

# **Alternative Futures for Afghanistan and the Stability of Southwest Asia: Improving Regional Cooperation on Water**

## **Session 2: the Amu Darya River Basin**

Thursday, 30 April 2009

EastWest Institute Brussels Centre

## **Event Report**

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## **Introduction**

On 30 April 2009, the EastWest Institute's Preventive Diplomacy Initiative held the second meeting in a series of expert dialogues on water security in Afghanistan and the region. The series, *Alternative Futures for Afghanistan and the Stability of Southwest Asia: Improving Regional Cooperation on Water*, follows a decision by the EastWest Institute's Parliamentarians Network on Conflict Prevention and Human Security to focus on water security as a critical component of conflict prevention.

The second session of the series, held in the EastWest Institute Brussels Centre, brought together political representatives, experts and academics from Afghanistan, its neighbors and key stakeholders from the international community, including the European Union, NATO and civil society, to explore enhanced regional cooperation on the water resources of the Amu Darya River Basin.

The Amu Darya River is one of the longest rivers in Central Asia, 1,578 mi (2,540 km) long measured from the remotest sources of the Panj River. The water resources of the Amu Darya river basin are essentially shared between Afghanistan and all the Central Asian states, and Iran if one includes the connecting Tedjen River that Iran shares with Afghanistan and Turkmenistan. The Amu Darya River is crucial to livelihoods of the millions of people sharing its water resources. In particular, the development of agriculture and hydro-electric power depends heavily on the water resources of the Amu Darya.

Successful regional cooperation on water can form a solid basis for enhanced regional cooperation in other areas, which is crucial to the success of the international community's efforts in Afghanistan. The Amu Darya River will certainly play a key role in the economic reconstruction of Afghanistan, thus affecting its relations with all Central Asian states.

Key issues discussed at the 30 April meeting were:

- Current developments in regional cooperation on the Amu Darya river;
- The need for tangible benefits for all stakeholders in regional cooperation;
- The role of existing regional organizations in promoting regional cooperation; and
- Impediments to enhanced regional cooperation including Afghanistan.

## **Current developments in regional cooperation on the Amu Darya**

The debate opened with a presentation by Ambassador Miroslav Jenča, Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Central Asia and Head of the United Nations Regional Centre for Preventive Diplomacy for Central Asia (UNRCCA). Ambassador Jenča called the April seminar that the UNRCCA had held in Almaty in cooperation with the UN Economic Commission for Europe on "Enhanced Coordination and Mutual Assistance between Regional and International Organizations on Water and Energy Issues in Central Asia" an example of how Afghanistan can be included in new mediation processes.

Ambassador Jenča also briefed the participants on the April 28 Summit of the International Fund for saving the Aral Sea (IFAS), set up by the Central Asian leaders in 1993 and currently chaired by Kazakhstan. The leaders of the Central Asian states had signed a joint declaration, expressing "interest in drawing up a mutually acceptable mechanism for the overall use of water resources and the protection of the environment in Central Asia, taking into account the interests of all the region's states." Citing news reports on the formation of up-stream and down-stream nation blocks, a number of participants cast doubts on the likeliness of such a mechanism to emerge anytime soon.

Ambassador Jenča insisted that, despite the current lack of conclusive solutions to regional water disputes, the Central Asian states had shown willingness to cooperate among them and to widen dialogue to include other regional stakeholders such as Afghanistan into regional frameworks. The United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan will be taking initiatives to further explore this possibility.

### **The need for tangible benefits for all stakeholders in regional cooperation**

It was noted that scarcity of water is not as much a problem as is the poor and uncoordinated management of the available water resources. A crucial question raised was whether regional cooperation to include all riparian states is in all parties' interest.

One participant underscored the record of collaboration among the five Central Asian states—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan—and their openness to collaborating with Afghanistan to manage its water resources. It was stated that they are vitally interested in a stable Afghanistan as threats coming from Afghanistan are threats in Central Asia as well. Another participant noted that Afghanistan on the other side is developing a policy on how to engage regionally on the water resources of the Amu Darya and is concerned about the yearly loss of water resources due to lack of water management.

