

Heidemaria Gürer

FORMS OF REGIONAL COOPERATION IN CENTRAL ASIA

After the collapse of the Soviet Union the five Central Asian former Soviet Republics (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan) appeared as one region. Though it is scientifically debatable if “Central Asia” consists of only these five states or if others should be included as well (e.g. Afghanistan, Mongolia), my findings will basically deal with the five former Soviet Central Asian republics – sometimes, where appropriate, with references to adjacent countries.

In distinction to other parts of the former Soviet Union, e.g. the Baltics or the Southern Caucasus, independence came unexpectedly to Central Asia. Statehood as such was gained and developed in most all cases rather easily – the phenomenon of “failed states” was to be encountered less in Central Asia than in some other former Soviet republics – it initially seemed for them more difficult to put themselves as real, initiative actors on the international arena – also due to a lack of own foreign policy experience during Soviet times. But comprising a territory of a size comparable to Europe – although populated only by a small percentage of the European population (some 50 million) – and being resource rich and strategically located between Europe, China, Russia and South East Asia (some of them on the shores of the Caspian Sea) to make their voices heard on the international arena became a stringent necessity. Should this goal be pursued on an individual basis or through common efforts?

Immediately after the collapse of the Soviet Union all five Central Asian states became – next to the United Nations (a special UN ECE programme was - though so far not very successfully - started for Central Asia) – members of the **CIS** as well as the OSCE. In contrast to other former Soviet Republics, CIS membership was never really put into doubt, although Uzbekistan pursued a sometimes more hesitant

policy towards certain CIS sub organisations like the CIS Collective Security Treaty (initially even called “Tashkent Treaty”), becoming also member of the GUAM thus enriching this organisation not only with a Central Asian outlook but also with one more “U” in its name, thus becoming **GUUAM** – an organisation originally formed by **G**orgia, **U**kraine, **A**zerbaijan and **M**oldova (all states that at this specific time had territorial problems with Russian involvement). In retrospective one could argue that today, in 2005, the CIS and relations with Russia are more important for Uzbekistan than its membership with GUUAM which was anyhow suspended for some time due to lack in progress in expected enhancement of trade and communication relations (for Uzbekistan being a double landlocked country a very important aspect) in favour of territorial questions (Nagorny Karabakh, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Transnistria) with which Uzbekistan did not want to get involved and harm its relations with Russia for nothing.

Concerning **OSCE** membership of the five Central Asian States in this Euro-Atlantic organisation it was at the beginning questioned by some countries (also and foremost by Russia), but applying the approach of equal opportunities to all former Soviet Republics geography was not taken as a membership criteria. OSCE membership gave the Central Asian States a “European” outlook on the one hand, but in the course of time their membership also transformed the OSCE into an organisation with a Central Asian emphasis. The OSCE with its field missions played its most important role in Central Asia in Tajikistan in helping to surmount the traces of the civil war. OSCE field missions were opened in all five Central States. During Austria’s OSCE chairmanship in the year 2000 Central Asia became for the first time in CSCE/OSCE history an explicit priority of a Chairmanship – the Austrian Minister for Foreign Affairs visiting the region four times within less than two years. Trying to put equal emphasis on all OSCE matters – democracy/human rights, economy/environment and security – the Central Asian states themselves felt that too little importance has been put on the last two aspects and, supported (if not instigated) by Russia, asked for a reorientation of OSCE policy not only towards Central Asia but in general which found expression in the non acceptance of Russia of the OSCE budget 2005 if no redistribution of OSCE funds and interests

would occur. It was also in the OSCE that the five Central Asian states – as different as they are in their developments – started to appear sometimes as speaking with one voice in an international organisation – e.g. similar to GUUAM or EU statements. Kazakhstan’s application for the OSCE Chairmanship in 2009, so far supported by all Central Asian States and Russia, is an expression of this “common Central Asian voice” within the OSCE, a sign of further transformation of the OSCE agenda (an expression of the Central Asian states’ will to be treated equally to the Euro-Atlantic members) and also an expression of the leadership role aspired to by Kazakhstan in Central Asia not only in the economic but also in the political field.

After having introduced Central Asia within the CIS and OSCE – both organisations with specific Central Asian aspects – as organisations in which the five States became members more or less automatically, I would like to follow up with regional organisations that have either been formed by the Central Asian States themselves or others but with an important involvement of the Central Asian states. Though we are constantly talking about the “region” of Central Asia, we have to admit that the five countries differ enormously from each other – on the domestic as well as foreign policy front. Though most observers expected a kind of regional cooperation to make the Central Asian voice heard better on the world arena, it was regional competition that prevailed for a long time to come – competition opposing Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan and – for cultural and civil war reasons – Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. Only slowly – after it was also felt that the CIS as such was not in a position to satisfy (mainly economic) needs of the Central Asian states and that other actors beside Russia were intrigued by the geostrategic importance of the region - different forms of regional cooperation appeared. I would like to enumerate the most important ones of them without being exhaustive and try to evaluate their aims, achievements, goals, etc. I will divide these organisations into roughly two groups: the first one being “indigenous” Central Asian, i.e. founded by Central Asian states, the second one being forms of cooperation in which Central Asia plays an important role but without having founded them themselves.

