Working Paper 33

Conflict Prevention and Power Politics: Central Asia as a Show Case

Dr. Heinz Krummenacher

Swiss Peace Foundation · Institute for Conflict Resolution
Gerechtigkeitsgasse 12
Postfach
CH - 3000 Berne 8

Tel: ++41 31 310 27 27
Fax: ++41 31 310 27 28
E-mail: info@swisspeace.ch

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1 Introduction: The Need for a Realistic Perspective on Prevention

Today we know that Francis Fukuyama (1992) was wrong: The end of the Cold War was not synonymous with the end of history. History continues. The corollary to this piece of evidence is that conflict – all too often deadly forms of conflict – between different human entities remain a reality. Even if Ted Gurr *et al.* (2000) argue that number and magnitude of violent conflicts have decreased recently, there is ample evidence to the contrary (Seybolt: 2000: 15-58) and that we will continue to witness armed conflicts and wars in the future. At present, weapons speak, for example, in Chechnya, Angola, and Afghanistan, while Macedonia finds itself at the brink of war. Tomorrow countries presently not in the limelight of international politics such as Chad, Nepal, or Mozambique might face a similar fate.

The reasons why violent intra- and inter-state conflicts occur, even though the Cold War has come to an end, are evident. Firstly, civil wars like those in Somalia, Ethiopia, Angola, and Afghanistan were not driven by ideology. Even though embedded in the context of superpower rivalry between the Soviet Union and the USA, their root causes obviously lie somewhere else. Therefore, the end of the ideological struggle by no means implied the end of the conflicts themselves. Secondly, the fall of the USSR fuelled conflicts which for decades had been more or less contained by Soviet hegemony.

Thus, shortly after Moscow's grip on what used to be called the „near abroad" loosened, Christian Armenians clashed with Muslim Azeris and Georgia faced secessionist desires in Abkhasia and Ossetia that led to violent eruptions as well. Tajikistan even submerged in a bloody civil war in 1992 that lasted for five years and took a death toll of more than 50,000. Even Europe was not spared, experiencing agonising war at its southeastern edge after more than 40 years of peace. After Slovenia and Croatia broke loose from the Socialist Republic of Yugoslavia, Belgrade invaded the break-away republics and engaged in a fierce campaign to create „Greater Serbia". Like domino-effect stones, most republics

of the former Yugoslavia fell victim to deposed President Milosevic's hegemonial ambitions, and those that managed to remain outside the conflict still suffer from the nationalist fever that grasped the perpetrators as well as the initial victims.

Looking at the long list of countries confronted with or barely able to evade war, we cannot but conclude that armed conflict and war will remain a reality in international politics. This insight will prevail more and more, eventually halting the boom that preventive politics enjoyed in the 90s. But does this mean that the concept of prevention failed and that it will become obsolete? Must we therefore bury all our preventive ambitions and abandon those plagued by the misery that armed conflict and war entail? I believe that such a capitulation would be wrong, even though violence seems omnipresent in the world. It would not only be cynical but also contradict the vital interests of the Western world. We cannot do business with countries in which war and chaos reign, and in the long run protracted violent conflicts not only hurt the warring factions themselves but also those not directly involved. Hence we cannot fancy ourselves in a spectator role but must pursue a policy of prevention due to moral obligations and out of sheer self-interest.

Thus the argument that it makes much more sense to invest in prevention of deadly conflicts than to engage in post-conflict reconstruction and rehabilitation is still a persuasive one. However, preventive politics must be critically reconsidered in light of our experiences during the past decade. Three aspects seem to be of particular salience:

1. We must not equate preventive politics with globally practiced altruism that calls imperatively for intervention by (authorized) outside actors whenever rival groups of people are about to smash in each others' heads. There are instances when – whether we like it or not – we have to accept that in the short run violence is probably necessary to successfully transform a conflict in the long run.

2. We must always carefully analyze whether preventive action makes sense and which actors should intervene under what conditions. Thus, if major actors involved constantly act in a way that unmasks them as „spoilers", prevention might only be indirectly possible for the time being.

3. We must be aware that prevention does not start when a situation gets tense but in the form of „structural" prevention[1] from the very beginning of any outside intervention. Hence, before starting a development project in Africa, Asia, or South America, the initiator must meticulously analyze the inherent risk potential. And once a project has started, one must continuously evaluate its impact on peace and conflict.

Obviously, I am asking for a policy of prevention that credits and acknowledges existing facts. This political realism includes, first of all, acceptance that social and political interaction is primarily based on interest defined in terms of power (Morgenthau: 1967: 4-14) and that, as a corollary, conflict and war as the most extreme form of „conflict resolution" are natural phenomena that cannot be totally banned. In this paper I describe the factors that make prevention a success and, vice versa, delimit the conditions under which it is likely to fail. Having gained a respectable amount of evidence with regard to Central Asia now being monitored within the FAST[2] project, I basically develop my arguments with regard to this area. I firmly believe, however, that the dilemmas that confront us in the realm of conflict prevention resemble each other around the globe.

2   Illusions and Misperceptions Tied to the End of the Cold War

Not only Fukuyama, but other scholars of international relations and politicians also saw a new era dawning after the Berlin Wall fell and the Warsaw Pact disappeared from the scene

---

[1]   Following the Carnegie Commission on Preventing Deadly Conflict (1997) I distinguish between two categories of conflict prevention: „operational" prevention, i.e. action taken in the face of immediate crisis, and „structural" prevention that consists of preventive action to ensure that crises do not arise in the first place.

