



**Alternative Futures for Afghanistan and the Stability of Southwest Asia:
Improving Regional Cooperation on Water
Opening Session – 2 April 2009**

Event Report

Introduction

On 2 April 2009, the EastWest Institute's Preventive Diplomacy Initiative launched a new 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 opening session of the series, held in the EastWest Institute Brussels Centre, brought together political representatives and experts from Afghanistan and the region and began to forge collective action on water – the most critical of natural resources.

The key issues identified at the meeting were:

- The political sensitivity of the water issue;
- The potential of water for trust and confidence building;
- The importance of sharing information;
- The need for better water management as a precondition for social and economic development; and
- The connections between water and energy (hydropower)

Recognizing the need for regional cooperation

The debate opened with a presentation by Mr. Fedor Klimtchouk, the Deputy Head and Senior Political Affairs Officer of the Ashgabat based UN Regional Centre for Preventive Diplomacy for Central Asia (UNRCCA). Mr. Klimtchouk underscored that the water and energy nexus had emerged as one of the main priorities to be addressed in the region. “Despite a number of bilateral and multilateral agreements in this sphere, the current system remains fragmented and compliance to agreements lags behind.” There is a growing recognition amongst all stakeholders, including the international community, that strengthening regional dialogue and enhancing cooperation on the exploration and management of water and energy resources will be critically important to come to long term sustainable solutions.

The political sensitivity of the water issue

Participants noted that trans-boundary water cooperation is often burdened by international disagreement over territorial sovereignty over shared water resources. Additionally, the politicization of water security on the national level has contributed to mistrust and stereotypical thinking preconditioning fruitful cooperation, not only at the level of political elites but also at the level of individual users. Reversing stereotypes surrounding water, creating political will, and increasing people's participation in water issues is urgent.

The potential of water for trust and confidence building

Several participants observed that shared water was more often enhancing cooperation than leading to violent conflict between competing users. It was agreed that the potential of water for trust and confidence building is to be underscored. Sharing water in mutually beneficial ways has had the tendency to encourage cooperation. Joint exploration of different kinds of benefits from such cooperation can serve as a stepping stone towards improved relations of trust.

One participant called the 30 years long cooperation between Iran and Afghanistan on the use of the water resources of the Helmand River Basin testimony to the fact that confrontation over water can perfectly be avoided, provided that preventive diplomatic means are fully used.

The existence of numerous bilateral and multilateral frameworks of cooperation on water (including the Interstate Commission for Water Coordination for Central Asia, the 1992 Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Watercourses and International Lakes and the 1997 UN Convention on the Law of the Non-navigational Uses of International Watercourses) provide further basis for trust building and cooperation. All riparian states should join the existing conventions.

Participants noted that joint training of water experts and capacity building, as used in the framework of the Scientific Information Centre of the Interstate Commission for Water Coordination of Central Asia, had proven to be a well-functioning tool for trust and confidence building too.

The importance of sharing information

One of the most important conditions to overcoming challenges to cooperation on water in the region is sharing information efficiently between all stakeholders. Too often one state's information on water resources is not shared with interested neighboring states.

In many cases, there is a lack of information altogether. In Afghanistan in particular, decades of conflict have severely diminished the available water resource information.

A multi-disciplinary approach to the water security issues, including expertise from all related scientific branches, could contribute to improving the existing information and to enhancing communications in the region.

Poor information sharing between international donors with regards to their water related development assistance is a large impediment to enhancing regional water security. Participants called for a better coordination of donor supported water infrastructure projects. Referring to its new technical assistance project in the region, the Asian Development Bank's representative welcomed closer cooperation, increased coordination and the building of networks between all involved parties.

A multi-stakeholder approach to fully recognize the interests of local users of water would further complement better information sharing. The management and development of water resources, being crucial to the livelihood of all, has to be carried out in ways that ensure that all users can reap the benefits in equal fashion.

One participant observed that geo-spatial monitoring of water resources was technically possible and could be used to the benefit of all stakeholders in the regions to form an effective system of early warning of threats to water and energy security. The participant added that NATO had expressed interest in further exploring the potential of sharing such information on a regional level.

Participants proposed the extension of existing regional information sharing tools, and called for Afghanistan's inclusion in the information sharing mechanisms of the Interstate Commission for Water Coordination of Central Asia (ICWC). The www.cawater-info.net was referred to as an excellent example of information sharing between relevant national agencies, international organizations and other stakeholders.

The need for better water management

As exemplified by the particular situation of Tajikistan, improving the water infrastructure is crucial to the livelihood of large parts of the region's population. Sufficient access to fresh water for sanitation, agriculture and energy is a precondition for social and economic development.