CICA (Conference on Interaction and Cooperation in Central Asia) – a Kazakh initiative dating back to 1992, elaborating along the example of the OSCE confidence building and conflict preventing measures in Central Asia and its surroundings. The “Almaty Act” of 2002 is to be considered the ground work for the creation of a real international organisation. Until the creation of a real Secretariat the Ministers for Foreign Affairs and the Heads of States will meet on a regular basis as well as senior officials and specific working groups. As of today, members are besides the four Central Asian states (Turkmenistan usually does not participate in regional organisations) also Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, China, India, Iran, Israel, Mongolia, Pakistan, Palestine, Russia and Turkey. The CICA agenda concentrates on security (e.g. disarmament, nuclear weapons free zone) and stability questions (against separatism, illicit trafficking) and in the aftermath of the Afghanistan events also on the fight against terrorism (use of religion as pretext). The abovementioned CICA aims are as such noble ones and complement the Kazakh initiatives in the field of dialogue of civilisations and religions, but the efficiency of CICA is sometimes to be doubted – especially after the creation of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation with similar aims (see below). It should also be noted that although the four Central Asian countries signed the Almaty Act and had been elaborating this document for 10 years, relations among themselves were sometimes less than confidence building (mining of borders, interruption of flow of goods and persons – visa introductions, etc).

Central Asian Cooperation Organisation – created under a different name in 1996 (Central Asian Union), comprising the four Central Asian States (except Turkmenistan; Tajikistan since 1998 - after the end of the civil war) and since 2004 also Russia – Secretariat and bank in Almaty, Parliamentary Assembly, rotating chairmanship. The main aim was to enhance economic cooperation, but so far not very successfully. Uzbekistan was often reluctant to participate, but felt itself obliged on the occasion of the organisation’s summit in Almaty in May 2004 to suggest Russia to become a full-fledged member of the Central Asian Cooperation Organisation – a fact that was enacted on the organisation’s October summit in Dushanbe the same year. Whether the accession of Russia will develop further the original aims of the organisation remains

to be seen, but it testifies on the one side of the gaining economic strength of Russia due to high oil prices – and thus the hope of more Russian economic support (which has already been seen on bilateral level in relations with Tajikistan and Uzbekistan) - and on the other side of the fostered Uzbek-Russian relationship which did not always exist unimpededly.

In addition to the abovementioned two “indigenous” Central Asian organisations, one should also mention that Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan and Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan have signed “**Treaties of Eternal Friendship**”. Taking the sometimes very cumbersome relations between individual Central Asian countries into consideration, one wonders what the aim of such treaties should be.

I think that we could move on now towards the second group of organisations:

In this case I would like to start with organisations that **comprise only former Soviet republics**, moving on to organisations comprising also other countries.

Eurasian Economic Community – created under a different name in 1996 (customs union), renamed Eurasian Economic Community in 2000, comprising Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and Tajikistan. Decision making capacity is weighed with 40% Russia, 20% Belarus and Kazakhstan each, 10% Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan each. The main aim is a full-scale customs union and common economic space (stressing also energy, banks) - similar to the EU. The composition of this organisation – with the inclusion of Belarus - can be seen as a “club” of Russia’s closest allies in the former Soviet Union. So far the results achieved were also rather modest, which might have given impetus to the creation of the

Single Economic Space in 2003, comprising the four most important economic powers on the territory of the former Soviet Union and in this way trying to enhance economic cooperation within smaller formats than

the overall reaching CIS that could hardly boost any success in any field so far. Hence, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Russia and Ukraine are to be the quintessence of the CIS integration process – Kazakhstan thus being the only Central Asian member in this organisation – a role Kazakhstan deserves more than ever, having the best developing economy on the territory of the former Soviet Union. The main aim of the grouping is again a customs union with free movement of goods, services, persons and capital as well as a unified policy on foreign trade, duties, banks, credits and currency (this being so far unacceptable for Kazakhstan). After the recent developments in Ukraine it remains to be seen if the cooperation will continue under the same format. On the occasion of the latest visit of President Putin to Kazakhstan in January 2005, discussions centred very much on questions related to the Single Economic Space, especially in the field of energy/pipelines.