[2]   FAST (Früherkennung und Analyse von Spannungen und Tatsachenermittlung) has been developed in the past three years by the Swiss Peace Foundation on behalf of the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation. See: www.swisspeace.ch and Krummenacher et al, 1999: 77-98.

of world politics, followed soon after by the late superpower Soviet Union. Former U.S. President George H.W. Bush proclaimed his „New World Order" when he was about to wage war to liberate Kuwait, which had fallen victim to Saddam Hussein's territorial ambitions. Many actually believed that relations between and within states would be based henceforth on international norms rather than power.

When efforts to install this new international regime failed, first in Kuwait and later in Somalia, ex-Yugoslavia, and elsewhere, sobriety only reluctantly replaced the euphoria that had gained momentum in the early and mid-1990s. Even the genocide in Rwanda in 1994 could not destroy the illusions of „idealists" who vigorously adhered to the notion that violent conflict and war belonged to the past. Annoyed by the great number of deadly conflicts all over the world, they took refuge in whatever argument they could grasp to reconcile reality with theory. Finally, they concluded that, while the theory was right with regard to developed democracies of the Western world, it did not hold true for Third World countries because they lagged too far behind Western standards and had not yet internalized the latter's rules of conduct in domestic and international affairs. Violent conflict in Eastern Europe, Asia, and Africa, it was argued, were the result of decades-old antagonisms, mostly historic, ethnic and religious, that had been superseded by Cold War rivalry and now erupted by force. Since the industrialised nations had to take a great deal of responsibility for this, it was the moral obligation of the international community to engage in preventive measures to avoid or at least mitigate the consequences of such armed conflict.

While this might even be true, I believe that it is much too premature to expect preventive politics to be a fully-fledged success story in the near future. On the contrary, in many cases it might even be naïve to believe that outside actors could bar armed conflict and war. There are two arguments on which I base this assumption:

1. The principles that give incumbent regimes *carte blanche* to treat their peoples in whatever way they want (namely the inviolability of state borders and the norm of non-intervention in each others' affairs) still prevail among prominent great powers such as China,

Russia, India, USA, etc. and thus represent mighty obstacles for preventive action).

2. Domestic conflicts that are often labelled ethnic or religious conflicts are really much more complex and cannot be reduced to one or two causal factors. Moreover, domestic conflict in general is not only multidimensional but generally has an international dimension as well. It goes without saying that the greater the number of stakeholders, the more difficult preventive intervention becomes.

2.1 The Alleged Shift in International Law

It is certainly correct to say that the once sacrosanct principles of „territorial integrity" and „non-intervention" have suffered some loss of significance during the aftermath of the Cold War. But while events such as the Second Gulf War of 1991 to liberate Kuwait and those tied to the unraveling of Yugoslavia are timid signs of such development, there is evidence of the contrary as well. If we take a close look at how international law has changed or remained unchanged over the past 10 years, we must concede that those pillars of international law, which many saw crumbling when NATO's air force bombed Serbian territory, are still firmly rooted in international law. The world actually remains a place ruled by self-interest and power rather than by universal human rights and international law.

NATO intervened in Kosovo in the name of humanitarian principles, but NATO and the rest of the Western world did nothing to help those in Chechnya who found (and still find) themselves in a similar if not even worse situation. What will happen if Montenegro chooses secession from Serbia? And what if Macedonia gets trapped in a bloody civil war? Will NATO intervene? And, if it intervenes, will it do so to protect civilians or to defend the territorial *status quo*? The lesson we should have learned from peace enforcing interventions during the 1990s is that they always follow their own logic and that this logic is based on a manifest economic and political cost-benefit ratio. Ethic and moral obligations are relevant in this equation only if they can be used to reinforce or camouflage real motives.

Humanitarian interventions will certainly continue to occur in the future, but only when in the genuine interest of mighty regional or global powers.

Thus armed conflict and war will stay with us, most often in countries that used to belong to the so-called Second or Third World. There, the disparity between a small elite which is privileged to enjoy at least some benefits of Western style modernization and those who cannot take part in the feast, is simply too great. Authoritarian rulers and regimes will be able to keep in check their frustrated peoples for a while, but in the long run social tensions will mount and eventually erupt forcefully along ethnic, religious or other divides. Most often, outside actors will be unable to prevent such scenarios. Even if their political leaders and the United Nations disposed of the financial means to engage in preventive measures, mass violence within and between states as a result of clashing political and economic interests remains a reality. Thereby, deprivation and frustration among the populace are only one determinant of massive armed conflict. The other and more salient one is that important local and regional actors all too seldom strive to prevent violent escalation of conflict. On the contrary, either because they profit from instability and war or fear the high cost of preventive intervention, they abstain at best from such intervention, at worst, they actively fuel conflicts.

2.2 The Alleged Shift from Interstate to Intrastate Conflict

If we look at armed conflicts that have taken place during the past 10 years, it seems clear at once that the majority of what we call „major armed conflicts"[3] have been intrastate or domestic conflicts. According to SIPRI (2000: 15-16), only two of the 27 major armed conflicts that went on in 1999 were interstate,

---

[3]   I define „major armed conflict" according to the *SIPRI Yearbook (2000*:15) as „the use of armed force between the military forces of two or more governments, or of one government and at least one organized group, resulting in the battle-related deaths of at least 1,000 people in any single year and in which the incompatibility concerns control of government and / or territory. "

namely India *vs.* Pakistan and Eritrea *vs.* Ethiopia. Does this mean that we are facing a change in paradigm, as many scholars and practitioners of international politics contend? Is there a shift from interstate conflict to ethnically and religiously motivated intrastate conflict?

