

A work in progress

Central Asian issues need collaborative solutions

The nations of Central Asia have been in a state of flux since the fall of the Soviet Union and have worked independently to prosper. But their inclusion into Western organizations that can benefit them economically and attract international investors depends on their ability to resolve human rights, freedom of the press and corruption issues. To maintain internal and regional stability, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan must work together to help resolve regional issues and join the international effort to fight terrorism and transnational crime. Just as critical: They must help the international community resolve the war in Afghanistan.

But regional issues and political unrest sometimes hinder progress. The nations in the area suffer from ongoing, and sometimes longstanding, disputes over a host of issues. As they continue to build their economic muscle, Central Asian nations must also find ways to deal with those problems. The European Union has a strategic plan to help those nations accomplish this important goal. The union is not alone, and has United Nations support. “The United Nations is ready to assist in holding a dialogue between leaders of Central Asian countries for solution of common problems of the region,” U.N. Secretary General Ban Ki-moon said during a visit to Kyrgyzstan in April 2010, as reported by the nation’s 24.kg news agency. “They include deterioration of ecology, water resources utilization issues, toxic metal utilization, climate change and others. Mutual efforts are required for their solution.”

Regional leaders are stepping up cross-border dialogue. In March 2010, for example, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan agreed to discuss matters of mutual interest and to resolve their dispute over the building

of hydroelectric power plants. After a long holdout, Kazakhstan’s President Nursultan Nazarbayev agreed to endorse Uzbekistan President Islam Karimov’s bid to stop the building of hydroelectric plants in so-called upstream countries until feasibility studies are completed. “Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, being countries downstream of the Syr Darya and Amu Darya rivers, need such guarantees” offered by international feasibility studies, Nazarbayev told the official *Kazakhstanskaya Pravda* newspaper. In return, Karimov agreed to endorse Nazarbayev’s bid to host the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, or OSCE, summit in 2010. Kazakhstan is leading the OSCE in 2010.

The Kazakh-Uzbek accord received international endorsement. The World Bank agreed to “underwrite the environmental feasibility [and safety] study for the Rogun Power Station on the Vakhsh River in Tajikistan, and to provide financial support for construction, depending on the study’s findings,” the online EurasiaNet newspaper reported in March 2010. “If studies prove that development plans could proceed without a detrimental impact on neighboring states, Astana and Tashkent would be willing to participate in construction,” Nazarbayev said.

Realizing that cooperation is the key to mutual prosperity, the nations — some outright regional rivals — are reaching out to each other to resolve common issues that will help them attain the regional security and stability that attract further international aid and investment. The Kazakhs realize their neighbors have key roles to play in the region, and none has as vital a role as the Uzbeks. “Uzbekistan is the most important strategic country in Central Asia,” a high-ranking Kazakh Foreign Ministry official told *The Washington Times* newspaper in April 2010.

However, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, the region’s most economically stable nations, are still trying to resolve a long-standing border dispute. “The demarcation process is likely to drag on for an indefinite period of



Uzbekistan’s President Islam Karimov, right, and Kazakhstan’s President Nursultan Nazarbayev meet during a summit of Central Asian leaders in Almaty, Kazakhstan, in April 2009. The leaders tried to end bitter disputes over water use in one of the world’s driest regions.



The gas pipeline that begins in Turkmenistan and transits Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan on the way to China is an example of multilateral cooperation in Central Asia.

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Two men talk in Dushanbe, Tajikistan, about their shares in the Rogun hydroelectric power plant. The nation is selling shares in the power plant to raise the \$1.4 billion needed to complete the project, stalled for decades.

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time while frequent shooting incidents along the 2,300-kilometer border are poisoning relations within communities in border areas with a mixed population,” Marat Yermukanov wrote in the bi-weekly journal *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*. “Since 2001, border guard agencies have registered more than 20 border incidents in which local Uzbeks and Kazakhs were involved.”

Other disputes abound in the region. Tajikistan and Uzbekistan are feuding over rail transportation between the two nations. All the Central Asian nations, not just Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, have unresolved conflicts over water and hydroelectric power. And the April 2010 unrest in Kyrgyzstan is proof that the corruption still affecting each of the nations threatens national and regional stability and security.

During its leadership of the OSCE, the world’s largest regional security organization, Kazakhstan hopes to implement changes that benefit the region and Europe. It wants to prove it is up to the task. Kanat Saudabayev, Kazakhstan’s secretary of state and foreign minister, hopes to accomplish two goals as head of the OSCE: Lessen the drug trade through Kazakhstan to slow terrorist funding, and stabilize the region, particularly with regard to Afghanistan. The war in Afghanistan is a direct threat to regional stability in several ways. Northern migration by terrorists, refugees and drug traffickers — some who finance jihad — has brought the issue of instability into focus.

The Washington Times quoted Claude Salhani, editor of its affiliate *Middle East Times*, who said Kazakhstan hopes to convene a summit involving the 56 OSCE member nations and put Afghanistan on the OSCE agenda. “Many of those countries will want to offer nonmilitary assistance, such as helping the country establish a good education program, a

working health care system and so on.”

Any agreement between neighbors such as Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, no matter how small, will help foster regional stability. The countries are putting into operation two accords they signed: the Economic Cooperation Program for 2006 to 2010 and the Economic Cooperation Strategy for 2007 to 2016. Both “outline prospective directions of bilateral cooperation in trade, water and energy complex, investments and finance, transport and communications, and customs and innovations,” Uzbekistan’s government website states. Their implementation will increase bilateral trade.

“Kazakhstan secures one of the leading positions in Uzbekistan’s foreign trade,” Ambassador Boribay Jeksembin of Kazakhstan said to the Uzbek president. “Our countries develop not only the trade, but also undertake mutual investments,” the ambassador said in a *Journal of Turkish Weekly* online report in March 2010. Additionally, the production, supply and transit of energy are areas where there is cooperation between the nations in the region. Apart from the economic gains, pipelines — such as the one that stretches between Turkmenistan and China, and transits Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan — are “bright examples of successful multilateral cooperation,” Uzbekistan’s official website stated in March 2010.

Central Asian nations know that a prolonged war in Afghanistan will continue to destabilize the region. Working together to counter terrorism, extremism, and illegal drug and arms smuggling will help maintain stability and add regional support to the NATO mission in Afghanistan. Uzbekistan has vowed to work with Kazakhstan to counter these threats. “Our countries have a large potential for expansion of mutual cooperation,” Nazarbayev stated on his government’s official website. □