

**Communication of M. Thierry Mariani  
Special Representative of the OSCE PA for Central Asia and Mongolia**

**Missions in 2013:  
Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Mongolia**

Central Asia has undergone profound changes over the past twenty years. With notable exceptions such as Afghanistan's almost constant state of war since 1979, the region can appear as an area of relative political tranquillity. This is despite the existence of various sources of instability; ethnic divisions, drug trafficking, Islamic fundamentalism, the interests of external actors in natural resources and local manifestations of great power rivalry among them. This communication documents the issues faced by Central Asia in 2013-2014, and particularly by the three countries visited by Mr. Mariani in 2013 (Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Mongolia).

### I. A transforming region

Central Asia is undergoing deep changes. The region is politically and economically fragmented and characterized by a lack of unity and regional solidarity. The risk of conflict is still present, hence the importance of efforts undertaken by multilateral actors such as the OSCE and the EU. However, rather than focus on the negative impressions of Central Asia to be found in the mainstream media, it is necessary to emphasize that these post-soviet States contain nascent societies that are undergoing profound social, economic and cultural transformations. This situation needs to be analysed by taking into account the historical context. There are four primary areas of on-transformation:

#### - A) Identity

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the onset of independence, the demographic composition of each state has become increasingly homogeneous. Minorities have few rights overall. In each case, the nation-state that emerged after independence primarily serves the majority and/or dominant ethnic group within it, and not the citizenry as a whole. Following independence, Central Asian governments sought to consolidate their sovereignty and prevent any risk of secession in the face of strong local powers and the territorial claims of their neighbours. The questioning of borders is not on the agenda today, but local claims persist – either because some minorities aspire to greater autonomy or because of unequal wealth distribution: Instability can therefore be attributed to economic and social realities, rather than ethnic factors.

#### - B) Religion

In Central Asia, the place of Islam is not as important as in Afghanistan. Central Asian States are secular in orientation and profess no state religion. Governments have ensured that religious practice is submitted to various types of state control. Natural government targets are those stemming from radical conceptions of Islam, in great part due to its closeness to Afghanistan. Alongside the ancient Central Asian practice of Islam, new radical movements have sprung up in the region. The risk of Islamic terrorism cannot not be underestimated nor exaggerated. Indeed, it is a function of political Islam in South Asia and the Caucasus, two bastions of such radical movements.

#### - C) Economic changes

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the policies of economic liberalization implemented after independence have led to brutal and large-scale impoverishment in Central Asia. There has been no gradual transition from the planned economy to the market economy. An economic system that is ostensibly liberal is in fact controlled by a tiny minority. Millions in Central Asia have been compelled to emigrate, mainly to Russia. The sudden disappearance of the planned economy has damaged the education and health systems. The fragmentation of the region is the primary obstacle economic development, even with the existence of regional cooperative structures. Concerns about sovereignty act as an obstacle to the fostering of regional unity.

#### - D) Great Power interests

Aside from Kazakh oil production, there are no major Central Asian industries to speak of. The EU does not have a clear policy towards Central Asia, despite having a greater economic presence locally

than the U.S. and Russia. Although the U.S. maintains its own presence in the region, it spends little on this due to Central Asia's lack of priority within the country's foreign policy. Conversely, China has become a major economic partner for the countries of Central Asia, and seeks to maintain stability in the region. Unlike other powers, Russia has a clear vision of Central Asia in the military sphere, owing to its security interests within the region (primarily counter-terrorism and border security). It is also eager to maintain control over local oil resources. In the face of such external pressures, Central Asian states strive to maintain a balance among their various partners.

## II. The consequences of the Afghan conflict for Central Asia

The stability of the region in 2014 will depend to a great extent on the development of Afghanistan after the presidential election and the withdrawal of ISAF. Instability in Afghanistan entails risks for Central Asia since the conflict accounts for much of the tensions within the region. For historical reasons, the OSCE does not occupy a central role in Afghanistan. That said, Afghanistan has been an OSCE partner for cooperation since April 2013. The Ministerial Councils of Madrid (2007) and Vilnius (2011) have increased the OSCE's engagement with Afghanistan, mainly in the form of extra-budgetary contributions for various projects (border and customs management, combatting drug trafficking and electoral assistance).

### - A) 2014: a year of uncertainty

The international community is committing substantial resources (\$340 million) to the preparation of the Afghan presidential election of 5 April 2014. The security environment of the election is uncertain. Afghan security forces and police are supposed to take the lead in the fight against the Taliban, while ISAF forces are to be downgraded to a level that has yet to be determined. NATO member states emphasize that a compromise between Afghan political factions is necessary to restore peace. However, this appears to be a remote objective: in 2013, the level of violence in Afghanistan surpassed that seen in 2012. The lead up to the election has underlined the need to strike a political balance on an ethnic basis, and not according to partisan interest and ambiguous ideologies.

