonstrates the aspiration of the region's states for close relations with the West, in particular with Washington. The willingness of some of the Central Asian states to modernize a number of their military bases in accordance with NATO standards means attracting Western specialists to the region to build the necessary infrastructure and train service staff as well as army officers. This type of co-operation would lead to a long-term partnership in different fields involving almost all countries of the region.

Developing more stable and effective co-operation between NATO and its Central Asian partners and introducing new mechanisms for political consultations would lead to intensive co-operation in the framework of the Euro-

9 The SCO was set up on 15 June 2001; its members include: The People's Republic of China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan und Uzbekistan.

Atlantic Partnership Council (EAPC). In order to fulfil its new functions, NATO, within the framework of the EAPC, needs to increase investments in the security area, in which problems could be solved by the military tasks of the "Partnership for Peace" programme (PfP). In particular, those NATO initiatives designed to widen and deepen the PfP should involve all aspects of partnership as well as raising the level of co-operation between NATO and its partners.

On the whole, the Central Asian states must themselves play a decisive role in establishing an effective and stable regional security system. It is their own active and constructive position that will help to create an environment that guarantees sustainable development in the Central Asian region. Therefore, co-operation to create security and stability in Central Asia must not be based on declarations and imprudent decisions and measures, but on bilateral and multilateral agreements.

Regional and International Co-operation and Economic Development

In addition to organizing the regional security system, Central Asian states should also pay special attention to the development of economic and humanitarian co-operation. In this regard, Uzbekistan has been promoting an integration process in Central Asia as well as creating the necessary prerequisites to overcome disintegration tendencies and achieve flexible settlement of interstate issues in the region.

In this connection, the results of the last two summits of the Heads of Central Asian States, which took place on 27 and 28 December 2001 and from 28 February to 1 March 2002, should be mentioned. During these summits the Central Asian Economic Association (CAEA), which was created in 1994, was transformed into the Central Asian Co-operation Organization (CACO).¹⁰ It is apparent that this process demonstrates the aspirations of the Central Asian states to elevate regional co-operation to a higher level. In particular, during the Tashkent summit of 2001, it was made clear that co-operation in political, economic, scientific and technical, cultural and other areas as well as collaboration in the international arena would serve the interests of all states in the region and support peace and stability at regional and global levels.¹¹

The agreements that were reached during the meetings of the Heads of State have already altered the dynamics of inter-state relations in the Central Asian region. For instance, on 23 January 2002, the embassies of Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan in Washington held a round table at the US Department of Trade which was dedicated to the topic of investment and business.¹² A number of

10 Cf. OREANDA news agency, 29 December 2001.

11 Cf. Pravda Vostoka of 29 December 2001.

12 Cf. UzA news agency, 25 February 2002.

agreements were signed at the end of a visit by a Tajik governmental delegation on the 12 February 2002, according to which the state debt of Tajikistan was reduced by twelve million US dollars and the price of Uzbek gas delivered to Tajikistan was also lowered.

It is noteworthy that during the summits mentioned above, the Heads of Central Asian States also attached great importance to strengthening mutual trust in the region, a key factor for the development of inter-state co-operation. In this connection, the Uzbek initiative to create one uniform information space by setting up a joint TV broadcasting system for all the states of the region is worth mentioning. An agreement on this was already signed between Uzbekistan and Tajikistan during the visit of President Emomali Rakhmonov to Tashkent on 27 and 28 December 2001.¹³ Such measures contribute to bringing nations together through the exchange of information on life in neighbouring countries and establishing a more open dialogue between the states.

The process of the further promotion and diversification of political dialogue, improvement in the forms and mechanisms of regional economic integration, strengthening mutual understanding on establishing a common security area and working out joint measures on maintaining peace and stability in the region will largely depend on intensifying multilateral co-operation in political, scientific and technical, cultural and humanitarian relations as well as the realization of the CACO provisions.

In addition, the Central Asian states have an interest in implementing economic, public and political programmes through the international community. The US has already announced corresponding plans on this. Since the Central Asian states have provided a humanitarian corridor for food supplies to Afghanistan and rear support to the anti-terrorist coalition, long-term co-operation between the US and the states in the region should be focused on efforts to link military co-operation with genuine assistance for reforms in the Central Asian states.

Washington's aims to maintain its presence in the region are connected with the complexity and long duration of the task of reconciling the situation in Afghanistan. Instead of focusing on a US military presence in Central Asia, long-term economic and other forms of co-operation in order to promote socio-economic development in the region have been proposed.