If we look at this question in greater depth, we arrive at a somewhat more balanced conclusion. On one hand, there has always been a close interrelation between intra- and interstate conflict. Thus, the wars in Korea, Vietnam, Angola, and Afghanistan were essentially domestic in nature. Only because the Soviet Union and the USA intervened and instrumentalised the states involved in the race for global supremacy were they eventually conceived in the West as being international wars. On the other hand, many wars that are labeled „intrastate", reveal a strong international dimension. Jonas Savimbi's UNITA, for example, could not have survived for long if it had not gained support from outside. Similarly, the warring factions in Afghanistan would have been exhausted a long time ago if they had not been backed by potent external actors who had an interest in prolonging the fratricide.

Classifying conflicts as intrastate or interstate is obviously very problematic and it becomes more and more difficult to make such a clear-cut distinction. The war in Chechnya is yet another example. Starting off as a civil war that might have been deliberately provoked by the central authorities in Moscow to discipline an unruly region, the character of the conflict might very well change at a certain point. While the domestic dimension could fade with growing intervention by Islamic groups and regimes, under certain circumstances the conflict could develop into the first religious war of the third millennium.

2.3 The Fiction of Ethnic Conflict

When the Cold War ended, it not only became fashionable to speak of a shift from interstate to intrastate armed conflict. As mentioned above, such „interstate" conflicts were increasingly called „religious" or „ethnic" conflicts. The implicit assumption is that from time to time virulent differences occur in an inscrutable manner within ethnically and religiously heterogeneous areas

and cause armed conflicts. This perspective is as simple as wrong, for it fails to recognise the role of the political actors who, through sheer craving to attain and maintain power, deliberately stir up and politicise interethnic differences. Ethnic or religious wars neither raged in Bosnia nor Croatia or between Kosovars and Albanians in pre-modern times. The only conflicts conducted on this basic model were modern conflicts which took place under very specific geopolitical circumstances.[4]

The matter is similar today in Central Asia, where the destructive potential was characterised by the former OSCE chairman Knut Vollebaek at the end of 1999 as even greater than that in the Balkans.[5] Here too, where the administrative borders drawn by the Soviets during the 1920s have become overnight *quasi*-impermeable state frontiers, the map resembled and still resembles a patchwork. Significant Uzbek minorities live in Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Tajikistan while inversely Kazakhs, Tajiks, and Kyrgyz people constitute strong numerical minorities in the neighboring states. Still, there have not been any violent interethnic conflicts in the region since gaining statehood in 1991. The civil war in Tajikistan, which claimed ten thousands of lives between 1992 and 1997, only seems to refute this statement: although it did contain an ethnic component, it was basically a sheer power struggle between traditional enemy clans.[6]

Thus, as in Kosovo and other places, ethnic fragmentation alone cannot be a sufficient reason for violent conflict in Central Asia either. Yet precisely this impression occurs when Kosovo and Central Asia are mentioned with the same breath as Vollebaeck does. Even if he did not establish such causality and the comparison between Central Asia and the Balkans simply affected the dimension of a possible future war in this region, his warning words are nevertheless highly problematic. This owes to the fact that the largest part of the public sees the Balkan wars of the 1990s as primarily – if not entirely – a product of interethnic antagonisms. The message the then OSCE chairman spread was therefore not only that the complicated ethnic jumble in Central Asia would have led to far more devastating consequences than

---

[4]   See Malcolm, 1998: xxvii - xxviii.

[5]   According to a Reuters news agency dispatch of December 30, 1999, the Norwegian Foreign Minister said: „This is an area where we could see conflicts even worse than in the Balkans."

[6]   See Atkin, 1999: 181-184, and Akiner, 2001.

in ex-Yugoslavia. He thereby also warned in Cassandra fashion that such a violent conflict was more or less inevitable.

3 Consequences for Preventive Policies

3.1 The Need for a *Realpolitik* View

Thus, we will have to live with the phenomenon of war. We will also have to take note of the fact that the causes of war are very complex and can hardly be reduced to a few explanatory factors. Even if all structural conditions that encourage societal tensions to escalate into violent conflicts and wars are given in a country, this by no means implies that this is unavoidable. Neither poverty and economic decline nor religious or ethnic heterogeneity inevitably cause violent conflicts. It is rather internal and external actors who make political capital of such potential conflicts for their own objectives and consciously or unconsciously cause armed conflicts or wars. As Malcolm (1998: xxviii) has correctly established with regard to Kosovo, „the road from interethnic prejudice to military conflicts, concentration camps, and genocide is long, and it is political leaders who force the population down this road, not the other way round".

For this reason we will must come to terms with the fact that war cannot be avoided in some cases, even if we have an excellent early-warning system and suitable preventive formulas at our disposal as well as the necessary financial and personal resources to apply them. If those involved in decision-making do not want peace and stability, because they profit or at least hope to profit from the lack of peace and stability, then all our preventive efforts are doomed to failure.

