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Promoting Stability In Central Asia

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Environmental Security: A Key to Stability in Central Asia

Central Asia and the Caspian Basin are the legatees of the Russian Empire's and the former Soviet Union's shortsighted extraction economy policies. As a result, these nations face environmental challenges unlike any other region in the world. A major natural or man-made disaster in any single country can threaten the fresh water supply and/or public health across the whole region. Such a major environmental disaster is a credible threat to national and regional stability.

Since the Central Asia States do not have access to extensive resources and funds to apply to such a disaster, contingency planning, implementing preventive measures, empowering on-site decision-makers, and maintaining an effective public information flow are critical to reducing the political and environmental impacts, and remediation costs of such an event. This was the environmental security message delivered to the representatives of Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan attending the 7th Conference on Promoting Stability in Central Asia conducted in Almaty, Kazakhstan, June 11-15, 2001.

Co-sponsored by the George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies and the Kazakhstan Institute for Strategic Studies Under the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, and supported by the Center for Strategic Leadership, the conference focused on five major themes: Regional Security, Challenges to Political Stability, Economic and Environmental Security Challenges, Regional Cooperation and Integration, and Recommendations to Enhance Regional Cooperation and Security. The identification of solutions to these issues that emphasized integrated, cooperative action across the region was not an easy task. Though key to regional security and stability, the complex challenges posed by Afghanistan, the urgency of regional economic and political integration, and the existing national jealousies do not lend themselves to the formulation of actionable proposals. Though more easily definable the development of a sound regional environmental security program that supports movement towards sustainable development is severely restricted by the competition for the necessary resources.

Environmental Security

Regional stability in Central Asia is an interest of the United States. Because of their influence, environmental issues such as resource access and quality are major variables in regional instability and conflict, exacerbating tensions resulting from religious, ethnic, and other local differences. However, environmental issues also create conditions for regional cooperation,

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and provide possibilities for communication and cooperation. It was this type of actionable opportunity with which the conference attendees were presented.

A major issue in the development of national and regional environmental security plans for Central Asia is the scope of the concept. Environmental security is more than “green” planning. It is a holistic policy that deals not only with the sustainable development of natural resources, but also the quality of life of the region’s citizens. Effective planning in both of these areas directly impacts a nation’s security interests. Co-existence within an environmental system that is stressed by both natural and man-made disasters and increasing human consumption places constant pressure on the stability of the Central Asia States and their Caspian Basin neighbors. It is critical that in this resource intensive region with its great number of divisive environmental security issues, that a mutually advantageous area for regional cooperation be identified.



Stimulating Regional Cooperation



As an example of the programs available today that encourage regional cooperation conference attendees were provided a summary of the results of the U.S. Central Command’s (USCENTCOM) focused environmental security conference, *Responding To Environmental Challenges In Central Asia And The Caspian Basin*. Conducted in March 2001 at Garmisch-Partenkirchen, Germany, the conference was cosponsored by the Office of the Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Environmental Security, the George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies, and the Collins Center for Strategic Leadership U. S. Army War College.

Taking a lead from the U. S. Army National Guard’s successful *International Workshop for Emergency Response* program, USCENTCOM chose disaster response planning and coordination as the vehicle for stimulating regional cooperation. This theater assurance initiative clarified the environmental issues central to the security of the Central Asian region and emphasized the importance of both military environmental stewardship and cooperative contingency planning in responding to identified existing and potential regional environmental challenges.

Regional Environmental Challenges

“Water is the key vital factor in Central Asia”

*M.S. Ashimbayev, Director, Kazakhstan Institute for Strategic Studies
Under the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan*

Since the breakup of the Soviet Union water availability and quality have been contentious issues. The shared nature of the region’s limited water resources poses one of the most common concerns for regional stability in the future. Fair and equitable distribution of ample clean water, which is viewed by all states as a sovereign right, will see challenges as States seek to balance supplies against rapidly rising demand.

In the years since independence there has been a divergence in the five countries economic policies and water needs. Differing exploitation interests between upstream (hydropower) and downstream (irrigation) states have been exacerbated by

the decay of infrastructure (dams and monitoring), increased irrigation requirements and greater industrial development. For the foreseeable future, these and other environmental factors will influence security in the region.

Any significant environmental event that impacts water quality will have regional implications. The deteriorating environmental conditions in the Caspian and Aral Seas are complicated by the potential for disaster posed by the shared transnational threat of radioactive sludge located near water resources.