### - B) Deadlocked political stabilization

Political forces in Afghanistan are divided into two categories: those who accept the new constitutional order implemented after the intervention, and those who reject it. Despite continually fighting against each other, they have never broken off dialogue. Yet, the failure of this dialogue - as exemplified by the latest Doha episode in 2013 - demonstrates the incompatibility of their positions and reinforces the deadlock. Without a political solution, Afghanistan is at risk of renewed ethnic and religious fragmentation that is likely to destabilize parts of Central Asia. The risks for the region were clearly identified at the end of 2013 during a conference in Bishkek. Concerned about terrorist movements and drug trafficking, participants appealed to the international community to increase the financial aid to Afghanistan. Indeed, only a strong Afghan authority with a potent defence capacity will restore security in Central Asia.

### - C) The importance of opium to the Afghan economy and political system

During the Rose-Roth seminar in Bishkek, consistent poppy cultivation was once again discussed. Afghanistan produces 90% of the world's opium supply, which accounts for roughly 60% of its GDP. The Taliban and other warlords use opium as a lever to control populations, maintaining an environment of insecurity and securing votes in the elections. There is a strong correlation between the prevalence of violence and the expansion of poppy cultivation in Afghanistan. The porousness of Afghanistan's borders has exported this problem to Central Asian countries like Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. Social and economic difficulties in Central Asia have tempted some to join the drug trafficking trade. The benefits of poppy cultivation are such that they create a violent environment and make the stabilization of Afghanistan impossible. The withdrawal of ISAF will reduce the funding

given to the Afghan government, thereby heightening the interest of political forces in Afghanistan in this lucrative source of financing.

### III. Tajikistan

Tajikistan is the poorest CIS country and has a very young population. Millions of Tajiks live in Uzbekistan and Afghanistan. The country is confronted with rising religious fundamentalism. The Hizb ut-Tahrir remains active in all of Central Asia, notably among the youth. Many Tajiks are still profoundly scarred by the civil war, but young people born after this period are perhaps most susceptible to this radical discourse. The President of Tajikistan has fought against extremism by various means (control of imams and sermons, closure of mosques, arrests, etc.)

#### - A) A security-based foreign policy

The Afghan issue and the fight against terrorism are at the heart of Dushanbe's concerns. Tajikistan suffers from the instability in Afghanistan – especially drug trafficking. Bilateral relations between Tajikistan and Uzbekistan remain tense. These derive from disagreements on water management (Rogun Dam), and Tajiks still require visas to travel to Uzbekistan. Bilateral relations with Kyrgyzstan are improving, and the two countries signed a protocol on border cooperation in January. Relations with China are good; there are no outstanding border issues since 2011 and China is the foremost investor in Tajik infrastructure. The security of Tajikistan primarily relies on its alliance with Russia. Russia shelters many Tajik workers whose remittances account for 50% of Tajikistan's GDP.

#### - B) The development of regional and international cooperation

Through its participation in the OSCE and the CSTO, Tajikistan seeks to develop its relations with its neighbours and great Eurasian powers. Dushanbe places value on its annual quadrilateral meetings with Russia, Pakistan and Afghanistan to promote regional cooperation. Tajikistan seeks to foster a regional dialogue on water management and has held several conferences on the topic (the latest was in 2013), with CASA-1000 and Rogun Dam being the main projects in this area.

#### - C) A testing economic situation

The consolidation of infrastructure is difficult in such a mountainous and landlocked country. Developing road infrastructure is essential for Tajikistan, and China is financing several roads. Cotton and aluminium production constitute the main exports, while Tajikistan must import food and energy. Agriculture still accounts for half of Tajikistan's workforce. The banking and construction sectors are expanding. Reform and investment in Tajikistan is largely dependent on foreign countries and international financial institutions. International aid is hindered by a lack of entrepreneurship and corruption.

#### - D) Active cooperation with the OSCE

The OSCE Office in Tajikistan is extremely active, intervening in many areas. Four of these are particularly worthy of note. Tajikistan has adopted a national strategy (2010-2025) for border security, and the OSCE trains Tajik and Afghan border officers. The OSCE holds seminars on regional cooperation for Tajik, Afghan and Kyrgyz border officers. In the fight against terrorism and organized crime, the OSCE works on confidence-building between the police and the population. On human trafficking, the OSCE monitors the compliance of Tajik policies according to international standards, focusing on the capacity-building of Tajik police. Within the framework of the Ottawa Convention, the OSCE also assists Tajikistan with mine clearance.

### IV. Kyrgyzstan

#### - A) Domestic stabilization

The constitutional referendum of 27 June 2010 established the first semi-parliamentary regime of Central Asia. Despite tensions in the South of the country, parliamentary elections were held on 10 October 2010. The OSCE and the international community praised the elections for their respect of pluralism and democratic values. The OSCE/ODIHR sent more than 300 observers to Kyrgyzstan and gave a positive assessment of the elections, bar some irregularities during vote counting. Soon after, a coalition government was formed, and one year later, a new president was elected.