In many ways typical for the fact that war does not befall countries and peoples like a natural phenomenon, but appears consistently, when the influential political decision-makers either want war or at least do not oppose it vigorously, is the region on the southern edge of the former Soviet Union - especially the Caucasus and Central Asia. Whereas Chechnya is a compelling example from the recent past of a deliberate endeavor to go to

war[7], I want to be oriented towards the future here. Taking the Central Asian countries[8] as a model, I hypothetically demonstrate why this region too could get caught in the cycle of violent conflict. These countries' structural crises and proneness toward violent conflict are dealt with and special attention is given to the interests of the major actors involved. In section 3.2. I then want to discuss briefly the possibilities for preventive politics to avert such a development.

3.1.1 On the Structural Proneness toward Violent Conflict of Central Asian Countries

There are many structural reasons for intra- or international violent conflicts in Central Asia. In this context are prevalent progressive impoverishment of broad sections of the population, spreading Islamic extremism, the repressive nature of the state regimes, the shortage of resources (especially water and land), and – usually mentioned in first place – the rivalry of ethnic groups who mutually believe themselves to be targets of discrimination. .

Regarding the theoretic conditions cited by Gurr *et al.* (1998: 15-26), which fuel ethnic rebellion, it is easily established that they exist at a substantial degree in all states of Central Asia, albeit to different extents:

- Firstly, strong collective incentives due to the increasing economic, political, and socio-cultural pressure on the population in general and on ethnic minorities especially;

---

[7] In the political centers of power the danger of a second war between Russia and Chechnya, which is striving for independence, has been well-known since the beginning of 1999. Nevertheless, its outbreak could not have been prevented. Not because early-warning signals had not been received or because influential decision-makers had not translated the early-warning signals into „early action". Quite differently, it was because Moscow on one hand wanted this war for matters of domestic policy involving economic and political reasons and, on the other hand, because the West did not want to spoil relations with Russia and its president in spe, Vladimir Putin.

[8] This concerns in practice Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan.

- Secondly, capacity for joint action to resist perceived disadvantages and;

- Thirdly, opportunity for joint action.

This statement especially applies for the Ferghana Valley, which has been divided up between Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan.

The Uzbeks in the Tajik part of the Ferghana Valley, for example, constituted the political elite in the days of the Soviet Union, dominating the economy as well as the state machine. Today they are economically bankrupt, politically marginalized, and excluded from the inner-Tajik peace process.[9] Therefore, the incentive to rise up against the post-communist rulers must exist as well as cultural identity and a degree of mobilization as premises for „joint collective action". Reservations are only necessary with regard to the third condition, the perception of auspicious opportunities. For despite obvious political discrimination and a high degree of mobilization, rebellions in the region inhabited by Uzbeks (Soghd in the north of Tajikistan) have never been properly supported by the majority of the population. Thus, Colonel Mahmud Khudoiberdiev, an ethnic Uzbek who had led several uprisings against the Tajik government, faced defeat time after time from 1995 onwards.[10]

Why? The answer may be found in the fact that Uzbeks in Tajikistan have seen the prospect of successful rebellion as rather unlikely. On the other hand, the devastation and the dead that the civil war between 1992 and 1997 left behind are still too well remembered for anyone to be willing to accept a repetition of that tragedy.

The Uzbek and Kyrgyz part of the Ferghana valley also have structural characteristics that make the region seem very much at risk. The area may be one of the most fertile in the world, but the colonial legacy of the Soviets as well as the national governments' unsuccessful economic policy since independence – too often articulated by Western „advisors" – put great pressure

---

[9]   Atkin, 1999: ibid.

[10]   The most recent clashes between rebels led by Khudoiberdiev and regular armed forces occurred in November 1998 in the Soghd (Leninabad) Province. They claimed the lives of at least 300 people, but the uprising was crushed after a few days (Atkin, 1999: 183-184).

on these states after they were catapulted into independence in 1991. The drawing of borders by Moscow has not only given all states enclaves with significant ethnic minorities but also sliced up a region that was traditionally an economic unit. Nowadays the companies – mostly specialized in exporting raw materials or primary products to other Soviet republics – no longer have the necessary means of production nor the markets. Kokhand in the Uzbek part of the Ferghana Valley, for instance, belonged among the six most important industrial locations in the whole country 15 years ago. Yet all factories now stand idle, and the few minor employers, who can just about keep their heads above water, are exposed to such a tax burden that they too are in existential troubles.[11]

Economic decline on its part causes poverty, makes a youth without any prospects turn to drugs[12], and literally drives them into the arms of Muslim organizations intent on getting rid of the secular government. Estimates assume that approximately 20% of young people in the Uzbek part of the Ferghana Valley are Wahhabis (a radical form of Islam originating in Saudi Arabia) or members of the more moderate, non-militant Hez-b ut Tahrir whereas 60% remain indifferent towards these organizations, and another 20% disapprove of their ideology.[13] With increasing poverty and the toughness of the central government in Tashkent in taking action against any kind of opposition, the greater becomes the attractive force of not only moderate Islamic organizations but also those which – with support from abroad – wish to overthrow the secular regimes by force of arms.[14]

---

[11] According to a local businessman the taxation load is now 43% of the income, and about 300 members of the fiscal police in the city of 200,000 inhabitants are permanently occupied with collecting taxes. Until recently they were allowed to examine the balance sheets of companies and private households without prior notice; only recently a bill was passed requiring the fiscal police to making appointments in advance.

[12] During the first three months of 2000, 319 drug addicts were registered in Khokhand, whereas „only" 179 were in 1999 (oral information from a member of the local school department, September 2000).

[13] Oral information from a school headmaster in Andijan from September 2000.

