

## Central Asia: Regional Problems, Regional Solutions

On 7 April 2010 Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon returned from his first official visit to Central Asia. During his visit, Ban called for “dialogue and cooperation” between Central Asian countries and addressed the need for [regional solutions to regional problems](#). When the Central Asian republics gained independence almost 20 years ago, analysts anticipated that these newly independent countries would form cooperative structures in response to the unique challenges faced by the landlocked region.

Under the Soviet system, most regional issues in Central Asia were highly centralized, with key decisions taken by Moscow. Since independence, policies have reflected the imperatives of national sovereignty. Nation building, concerns about relative gains over neighbors and access to natural resources and world markets have formed the core of their post-communist policies. However, an effective strategy to tackle problems such as cross-border migration, extremism, energy security, water allocation and drug trafficking will require cooperation among individual states and further efforts to integrate the region as a whole.

The Central Asian states’ inability to resolve the issue surrounding the fate of the Aral Sea is the most symbolic example of their failure to collaborate on regional issues. The Aral Sea’s volume has [shrunk by 90 percent](#), the result of a Soviet policy that diverted the natural flow of rivers in the region to support cotton production. Additionally, Central Asian countries face the risk of conflict over water and energy resources. The resource-rich downstream countries Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan are in an [ongoing dispute](#) with the upstream countries Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan over water allocation. The downstream countries require water for irrigation during the summer, whereas the upstream countries suffer from severe energy shortages in the winter and thus have an interest in storing the water to use for hydroelectric power.

### **Absence of structures for regional cooperation**

Although the Central Asian states have joined regional organizations, such as the Eurasian Economic Community [EurAsEC], the Shanghai Cooperation Organization [SCO], and the Collective Security Treaty Organization [CSTO], implementation of cooperation initiatives has been limited. Instead, these states have sought bilateral cooperation with Russia, China and the West to gain a competitive advantage over their neighbors, thereby intensifying intra-regional rivalries and obstructing regional integration.

Furthermore, the geopolitical rivalry between the major powers involved in the region (Russia, US, China) has sustained the authoritarian nature of the Central Asian regimes. Their leaders have joined regional structures with Russia and China, thereby undermining the Western agendas of good governance and democracy in order to [reinforce regime security](#). During the first half of this decade

the Eurasian region experienced a number of events that led to the overthrow of the incumbent regime, widely known as the color revolutions in Georgia (2003), Ukraine (2004) and Kyrgyzstan (2005). Furthermore, the Andijon uprising in Uzbekistan (2005) saw hundreds of people killed in a clash between protesters and government forces. Following Western condemnation of the events in Andijon, Uzbekistan has been more lukewarm towards the West and has integrated into structures dominated by Russia. The US has since come under criticism for ignoring human rights abuses and repression in Central Asia, motivated by the [region's strategic importance](#) in the US-led military operations in Afghanistan.

The events that unfolded in Kyrgyzstan earlier this month highlighted the social and economic difficulties that the country has faced. Failing to resolve these socioeconomic problems, President Kurmanbek Bakiyev increasingly resorted to oppression, thereby marginalizing ordinary people. None of these problems are unique to Kyrgyzstan. The president of Uzbekistan, Islam Karimov, has been particularly [concerned about possible spillovers](#) and [condemned](#) the deposition of any legitimate leadership.

### **Future prospects, Kazakhstan's OSCE chairmanship**

Kazakhstan, which has shown impressive economic growth since 2000, could potentially emerge as a center of regionalization in Central Asia. Recent trends show that Kazakhstan could emerge as an integrative core independent from Russia. Kazakhstan's multi-vector foreign policy and its successful economic and political reforms have supported its development into a [regional center](#) for trade and investment. Furthermore, partly due to discrimination encountered by labor migrants in Russia, Kazakhstan has [attracted many such migrants](#) from neighboring countries.

Will Kazakhstan, however, be able to extend its economic leadership into the political realm? Kazakhstan holds the chairmanship of the OSCE for the year 2010, presenting it with an opportunity to enhance its standing internationally and contribute to regional security issues. At the OSCE conference in Bucharest in February 2010, Kazakhstan signaled that one of its objectives during its OSCE chairmanship will be to maintain stability in Central Asia. President Nursultan Nazarbayev hinted that Kazakhstan will [emphasize the OSCE's first and second dimensions](#) – politico-military security and economic and environmental security – rather than democracy, arguing that the OSCE has been too attached to the western value system. Kazakhstan has pledged to combat terrorism, drug trafficking and organized crime in the region and has taken a leading role in recent nuclear non-proliferation initiatives. In response to the April 7 uprising, Kazakhstan sent an OSCE special envoy to Kyrgyzstan and facilitated Bakiyev's safe departure from the country.

Since economic development is a major determinant of stability in Central Asia, Kazakhstan needs to encourage economic integration among the region's states. The [UNDP Central Asia Human Development report](#) suggests that a cooperative approach could mean a doubling of the region's GDP over 10 years. But while EurAsEC provides a basis for multilateral economic cooperation, Kazakhstan is the only Central Asian country that was included in the recently created [customs union](#) with Russia and Belarus.

Kazakhstan has set a very ambitious agenda for its OSCE chairmanship, addressing a number of crucial issues that could [improve regional security](#). However its increasing political and economic clout could potentially fuel further competition among Central Asian states.

By Mark Finch

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## Resources

### International and Governmental Organizations

#### [The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe \(OSCE\)](#)

The OSCE is the world's largest regional security organization whose 56 participating states span the geographical area from Vancouver to Vladivostok.

### Research and Academia

#### [The Russian and Eurasian Security Network \(RES\)](#)

The RES brings together leading academic institutes, think tanks, and media organizations from around the globe to examine security-related developments in Russia and the Eurasian region.

#### [Central Asia-Caucasus Institute](#)

The Central Asia-Caucasus Institute is an independent research and policy institution, affiliated with the Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies at Johns Hopkins University.

#### [China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly](#)

The China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly is an English language web-based journal devoted to the analysis of current issues facing China and Eurasia, as well as the growing relationship between the two.

### Media

#### [Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty \(RFE/RL\)](#)

RFE/RL is an independent, international news and broadcast organization.

#### [EurasiaNet](#)

EurasiaNet provides information and analysis about political, economic, environmental and social developments in the countries of Central Asia and the Caucasus, as well as in Russia, the Middle East and Southwest Asia.

#### [Registan.net](#)

Registan.net covers Eurasian politics and news, seeking to draw more attention to issues and news not covered in depth by western media.

#### [Ferghana.ru](#)

The Ferghana Information Agency is a certified Russian media outlet, serving the Central Asian republics of the former Soviet Union.

### [Oasis on-line journal \(in Russian\)](#)

Oasis is a bi-monthly online journal that covers the five Central Asian countries.

### **Non-governmental Organizations**

#### [Institute for War & Peace Reporting Central Asia](#)

The Institute for War & Peace Reporting strengthens local journalism in areas of conflict. By training reporters, facilitating dialogue and providing reliable information, it supports peace, democracy and development in societies undergoing crisis and change.

#### [Transition Online \(TOL\)](#)

TOL is a non-profit organization established to strengthen the professionalism, independence and impact of the news media in the post-communist countries of Europe and the former Soviet Union.

#### [International Crisis Group \(ICG\)](#)

The ICG is an independent, non-profit, multinational organization working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict. The ICG features comprehensive coverage of the Eurasian region.

Please see also our special keyword on [Eurasia](#).