With the exception of Turkmenistan the Central Asian countries also concluded **Strategic Partnership Agreements with Russia**.

Among the cooperation forms that **comprise also other countries than ex Soviet ones**, one could cite the following ones:

Shanghai Cooperation Organisation – created 1999 on Chinese initiative, comprising all Central Asian states bordering China (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan) and Russia; Uzbekistan joined in 2002. The main aim was to build confidence building measures on the Western/Northern Chinese borders thus interrupting eventual irredentist Uighur/Turcic movements – an aim that China is also trying to achieve through enhanced economic cooperation with Central Asia. Due to Chinese interests and strong pushing from its side the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation has maybe become the best working regional organisation in Central Asia with clear cut policies that were the more so underlined after the Afghanistan events. The organisation boosts an anti terrorist centre that was – under Russian initiative - transferred from Bishkek to Tashkent in order to convince Uzbekistan to actively participate in the organisation and as a trade-off for Uzbekistan's proposal to include Russia into the Central Asian Cooperation Organisation.

ECO (Economic Cooperation Organisation) – created in 1985 by Iran, Pakistan, Turkey for promoting economic, technical and cultural cooperation, joined by Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan in 1992; Secretariat in Teheran with Permanent Representatives. For the Central Asian countries the ECO is also important as a donor organisation doing many, including infrastructure, projects (communication – important for land locked Central Asia) in the recipient countries and has gained in importance after new inclusions in 1992. Today's priorities are fostering regional trade, a data bank for trafficking, a common energy system, the creation of an own commercial bank, and a scientific fund. The ECO is a comparatively well functioning organisation without big political aspirations (which are eventually streamlined by parallel membership of Iran and Turkey), but more on the side of economic, technical development.

Turk Cooperation – created in 1992 by Turkey and comprising the Turkic-speaking former Soviet Republics Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. The Turk Cooperation was especially driven by late President Demirel who tried to pursue through this organisation the relationships with brotherly, newly established countries – relationships that have been almost non existent during the Soviet Union. Cooperation centres mostly on cultural aspects were created, though differences have become visible more markedly since as funding for more complex political/economic projects were not available. Cooperation is also seen more in the relations of Turkey with the individual member countries and not so much among the other Turk-speaking countries, given the sometimes strained relations among the Turkic-speaking countries of Central Asia and the Southern Caucasus.

Caspian Cooperation – initiated originally by Iran among the states bordering the Caspian Sea (Azerbaijan, Iran, Kazakhstan, Russia, Turkmenistan) in order to counterbalance Turkish influence through the Turk Cooperation and to have an important say in the delimitation of the Caspian Sea in connection with which Iran very soon appeared to be on the losing side. Today the Caspian Cooperation as outlined has practically ceased to exist.

Despite the abovementioned organisations, which all include actors immediately adjacent to Central Asia, one should also mention **cooperation forms including outer-regional actors.**

PfP/EAPC: All countries of the region (except Turkmenistan) participate. The EAPC Istanbul meeting in 2004 clearly defined Central Asia and the Southern Caucasus as priority areas. The Afghanistan events with the following stationings in the framework of the Antiterror Coalition in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan not only contributed to an increase in geostrategic importance of the whole region, but also enhanced relations within the EAPC, giving these relations sometimes also a regional approach.

EU: The EU signed Partnership and Cooperation Agreements with all five Central Asian states. Also in its case the Afghanistan events triggered a more thorough approach towards the region: doubling of TACIS budget for Central Asia, enhanced exchange of visits, elaboration of documents relating exclusively to Central Asia. The main aim of the EU is to cooperate with Central Asia in the fight against terrorism, drugs and international crime, to secure access to energy, to improve political dialogue and trade and investment, to support democracy and human rights and regional cooperation to solve problems in the field of water, energy and environment. Especially regional cooperation is one of the EU's important interests, as many problems Central Asia is facing today can only be solved on the regional level.

The most important project in this respect is the BOMCA project (Border Management in Central Asia) under Austrian lead that tries to help the Central Asian states to better handle their border regimes – for which regional cooperation is essential. Other important EU projects in which Central Asian states also participate are INOGATE and TRACECA. Through the inclusion of the Southern Caucasus into the New European Neighbourhood Policy Central Asia also moved closer to Europe's borders. Kazakhstan whose territory also lies partially in Europe is already thinking loudly about its application to the New European Neighbourhood.

But as described on many occasions above, regional cooperation is not self-evident in Central Asia. Many countries prefer to go the bilateral, individual path or to establish themselves as regional leaders that do not want to be hindered by outer-regional influences. In general, one can say that the smaller Central Asian countries Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are more open to regional cooperation as they are also more in need of help due to their poor economic performance.