Political, economic, humanitarian and military issues are actively being discussed between US officials and state leaders in the region. In this context, the American side has repeatedly ascertained "a higher level" in the mutual relations between the US and Central Asian states. In particular, Uzbekistan confirmed its intention to accelerate the realization of programmes related to economic liberalization.¹⁴ A common aspiration on the part of both sides to deepen the co-operation led, on 30 November 2001, to the signing of a

13 Cf. UzA news agency, 27 December 2001.

14 Cf. Pravda Vostoka of 6 December 2001.

Memorandum of Understanding between the governments of the Republic of Uzbekistan and the US on the further development of bilateral co-operation and support of economic reforms in Uzbekistan.

As has already become apparent, the rebuilding of Afghanistan is promoting development in Central Asia; the supply of Central Asian goods, materials and services into Afghanistan has already stimulated the economies of the states in the region. However, the perspectives for the economic development of the Central Asian region will mostly depend on the exploitation of the vast energy resources in the region and on alternative export routes.

The Role of International Organizations

It appears that adherence in US policy to more intensive and co-ordinated co-operation in all areas, including security, trade and the energy sector as well as strengthening the internal security of the countries in the region by supporting political and economic reforms would create the prerequisites for long-term stability in Central Asia.

Furthermore, preventing international terrorism and religious extremism by solving the socio-economic and socio-political issues of the region requires the involvement of the UN, the OSCE and other international institutions in regional processes.

The foundation of the Counter-Terrorism Committee (CTC) of the UN Security Council can be seen as a parallel to the Uzbek initiative to establish a United Nations international centre to counter terrorism. Now that the military phase of the anti-terrorist operation in Afghanistan is coming to an end, Uzbekistan supports the idea that overall co-ordination of anti-terrorist policies and the reconstruction of Afghanistan should be carried out under UN auspices.

In this regard, the protocol between the government of the Republic of Uzbekistan and the UN on promoting the delivery of humanitarian aid from Uzbekistan to Afghanistan signed on 14 December 2001 in Tashkent plays an important role.¹⁵ While it, on the one hand, assists international non-governmental and governmental organizations in completing deliveries to Afghanistan, this document has also significantly accelerated the realization of UNDP's long-term projects in Uzbekistan in the following fields: increasing living standards by creating stable sources of income; environmental protection; human resources development; development of information and communication technologies in Uzbekistan; support of the government on the co-ordination of foreign aid.

The OSCE could also play a key role in strengthening security and stability in Central Asia, however, it needs to reassess its priorities, including the ex-

15 Cf. Pravda Vostoka of 15 December 2001.

pansion of its mandate to co-ordinate a common strategy against the new types of threats.

The determination of the OSCE to face up to terrorism by making a joint effort has found expression in the adoption of the 2001 Bucharest Plan of Action for Combating Terrorism, which includes proposals on giving practical support to the Central Asian states. In this context, although the OSCE cannot be considered a leading organization on countering terrorism, it could deal with some of the fundamental problems of terrorism like political and socio-economic disparity, which are the breeding ground for extremist ideologies. The "International Conference on Enhancing Security and Stability in Central Asia: Strengthening Comprehensive Efforts to Counter Terrorism", held in December 2001 in Bishkek under the auspices of the OSCE, which continued the work of the conference on security issues, jointly organized by the UNODCCP and the OSCE in Tashkent in October 2000, was a first step to the realization of the Bucharest Plan of Action for Combating Terrorism.¹⁶

The OSCE has sufficient intellectual resources and political authority to maintain multilateral relations with the Central Asian states, who have a right to expect support from the OSCE, not only in monitoring the potential spots of conflict and instability, but also in their efforts in all dimensions of sustainable development, including the social and economic, cultural and humanitarian, scientific and technical as well as educational fields.

In this regard, providing technical and financial assistance to the states of the region on the basis of comprehensive national and regional programmes should be considered a priority in the following fields:

- strengthening the capabilities of the Central Asian states in protecting their borders and preventing terrorist and organized criminal groups from crossing borders. In this connection, the situation in Afghanistan and especially illicit drug trafficking should be taken into consideration, but at the same time there should be no obstacles to free trade and travel;
- assisting sustainable economic development by increasing co-operation between national and international banks in order to support economic processes. This would also help to attract foreign investments as well as preventing money laundering and the financing of terrorism;
- training specialists in different areas and providing appropriate equipment and technologies;
- strengthening the potential of state organizations to counter terrorism, organized crime and illicit drug trafficking;
- providing financial and other assistance to facilitate ratification and implementation of the appropriate international conventions.

16 Cf. www.osce.org/events/bishkek2001.

Thus, international co-operation in establishing a sustainable regional security system in Central Asia should include the participation of the main centres of power and international organizations, which will create a basis for co-operation and settlement of problems in the region. International assistance for reforms in the region will promote stability and peace not only in Central Asia, but will also prevent the emergence of any new hot spots that may be a threat to global security in the future.