Much of Afghanistan's existing infrastructure is in dire need for maintenance and improvement. New infrastructure will need to be developed if Afghanistan is to meet the fresh water and energy needs of its population. Recent droughts, poor management and violent conflict have contributed to a situation where hardly 20% of Afghanistan's population has access to water and 6% to electricity.

The availability of water is not as much a problem as is the lack of management of the resource. Afghanistan and its neighbors are home to enormous resources of water of which large amounts are lost due to poor management.

The water-energy nexus

The participants recognized that hydropower is an increasingly important source of energy for Afghanistan and its neighbors. The development of hydropower potential in the region will be an integral element of any regional cooperation on water. The issue is one of high political sensitivity as developing dams and hydropower stations will affect the natural flow of water, impacting downstream users. The participants agreed that the recognition of the connection between water and energy and the related challenges, including the political sensitivity, is a precondition to moving forward with regional cooperation on water in a mutually beneficial manner.

The construction of hydro-electric facilities on the Panj River, affecting Tajikistan and Afghanistan, provides a useful example in this regard. All participants recognized the great potential of power generation through water. However, the need for independent assessment of the impact of dams and hydropower stations on downstream users was stressed.

Next steps

The participants agreed that the series of policy dialogues provided a useful platform for exploring further cooperation. The participants in the series will continue to work towards policy recommendations for regional principles and a code of conduct on shared water resources.

The EastWest Institute will distribute the contact information of all participants of the opening session.

The next session of the series will take place on 30 April and explore enhanced regional cooperation on the Amu Darya River. The meeting will be open to all participants of the opening session.

Participants List of the Opening Session

1. **Dr. Greg AUSTIN:** Vice President and Director of the Global Security Program and Policy Innovation, EastWest Institute
2. **Anders BERNTSELL:** Executive Director, Stockholm International Water Institute
3. **Lizza BORNAY-BOMASSI:** Project Assistant, Preventive Diplomacy Initiative, EastWest Institute
4. **Astrid CARFAGNINI:** Intern, Preventive Diplomacy Initiative, EastWest Institute
5. **Birte GAETH:** Assistant of Angelika Beer, MEP
6. **Abdul Jalil GHAFUORY:** Public Affairs Officer, Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, Mission to the EU and NATO, Brussels
7. **Ortwin HENNIG:** Vice President and Head of the Preventive Diplomacy Initiative, EastWest Institute, Ambassador
8. **Matthew KING:** Project Manager, Preventive Diplomacy Initiative, EastWest Institute
9. **Liza KURUKULASURIYA:** Project Coordinator, Forging Worldwide Security, EastWest Institute
10. **Christine LYNCH:** Project Assistant, Preventive Diplomacy Initiative, EastWest Institute
11. **Jamil MAQSOOD:** General Secretary, United Kashmir Peoples National Party
12. **Hassan MASHHADI:** Director, All Hazards Management
13. **Mohammad Yahya MASOUD:** Political Counselor, Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, Mission to the EU and NATO, Brussels
14. **Natalia MIRIMANOVA:** Senior Researcher/Coordinator EU Central Asia Monitoring Project, Centre for European Policy Studies
15. **Suhrob MIRZOALIEV:** Second Secretary, Embassy of Tajikistan to the Kingdom of Belgium
16. **H.E. Ambassador Isan MUSTAFOEV:** Head of the Uzbekistan Mission to Belgium, the EU and NATO
17. **Maximilien PARDO:** Advisor, UNEP Post Conflict and Disaster Management Branch
18. **Michael PENDERS:** President, Environmental Security International
19. **Rustam SOLIEV:** Deputy Head of Mission, Embassy of Tajikistan to the Kingdom of Belgium
20. **Benjamin STURTEWAGEN:** Project Coordinator, Preventive Diplomacy Initiative, EastWest Institute
21. **Turdimurat TURSUNMURATOV:** First Secretary of the Uzbekistan Mission to NATO
22. **Seyed Ala'eddin VAHID GHARAVI:** First Counselor, Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Iran in Belgium
23. **Dave VERGE:** Intern, Preventive Diplomacy Initiative, EastWest Institute

Via Conference Call

24. **Victor DUKHOVNY:** Director, Scientific Information Centre, Interstate Commission for Water Coordination of Central Asia
25. **Fedor KLIMTCHOUK:** Deputy Head and Senior Political Affairs Officer, UN Regional Centre for Preventive Diplomacy for Central Asia
26. **David KRUGER:** Senior Regional Economic Cooperation Programs Specialist, Asian Development Bank, Central and West Asia Department
27. **Dr. Rakhshan ROOHI:** Principal Scientific Officer, National Agricultural Research Council Center Pakistan
28. **Sayed Sharif SHOBAIR:** National Project Coordinator and Chief Engineer, Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) Representation in Afghanistan, Emergency Irrigation Rehabilitation Project