On the other end of the scale we find Turkmenistan that – bound by its neutrality – rejects almost any form of regional cooperation, followed by Uzbekistan that is also very cautious towards regional cooperation – be it that it could get a prestigious role or significant help out of it (see antiterrorist centre of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation). Kazakhstan, though being the richest country in the region, has always promoted regional cooperation and was also the first that tried to present coherent foreign/regional policy approaches in world politics. Thus Kazakhstan is aspiring not only to a leadership role in the field of economy, but also in politics (see also OSCE chairmanship 2009).

To **sum up** one could state that regional cooperation in Central Asia has never been easy. Too diverse are the interests leading the individual countries. But being aware that the international community somehow awaits regional cooperation at least in certain fields and that for home consumption approaches towards regional cooperation seem necessary, the Central Asian states have founded many regional organisations or the individual countries have become members of other organisations with a regional outlook or of those that put a certain emphasis on Central Asia. These organisations centre mainly either on economic or security cooperation. The role, number and content of regional organisations and their members are an important indicator of the state of world politics. In no other place in the world the competition between the three/four most important individual global players can be seen more clearly than in Central Asia.

After its independence Central Asia was seen as a backyard of **Russia** with undisputed Russian influence from the outside – but sometimes its

influence is seen as a rival to local leadership aspirations – but the energy question and first of all Afghanistan put Central Asia on the world competition map – by creating new regional organisations or remodelling already existing ones. Overnight, we have seen the arriving and joining of the Antiterrorist Coalition forces under US lead with stationings in Kyrgyzstan (where Russia was to open an own basis shortly after) and Tajikistan (next to the 201st Russian division – probably making Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan the only countries in the world to find US inspired and Russian forces stationed close together in the same country).

The stationings of the Antiterror Coalition forces were very much welcome by the respective countries as they contributed at least at the outset to diminish the threat of an eventual Islamic-inspired upheaval (Afghanistan) and also brought large economic gains which Russia could not deliver anymore in 2001/2002.

Since then the situation has changed in so far as that due to the rise in oil prices Russia feels economically more confident combining this with the use of geographic proximity and better understanding of the mentality of the region. This is seen best by Russia's inclusion into the Central Asian Cooperation Organisation, its huge economic investments especially in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan and the opening of a Russian basis in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan (transfer of the 201st division in permanent stationings).

Talking about Central Asia one should in no way forget the influence of China. The main interests of China towards Central Asia are economic - being in dire need of energy (China did its greatest ever foreign investment in the oil field in Kazakhstan) – and political-strategic: first to halt any signs of support for eventual autonomy drives of the Moslem, Turk Uighurs and – especially after the stationings of the Antiterror Coalition - to watch closely US infiltration of the region.

The Chinese-inspired Shanghai Cooperation Organisation with its strong antiterrorism content (the fight against terrorism, drugs, crime has developed into a well beloved trio since the first international conference

on this matter under Austria's OSCE chairmanship in October 2000 in Tashkent, but is sometimes also misused for other aims) tries to accommodate these Chinese foreign policy goals. As mentioned above, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation seems today the best working regional organisation in Central Asia – which is not only a proof of China's foreign policy abilities, but also of the fact that the regional organisations in Central Asia work better if there is a foreign interest behind or a foreign country pushing it.

For me, Central Asia has a unique geostrategic position: Lying

- between Russia and China – as a kind of buffer zone and having thus to accommodate aspirations of two huge world powers
- between the Southern Caucasus and China/Afghanistan (some countries bordering the Caspian Sea) – being a transit area for all kinds of goods and persons (including drugs, arms, human beings – trafficking)
- between Russia and Afghanistan – having had to deal with the Afghan neighbourhood and tragedy in all its aspects (civil war in Tajikistan, drugs, terrorism)
- between Russia and Iran/Afghanistan – being confronted with different models of Islamic statehood
- bordering Iran and Turk-speaking countries (Azerbaijan) - having thus to feel the influence of two different linguistic groups/cultures – Turk (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan) and Persian/Farsi (Tajikistan)
- between Russia and South East Asia – the India-Pakistani rivalry is also felt here

Complemented by rising interests of the US and Europe (Antiterror Coalition, energy) - all these factors are reflected among others in the different regional groupings and their form of cooperation. Rarely – with some exceptions - Central Asia is a successful player on its own initiative, but more a reacting one. It is to be hoped for that Central Asia will continue to find its geostrategic role in the world acknowledged and that it will not fall into oblivion once the world caravan moves on.

The views elaborated above represent the author's personal views and in no way the official position of the Austrian Ministry for Foreign Affairs.

Dr. Heidemaria Gürer
Roving Ambassador
Austrian Ministry for Foreign Affairs
Vienna