[14] The International Crisis Group (2001: 7) even claims that prompted by mass arrests of followers, Hez-b ut Tahrir „leaders moved away from avowing peaceful means for achieving their goals to suggesting that the only effective way to oppose the Karimov regime is through violence".

3.1.2   Interests of Internal and External Actors

Above I hypothesized that it is not so much the structural composition of the countries but the conduct of the relevant actors involved that determines the question of war and peace. Thus it is of basic significance to briefly outline influential actors and their motivations and interests in Central Asia. Doing so below, I shall restrict myself to the Central Asian states themselves as well as Russia. For in my opinion, a decisive significance must be attached to Russia in determining whether peace can or cannot be preserved in the region.[15]

3.1.2.1   The Central Asian Governments

The first steps of the young Central Asian states in international circles showed a good measure of contradiction: they turned to Russia on one hand and were even inclined to re-integrate into the Community of Independent States (CIS). Yet they also set off in other directions and tried to establish contacts with their neighbors China, Iran, and Turkey as well as with the most important Western countries, especially with the U.S. Although nearly all of them became members of the NATO „Partnership for Peace" program and tried to establish stronger ties with the West, the governments in Astana, Bishkek, Ashgabad, Dushanbe, and Tashkent paid not much attention to or even rejected normative and democratic standards which are essential in Western concepts for establishing international relations. „Separation of powers", „freedom of the press" „human rights", etc. were not principles they were willing to accept as fundamental to their state system. Similarly, on the topic of human rights versus state (tantamount to regime) interest, they

---

[15]   Of course, as to complete the puzzle, other external actors must be taken into consideration, especially China, the USA, Iran, Turkey, and supranational organizations such as the UN and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE).

regularly opted for the latter.[16] Nothing has changed about this attitude during the past 10 years. When Western governments try to bind Tashkent or Bishkek to liberal values, for instance, the Central Asians regularly regards this as an attempt to restrict their freedom of action in national or international issues.

There is obviously an entirely different understanding of the purpose of the state and the foundations of international relations. Whereas Western democracies tend to act, due to international interdependencies, in a „neo-functionalist" manner and also tend to transfer more and more state prerogatives to supranational organizations, the Central Asian governments are far from doing the same. They are still trapped in a „realistic" world view. Its most significant feature is that, in the Hobbesian sense, every state is the next state's enemy, and neighboring states as well as other states exercise power and influence at its expense.[17] From this *Realpolitik* point of view, the primary objective of any state must be to maintain state sovereignty and national integrity in this hostile environment, with moral-ethical considerations, of course, being of little or no significance. Likewise, membership in regional or international organizations is primarily understood as a means of gaining advantages over others; moral commitments, however, do not arise from these memberships. The Central Asian states may pursue different foreign-policy interests. They may also differ in choosing the means of implementation. But in one point they are as alike as two peas in a pod: their ultimate objective is to maintain power by every means at their disposal. What this means with regard to preventive politics we shall see below.

3.1.2.2   *Islamic Forces*

Militant Islamism, mostly associated with the IMU (Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan) and personified by their leaders Takhir

---

[16]   Thus, for example, the Uzbek President who from the beginning „perceived domestic opposition, both religious and secular, to be a threat to his regime and a social force in need of squashing (Miller, 1999: 16)", downplayed this motivation until he gained access to the West and its institutions. After the US had provided legitimacy to his regime through formal recognition, Karimov, however, revealed no zeal to accept democratic norms but continued to crack down on any and all opposition

[17]   See Abazov, 1999: 25-26.

Yuldash and Juma Namangani, is understood as the number one threat and the reason for all evil in Central Asian capitals. During recent years freedom fighters allegedly connected to the IMU actually made the public take notice of their repeated invasions in the southern part of Kyrgyzstan, as well as Uzbekistan itself. What risk comes from these rebels operating from Tajikistan and Afghanistan? What are their objectives, and what is their strategy? It is not easy to give an answer to these questions. Whereas some suppose a „grand strategy" hatched by influential Arab leaders behind these invasions, the final objective being the constitution of a Muslim theocracy in the region between Afghanistan and Chechnya, others see simpler explanations prevailing. Many see the Islamic freedom fighters, who are supposedly recruited from mercenaries from all over the world, simply as tools of Uzbek opposition members with a craving for power who are targeting the regime of President Karimov.[18] Others again see the invasions as mere mock battles which distract from the actual objective, keeping the drug corridors open for trafficking of Afghan heroin and opium to Western markets via Central Asia and Moscow.[19]

Regardless of the objectives of Muslim irregulars and their backers, it is a fact that they do not constitute a great risk to the existence of the Central Asian states.[20] Although official information on numerical size of the Muslim attackers is strongly played down, so as not to create panic in the population, they are still far from standing up to the state armed forces, especially to the Uzbek army. During last year's campaign they managed to briefly penetrate only a small, high-altitude border area of

---

[18]   Jamestown (Tuesday, 29 May 2001 Monitor - Volume VII, Issue 103), for example, describes the IMU as „an armed movement that proposes to overthrow the government of Uzbekistan by force. It is based outside the country and envisages a triumphant return in the future. Its leaders and original core, most of whom grew up in Soviet Uzbekistan, seem to follow a classical revolutionary-elitist strategy, adapted to the region's conditions. They tend to cast themselves as a vanguard, with the mission of guiding Uzbekistan's Muslim masses toward systemic change."