Agreeing with the need for regional trust building, one participant observed that mere trust building initiatives are not sufficient to bring about better cooperation. All stakeholders must fully understand and recognize the tangible benefits of any cooperation. The shared management of the Nile River Basin and cooperation on water in the framework of the Southern African Development Community had shown that widening water cooperation to include cooperation in other regional affairs too had proven very effective.

In this context, it was noted that all states in the region should open up their planning process on water related projects at the development stage to better ensure a regional perspective in the delivery stage. This would contribute to enhanced cooperation, potentially coordination of projects, and possibly improved donor coordination in a regional context.

### **The role of existing regional organizations in promoting regional cooperation**

Since 1873 Afghanistan and its northern neighbours, Russia, the Soviet Union and the Central Asian states have concluded agreements relating to the Amu Darya River. The most significant agreements were:

- The Frontier Agreement between Afghanistan and Russia (1873)
- The Frontier Agreement between Afghanistan and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (1946)
- The Treaty between the government of the Union of the Soviet Socialist Republics and the Royal Government of Afghanistan concerning the regime of the Soviet-Afghan state frontier (1958)

Whereas these agreements focused on the river as an international boundary, no water resource sharing schemes were stipulated.

In the years following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the newly independent Central Asian states established a number of institutions for regional cooperation, including:

- The Interstate Coordinating Water Commission
- The subordinate Amu Darya and Syr Darya Basin Management Authorities
- The Interstate Council on the Problems of the Aral Sea Basin
- The International Fund for the Aral Sea

It was observed that Afghanistan, though a key riparian state, remains outside each of these regional cooperation frameworks. Afghanistan has no bi-lateral or multi-lateral treaties with any of the Central Asian states that stipulate how much water it is entitled to use from the Amu Darya. The question was whether other existing specific regional frameworks, currently not built around cooperation on water, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) and the Central Asian Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC), could therefore be useful to incorporate water cooperation discussions too. It was noted that since Afghanistan is a full member of ECO and CAREC, there are already some existing spaces of cooperation which could be enhanced.

Although the principles of reasonable use of water and refraining from infliction of harm have been agreed, participants shared the view that current cooperation had not realized its full potential. It was suggested that a thorough review of existing cooperation frameworks, treaties and agreements was necessary to redefine stakeholders' roles and responsibilities and to reshape current regional cooperation, not only to include Afghanistan but to engage Russia, China and major donors from the international community.

### **Impediments to enhanced regional cooperation including Afghanistan**

Afghanistan has never been included in the traditional geographical concept of Central Asia. Additionally, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan share a common recent past of close relations of interdependence under the USSR. One participant noted that Afghanistan was often perceived in Central Asia as a threat.

The current instability of Afghanistan was deemed another impediment to regional cooperation. Several participants called for less interference from Pakistan in the politics of Afghanistan. The unresolved Afghanistan-Pakistan border issue did not contribute to regional stability. Some argued that the instability of Afghanistan should not be an impediment to engage in regional cooperation. Regional cooperation was in fact considered crucial to increase stability.

As mentioned in the opening session of the series, the lack of available hydrological data in Afghanistan has been an impediment for regional cooperation too. Decades of conflict have severely diminished the available water resource information and the Afghan government is still in the process of rebuilding its knowledge base.

Several participants cited lack of local ownership of cooperation processes as an impediment to successful regional cooperation. Imposing cooperation top-down or from an outside player would not yield the desired results. Caution should apply to all such processes to assure full recognition of all stakeholders' interests, including those of smaller ethnic groups and individual users. As an example, one participant suggested that the government of Pakistan was using water infrastructure projects as a weapon in the land disputes of Jammu & Kashmir. A suggested point of good conduct was to include the United Nations in assessments of major water infrastructure projects affecting the daily lives of millions of people.

## **Next steps**

Taking on board the need for a multi-disciplinary assessment of needs, including those of Afghanistan, one participant proposed to organize a NATO-Science for Peace workshop on regional water cooperation, the details of which shall be further explored.