- B) Important problems of internal security

Kyrgyzstan is confronted to major transnational security issues (drug trafficking from Afghanistan, organized crime and Islamic threats). Border instability in the Southern enclaves often reignites tensions with Uzbekistan, and to a lesser extent, with Tajikistan. On 5 January 2013, violent confrontations between Kyrgyz and Uzbek citizens occurred in the Uzbek enclave of Sokh.

- C) The human rights situation

Kyrgyzstan must reform its judiciary and police. On 13 November 2012, a European delegation visited Azimjan Azarov, a journalist and human rights defender. He was arrested in June 2010 while investigating the violence in Osh in the South of the country. The Supreme Court sentenced him to life imprisonment in December 2011. The President of Kyrgyzstan herself, Mrs Roza Otunbayeva, has requested the Justice ministry several times to investigate torture and ill-treatment by security forces.

- D) The economic situation

Kyrgyzstan suffers from three structural problems: it is an energy-dependent, landlocked country, with a small market. The exports lack diversity because precious metals and minerals account for 60% of them. Kumtor gold mine accounts for 15% of GDP. Kyrgyzstan depends on remittances sent by Kyrgyz expatriates living in Russia and Kazakhstan (35% of GDP). According to estimates, the underground economy accounts for half of GDP. Agriculture employs half of the population. Like Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan is also confronted with poverty (32% of the population). Since 2010, Russia provides important funding to Kyrgyzstan to alleviate its trade deficit.

- E) Important progress in line with OSCE objectives

Kyrgyzstan has proven its eagerness to respect OSCE values and objectives. With support from the OSCE Centre in Bishkek, it has made important progress during the last two years. Concerning border security, the OSCE has supported several comprehensive training programmes for Kyrgyz and Afghan customs officials in 2013. Such programmes will continue in 2014. In the framework of the national action plan on preventing human trafficking, the OSCE aims at reinforcing legislation, institutional capacities and dialogue. Kyrgyzstan, with support from the OSCE Centre in Bishkek, has engaged in a series of actions to reinforce human rights, rule of law, independence of the judiciary, reform of the prison sector, election transparency and gender equality (there is a 2012-2020 national gender equality strategy).

## V. Mongolia

Mongolia is a perfect example of how a former authoritarian country grows democratic roots. Since the end of the one-party system in 1990, Mongolia has held many democratic elections. For the first time ever, OSCE observers were present during the June 2013 presidential election in Mongolia.

Mongolia has a high potential for economic development. Although GDP is still modest and depends on international donors, Mongolia has many strong points: important mineral resources and livestock, interesting perspectives for telecommunications, food-processing industry and tourism. Mongolia has had a high growth rate since 2002 (11,2% in 2012 for instance). As a producer of raw

material however, Mongolia is dependent on the international economy and encounters pollution problems.

Since the 2000s, Ulan-Bator's foreign policy has changed. Although Mongolia's foreign policy is still based on striking a balance between China and Russia, the country is developing relations with other countries such as the U.S., Japan, South Korea, the EU, France and Germany. They are important trade partners and bilateral donors for Mongolia. The EU has become Mongolia's third largest trade partner. In April 2013, Mongolia signed a partnership and cooperation agreement with the EU. Furthermore, Mongolia also became a member or partner of several multilateral organizations. Its foreign policy is now based on better guaranteeing the security and integrity of its territory.

Mongolia was an OSCE partner for cooperation before becoming the 57<sup>th</sup> member of the organization in 2012. This membership is crucial because it consolidates Mongolia's affiliation to a bloc sharing democratic values and enables the country to participate in the debates of one of the most important multilateral organizations in the world.

Moreover, OSCE objectives mirror several concerns of Mongolia: police and border patrol reform, justice reform, fight against corruption, water management, promotion of women and minorities, media freedom... The country has really good results in these areas, but it is aware that it needs support from the OSCE and the EU.

In this context, on 30 May 2013, the Mongolian Minister of foreign affairs officially addressed to the former OSCE CiO Leonid Kozhara a formal request to establish an OSCE presence in Mongolia. During the Ukrainian CiO's visit to Mongolia (28 May-1 June), the CiO himself recommended the creation of an OSCE mission in Ulan-Bator. Such a request intervenes in a tense political and financial context for the OSCE, but the U.S., Canada and many European countries have welcomed it. No financial argument can be retained against the establishment of the mission: some OSCE missions benefit from hundreds of staff (Kosovo) and it is always possible to redeploy staff in order to create a new mission in Ulan-Bator. OSCE participating States therefore have the duty to fulfil this request.