[19]   See e.g., International Crisis Group: 2001: 9.

[20]   The International Crisis Group (2001: 23) stated in one of their last reports on Central Asia that while the sporadic IMU incursions into Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan aggravate tensions within and between the states „in their current form they do not threaten to overturn regimes or establish an Islamic state in the region".

Uzbekistan, which is mainly inhabited by ethnic Tajiks. But they did not get sufficient support from the population. While it is true that the rebels do get support, people in most cases do not do so for religious or ideological reasons, but simply because they get what the government does not provide: food to survive.

In the medium and long run, however, the threat coming from extremist Islamic organizations is, in two respects, quite real. On one hand, repressive politics, even towards moderate Muslims, as most vigorously applied in Uzbekistan, inevitably cause more militancy and an increase in the number of religious zealots. There is a danger here that religion will become the unifying point of a broad spectrum of radicalized opposition forces which otherwise would not only be less aggressive but also separated along regional, national, linguistic, and clan-specific divides. On the other hand – and maybe yet even more dangerous – the sporadic crimes of violence of Islamic extremists may provide Russia with future legitimacy to pursue its economic and strategic ambitions in Central Asia directly or indirectly by force of arms.

3.1.2.3   Russia

Winston Churchill once said: „I cannot forecast to you the action of Russia. It is a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma, but perhaps there is a key. That key is Russian national interest"[21]. Following Russian foreign policy since 1991, one is inclined to say that after a short phase, when global aspirations faded into the background and Moscow endeavored to join the Western Commonwealth as a normal member state, today neo-imperialistic tendencies again characterize Russia's national interests.[22] Since former Foreign Minister Primakov called Central Asia the „strategic underbelly" of Russia on his first official visit abroad to Tajikistan, indications have grown that Moscow is not prepared to retreat from Central Asia, but on the contrary is trying to maintain and re-establish her influence in the region by military and economic means respectively.

Economically Russia does not have the technology and funds to compete with Western rivals in mining energy and raw

---

[21]   Quoted from Eisenhower and Sagdaev, 1995: 1.

[22]   See Erdem, 2000: 19-21.

material resources in Central Asia. Russia's advantage, however, is that all five are landlocked countries and dependent – at least on the short and middle term – on Russian infrastructure (pipelines, refineries, and sea ports) if they want to sell their energy sources to Western markets.[23] Kazakhstan as well as Turkmenistan have fallen victim to Russian blackmail in the past, as their natural-gas exports were stopped when Moscow was not happy with its share of the revenue.[24]

Militarily, leading Russian exponents especially base continual attempts at perpetuating their military presence in Central Asia on the threat of Islamic fundamentalism and the need to combat drug and weapon trafficking from Afghanistan northwards. On every occasion, the threat of Islamic extremism is described in the most garish of colors, and the need for collective defensive measures is stressed – this of course under Russian command.[25] The fact that Russia itself actively supports Islamic extremism and probably participates in drug and weapon trafficking is deliberately suppressed.[26]

---

[23] See Blank, 1995: 374-76.

[24] *Ibid.*

[25] Russia is obviously endeavouring to prepare world opinion for a forthcoming military engagement in Central Asia. The chain of evidence speaks volumes in this respect: back on 3 November 1999 the ministers of defence of Russia and Uzbekistan indicated that in the following spring they would be prepared to take joint military action against Islamic guerrillas operating from Tajikistan: „At today's meeting special attention was paid to measures to destroy the rebel groups", Russia's Igor Sergeyev said, following joint manoeuvres with four ex-Soviet Central Asian states (Reuters, 3 November 1999). On 11 December President Karimov then felt inclined at a press conference on the occasion of President Putin's visit to accept Russian involvement, when he said: „Russia is today the country whose help we need to maintain stability and security of our region as a whole (...) we are convinced that Russia's help and Russia's presence in the region will allow us to repel the rampant expansion of extremism and terrorism" (Reuters, 11 December 1999). Finally Putin himself announced at a CIS meeting on 25 January 2000 that CIS member states had decided „to work out an international purpose-oriented programme to combat terrorism in all its manifestations" (Reuters, 25 January 2000).

[26] According to Jamestown (21 February 2001 Monitor - Volume VII, Issue 36): „Moscow allows the IMU to operate on a leash of variable length in the region. That tactic is designed to increase Tashkent's and Bishkek's sense of insecurity and to justify the calls for an 'antiterrorist' alliance in Central Asia under Russian leadership."

3.2 *Realpolitik* Adjustments of the Instruments of Preventive Politics

Is there a point in prevention of violent conflict in Central Asia under the circumstances, as outlined above? After all, there seems to be every reason to believe that leaders there – all of whom are boarding pupils of the Soviet system – are only interested in one thing: maintaining power. Immunized against basic universal values such as human rights, freedom of speech, and separation of powers they pursue politics based strictly on a cost-benefit calculation. When the economic incentive is sufficient, *e.g.*, in the form of a loan for an order of a two figure million from the World Bank, one becomes a little more tolerant towards the opposition and even allows opinion pluralism to a certain extent. However, as soon as the position of power is perceived to be seriously at risk, the pendulum swings back. Using force to solve pending problems is then very quickly and most naturally regarded as a legitimate measure, because the end justifies the means, and power conservation and maintenance of state sovereignty are identical for the rulers. The fundamentalist opposition will not want to hold out to compromise either, nor will it be satisfied until the „illegal regimes" are replaced by a system of rule acceptable to them. Does prevention actually have any chance of success under such circumstances? And if so, what kind of prevention on what level?