As requested by the participants, the EastWest Institute will distribute the Joint Declaration of the April 28 Summit of the International Fund for saving the Aral Sea (IFAS) upon receipt of the document from the Executive Committee of the IFAS.

As announced by Angelika Beer, MEP, the EastWest Institute's Parliamentarians Network on Conflict Prevention and Human Security is working to prepare a conference on water security in Amman, Jordan in fall 2009. Recognizing the importance of water for the Arab world, the Permanent Mission of the Arab League in Brussels has expressed interest in partnering for this event.

The EastWest Institute will distribute the contact information of all participants of the previous sessions.

The next session of the series will take place on 28 May and explore enhanced regional cooperation on the Kabul River. The meeting will be open to all participants of the previous sessions.

## Participants List of Session 2

1. **Aemal BAHADUR** : Intern, Policy Planning Unit, Private Office of the Secretary General, NATO
2. **Angelika BEER** : Member of the European Parliament, Chairwoman of the European Parliament Delegation for Relations with Iran, Co-Chair of the Executive Council of EastWest Institute's Parliamentarians Network for Conflict Prevention and Human Security
3. **Lizza BORNAY-BOMASSI** : Project Assistant, Preventive Diplomacy Initiative, EastWest Institute
4. **Astrid CARFAGNINI** : Intern, Preventive Diplomacy Initiative, EastWest Institute
5. **Aigerim DUIMAGAMBETOVA** : Intern, EU Central Asia Monitoring Project, Centre for European Policy Studies
6. **Henri DUQUENNE** : Press Officer, Office of the European Union Special Representative for Central Asia, H.E. Ambassador Pierre Morel
7. **Nicolas FOURNIER** : Policy Officer, United Nations Environment Programme, Brussels
8. **Abdul Jalil GHAFOORY** : Public Affairs Officer, Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, Mission to the EU and NATO, Brussels
9. **Jakob GRANIT** : Project Director, Stockholm International Water Institute
10. **Nafisa HASANOVA** : Project Coordinator, EU Central Asia Monitoring Project, Centre for European Policy Studies
11. **Ortwin HENNIG** : Vice President and Head of the Preventive Diplomacy Initiative, EastWest Institute, Ambassador
12. **Walter KAFFENBERGER** : Consultant, Science for Peace and Security Section, Public Diplomacy Division, NATO
13. **Abdul Hamid KHAN** : Chairman, Balawaristan National Front
14. **Matthew KING** : Project Manager, Preventive Diplomacy Initiative, EastWest Institute
15. **Christine LYNCH** : Project Assistant, Preventive Diplomacy Initiative, EastWest Institute
16. **Jamil MAQSOOD**: General Secretary, United Kashmir Peoples National Party
17. **Hassan MASHHADI**: Director, All Hazards Management
18. **Natalia MIRIMANOVA** : Senior Researcher/Coordinator EU Central Asia Monitoring Project, Centre for European Policy Studies
19. **Michael PENDERS** : President, Environmental Security International
20. **Benjamin STURTEWAGEN** : Project Coordinator, Preventive Diplomacy Initiative, EastWest Institute
21. **Turdimurat TURSUNMURATOV** : First Secretary of the Uzbekistan Mission to NATO
22. **Dave VERGE** : Intern, Preventive Diplomacy Initiative, EastWest Institute
23. **Rachel VOGEL** : Intern, Environmental Security International
24. **Dr. Kai WEGERICH** : Assistant Professor, Irrigation and Water Engineering Group, Wageningen University

## Via Conference Call

25. **Dr. Najam ABBAS** : Research Fellow Central Asian Studies, Institute of Ismaili Studies
26. **Saifullah AHMADZAI** : Senior Research Analyst, Centre for Conflict and Peace Studies (CAPS) Kabul
27. **Sayed TORBEY** : Deputy Head of Mission, Permanent Mission of the Arab League in Brussels
28. **H.E. Ambassador Miroslav JENČA** : Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General and Head of the UN Regional Centre for Preventive Diplomacy for Central Asia (UNRCCA)