Caspian Sea

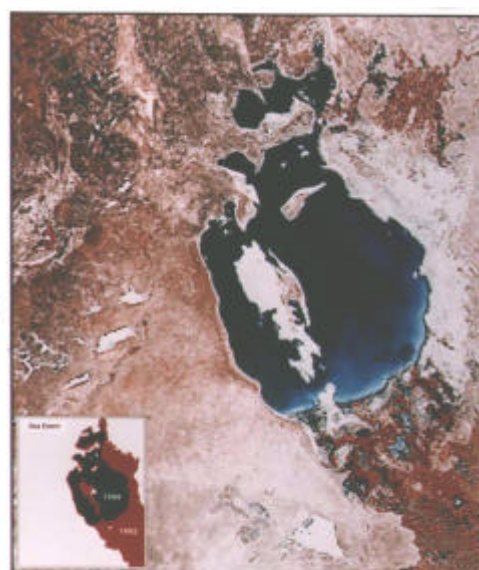
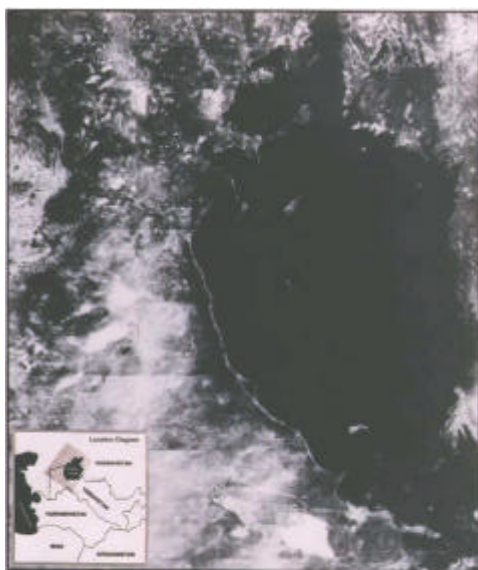
Occupying an area slightly larger than Germany, the Caspian Sea is a critical economic factor not only to Russia, Azerbaijan, Iran, Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan, but to their inland neighbors as well. As the exploitation of its oil and gas resources are pursued it is becoming a focal point for international environmental tensions. Complicating these issues

is the Caspian's rising water level. Having risen over seven feet since 1978 it has eliminated some maritime port facilities, and is threatening to spread chemical and biological contamination by invading existing containment ponds and holding areas. Water levels have risen so much that up to 200 abandoned on-shore oil wells are now "offshore" wells with the attendant pollution concerns.



Aral Sea

Once the world's fourth-largest freshwater sea, in the last 20 years its area has dropped by half, and its volume by three-fourths. The result of Soviet-era agricultural policy and over irrigation that diverted the waters of its primary feeders, the Syr Darya and the Amu Darya, the disappearance of the Aral Sea has created a major environmental



security disaster that is impacting the whole region. Climate change, desertification, and impacts on respiratory health have caused internal migrations in Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan. The continued shrinkage of the base level of the Aral Sea threatens to further expose the former Soviet biological warfare testing site, Vozrozhdeniya Island, raising the potential for widespread contamination of the ecosystem with live anthrax.

Potential Concerns

Radioactive contamination from former Soviet storage areas and holding ponds threatens the water quality of the regional aquifers should a major earthquake or other

natural phenomenon cause a breach in the integrity of the containment facilities. Existing terrorist capabilities also pose a threat to dams and waste storage areas. Another major area of uncertainty is the structural integrity of Tajikistan's Sarez Lake dam. Formed by an earthquake in 1911, Sarez Lake is one of the largest high altitude lakes in the world. Failure of the dam would be a regional catastrophe that could threaten the lives of over 5 million people.

The Road Ahead

Though there are diverging positions on some issues, there is a significant amount of regional cooperation. In large part this is a result of common approaches and the organizational structure of these countries as former Soviet states as well as recognizing that, to varying degrees, the countries are dependent upon each other. Capitalizing on these positive issues, at the March conference USCENTCOM proposed a 2-3 day Senior Executive Seminar to be conducted in 2002. The seminar goal would be to work with representatives of the appropriate Central Asia States ministries to formulate a regional/multi-national disaster response plan that identified preventive measures as well as operational responses. This plan would be tested in the future with an USCENTCOM-sponsored, multi-national command post exercise (CPX).

Conclusion

Central Asia's critical geographic location and energy resource potential makes its continued stability a strategic concern of the United States. The most immediate destabilizing factors in the area are environmental remediation issues that require greater resources than are currently available either regionally or internationally. Assisting the Central Asia States to develop national and regional disaster preparedness and response measures is a positive measure that supports the objectives of the United States.

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