A second and no less explosive question arises: if Russian foreign politics really does show neo-imperialistic characteristics, then the Kremlin is not at all interested in stabilizing the region between Afghanistan and the Caspian Sea. Firstly, because a peaceful Central Asian region would mean that one day the oil and natural gas deposits there would find their way to Western consumers over non-Russian territory. Secondly, since Moscow can only exert influence if the governments in Astana, Tashkent, Bishkek, Dushanbe, and Ashgabad depend on foreign support (Russian!) to maintain their security. By far the easiest way to meet this objective is to stir up latent social, religious, or ethnic conflicts and to play off the actors involved against each other. But what is the point of well-meant „peace promotion" and „good governance" programs if the region is really a plaything of local and Russian rulers? If nearly everybody in power profits politically

or in the form of drug or weapon trafficking from instable conditions, shouldn't one steer clear of prevention programs?

Phrasing the questions as above simultaneously means answering them to a great extent. Yet I want to record the fact here that this paper is not supposed to encourage abandonment of any prevention efforts in the Central Asian region. My objective is simply to make theoreticians and practitioners more sensitive to the necessity of asking oneself the following questions at the outset of preventive intervention in this conflict area:

- Should one intervene at all? And if so,

- who should do this?

- at what level?

- and in what manner?

Whereas the latter points are prevalent in scientific and practical discussions, my concern is primarily the first aspect – the appropriateness of preventive interventions under the *Realpolitik* conditions given. Here one distinguishes between intervention at the levels of „high politics" (diplomacy) and „low politics" (governmental and non-governmental development cooperation and humanitarian aid).

At present I see little chance for violence prevention in the „high politics" field in Central Asia, because, as stated above, manifest interests of a great regional power (Russia) are involved, and, on the other hand, the Central Asian states are themselves trapped in pronounced cost-benefit thinking which makes intervention seem generally problematic. When, for example, Uzbek President Islam Karimov weighs the advantages and disadvantages of Western aid offers, the rewards in form of political, economic, and ecological support are perceived to carry less weight compared to the negative consequences involved. Substantial aid will only be given if Uzbekistan opens up politically and economically. This implies a strengthening of civilian society and a multiplication of political and economic actors on the scene. Yet both would lead to eroding the power position of the current autocrat. This is why he reacts predictably by rejecting corresponding offers from the West. Thus preventive

politics to reduce existing conflict potentials peacefully in Uzbekistan as well as elsewhere in Central Asia is hardly possible. This applies to a world power USA, the OSCE, and the EU – let alone such small states as Switzerland.

Yet at the „low politics" level, where technocratic management is needed and the question of national sovereignty does not arise immediately, the situation looks a little different. Here preventive interventions with a chance of success are possible if the relevant success factors to be considered are taken into account.[27] Certain Swiss development aid projects, conducted with the assistance of local NGO's, can very well be regarded as pointing the way ahead. It was possible, for example, to find a conjoint solution in an argument between Kyrgyz and Tajiks over land and water resources in the Kyrgyz part of the Ferghana valley.[28] Such success would be far less likely for analogous arguments between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks, as the communal decision-makers on the Uzbek side do not have decision-making competence, and such problems are soon elevated to a political level where national sensitivities play a significant role.

For precisely this reason, I am skeptical of certain programs to promote democracy such as the „Ambassadors of Goodwill" project, which should exert preventive influence on the middle-echelon leadership by means of international networks of mediators and unofficial diplomacy. The risk is in large that such programs might degenerate into sheer alibi exercises and would not influence anything but might give Central Asian rulers a democratic coat.

3.3 Consistent Evaluation of Prevention Programs

It is one thing to give careful considerations in weighing preventive interventions to whether it actually makes sense or might only cause problems for oneself and others. It is just as important to think about whether intervention really serves violence prevention in the aftermath or not. It is insufficient to develop programs to liberalize the economy or to strengthen

---

[27]   See Paffenholz, 2001.

[28]   Foundation for Tolerance International, 2000.

democratic structures and to hope that they will generate a peaceful society miraculously by osmosis.

Far too often it turns out that especially good-governance projects cause the opposite: instead of decreasing the risks of armed conflicts, they actually increase them! In this respect, for example, legal advice for the rural population, as offered by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) together with Helvetas in Kyrgyzstan could turn into quite a two-edged sword. On a fairly long term, it fosters democratic development of the country, but in the short term it inevitably increases tensions between a peasantry increasingly insisting on its rights and government authorities. I am by no means arguing here for such programs to be abandoned. Yet the organizations and individuals involved in developmental co-operation must constantly be aware of the tension field between promoting democracy on one hand and violence prevention on the other. And eventually they might need to temporarily halt or even cancel such programs if in a heated atmosphere their activity could become a trigger for large scale violence.

4   Conclusion

Violent conflict and even war remain reality! If we were to mark regions of the world according to their conflict potential, those would be most prominent where Western or Eastern colonists tore existing political-economic units apart or constructed new territorial structures lacking policy administrating and / or economic foundations. If these countries or regions were simultaneously modernized in a Western or Eastern sense, the likelihood that such conflict potential would some day be released by means of violence increases manifold.

It is obvious that the Central Asian successor states of the Soviet Union are especially at risk. As a result of the interaction between economic decline, impoverishment of broad sections of society, demographic pressure on limited ecological resources, intra- and international tensions are increasing strongly. Conflicts, briefly pacified by colonialism, are erupting again. Ancient antagonisms, the reasons of which we often do not even know,

are mixed with new conflict potential generated and increased by industrialization and modern statehood. In addition the „*divide-et-impera*" politics of the Soviets created a situation in which every titular nation is confronted with significant ethnic minorities.

Scientists and practitioners studying violence prevention in the Central Asian area should be aware of this special situation. Recognizing the omnipresence of violence, they should particularly sharpen their senses to what is possible in terms of *Realpolitik,* and this in many respects:

- Firstly, they must consider the possibility of armed conflicts and war occurring despite all preventive governmental and non-governmental efforts.

- Secondly, the interests and objectives of the actors must be analyzed meticulously. Armed conflict and war result less from structural constellations like „poverty", „economic need", and „ethnic or religious fragmentation", for it is always humans who decide on war and peace.

- Thirdly, if my hypotheses concerning the characteristics of the Central Asian ruling clans and the neo-imperialistic politics of Moscow are correct, this results in the recognition of the fact that the possibilities for violence prevention in Central Asia are kept within tight limits.

The key question at the beginning of practical politics in violence prevention (not only in Central Asia but ultimately anywhere else) must always be „*cui bono*" using the methods of criminology. This in a positive as well as negative sense. If we know who will benefit from war and instability and who it will harm, we also know the scope for preventive intervention from outside. In my opinion, it is presently rather small in Central Asia.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Abazov, Rafiz (1999): The Formation of Post-Soviet International Politics in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan, *The Donald W. Treeadgold Papers in Russian, East European, and Central Asian Studies*, No. 21, June 1999, Jackson School of International Studies, University of Washington, Seattle.

Akiner, Shirin (2001) Tajikistan: Disintegration or Reconciliation?, Royal Institute of Inernational Affairs, Chatham House, London.

Atkin, Muriel (1999): „Tajikistan – a Case Study for Conflict Potential", in: Heinz Krummenacher and Susanne Schmeidl (eds), *Conflict and Conflict Prevention in Central Asia: the Prospects for Early Warning*, The Soviet and Post-Soviet Review, Vol. 24, No. 3, 1997. Charles Schlacks, Jr., Publisher, Idyllwild, California.

Blank, Stephan (1995) „Energy, Economics and Security in Central Asia: Russia and its Rivals", in: *Central Asian Survey*, Vol. 14 No. 3: pp. 374-376.

Carnegie Commission on Preventing Deadly Conflict (1997): Preventing Deadly Conflict, Executive Summary of the Final Report, Washington D.C.

Eisenhower, Susan and Roland Z. Sagdaev, 1995: Central Asia: Conflict, Resolution, and Change, Chevy Chase, MD: CPSS Press.

Erdem, Cagri (2000): „The New Geopolitics of Central Asia", Paper presented at the 41st Annual ISA Convention, Los Angeles, CA, March 14-18, 2000.

Foundation for Tolerance International (2000): „Case Study on Successful Conflict Resolution Efforts – Andarak Conflict Cluster" (unpublished paper).

Fukuyama, Francis (1992): *The End of History and the Last Man*, New York: Free Press.

Gurr, Ted R., Monty G. Marshall, and Deepa Khosla, (2000): *Peace and Conflict 2001 - A Global Survey of Armed Conflicts, Self Determination Movements, and Democracy*, Washington: Center for International Development and Conflict Management, University of Maryland.

Gurr, Ted R. (1998): „A Risk Assessment Model of Ethnopolitical Rebellion", in: John L. Davies and Ted Robert Gurr, *Preventive Measures*, Lanham, Rowman &Littlefield.

International Crisis Group (2001): Central Asia – Islamist Mobilization and Regional Security, Asia Report No. 14, Osh / Brussels.

Jamestown: http://www.jamestown.org

Krummenacher, Heinz, Günther Baechler, and Susanne Schmeidl (1999): „Beitrag der Frühwarnung zur Krisenprävention – Möglichkeiten und Grenzen in Theorie und Praxis", in: *Krisenprävention, Friedensbericht* 1999, pp. 77-98. Österreichisches Studienzentrum für Frieden und Konfliktlösung / Schweizerische Friedensstiftung (ed.). Chur / Zurich.

Paffenholz, Thania (2001): „Designing Intervention Processes", in: *Berghof Handbook on Conflict Transformation*: http://www.berghoffcenter.org

Schmeidl, Susanne (2001): „Early Warning and Integrated Response Development", in: *Romanian Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 1, No. 2, April 2001, p. 6, Bucharest: Romanian Academic Society.

Seybolt, Taylor B. (2000): „Major Armed Conflicts", in: SIPRI Yearbook 2000 – Armaments, Disarmament and International Security, 2000, pp. 15-49, International Peace Research Institute, Stockholm.

SIPRI Yearbook 2000 – Armaments, Disarmament and International Security 2000, International Peace Research Institute, Stockholm.

Malcolm, Noel (1998): *Kosovo – A Short History*. Papermac. London.

Miller, Eric (1999): Is the Prince Really Dead? - Internal Threats and Uzbekistan's Post-Soviet Alignment Strategy. Paper presented at the 1999 International Studies Association Annual Conference in Washington D.C., February 1999

Morgenthau, Hans J. (1967): *Politics Among Nations – the Struggle for Power and Peace,* Alfred A. Knopf, 1967, 4th edition.