

*Human Security in Central Asia*

*– Challenges posed by a decade of transition (1991-2002)*

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Notwithstanding many internal and regional crises, Central Asia has attracted little attention from the world community throughout the 1990s, but has been “thrust into the global spotlight” since September 11, 2001. The region is here defined as spanning from “Turkey in the west, to the Xinjiang region of China in the east, and from Russia in the north to Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan in the South”, the focus here being specifically post-Soviet Central Asia, comprising Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.

One of the first challenges of these states was linked to their national identity, the building of a nation-state and interethnic relations inside the country, with a need to break from reified Soviet legacies. This challenge however was successfully overcome through various policies of civic nationalism, increased equality through renewed citizenship codes and language laws. On the ground level however there still remains a gap between de jure equality “and the de facto potential for non-titular groups to succeed politically or to gain representation in each republic”. There is thus a challenge in finding further policy alternatives to conquer these remaining obstacles.

The second challenge, which was the economic transition, has however been far more negative for the people of Central Asia. Official data collection methods hide the true extent of unemployment and underemployment, while agrarian reform and development has been slow. Industries often remain defunct, industrial policy misadjusted, and privatization has often in fact meant “subsidized sale to insiders”. Central Asian economies thus face an important lack of capital for investment, jeopardizing any chance for recovery. Gas and oil resources have helped raise GDP levels, but the benefits from this trade are unevenly distributed, the majority of the people feeling left behind. This can be a worrying indicator in terms of civilian peace in countries where populations were “long used to relative equality under socialism”.

The social transition has also had negative effects. Transitioning states could no longer afford the levels of social expenditures that had been those of the Soviet Union. For instance the efficiency of the former education and health systems often could not be maintained, and the transition has seen a decrease in literacy rates and health indicators. Soviet managing of the environment has also induced high environmental insecurities, notably with the massive pollution of water supplies. Polluted water is hindering agricultural productivity and is fuelling tensions over the control of water sources.

The political liberalization of Central Asian countries has seen various trajectories, some engaging rapidly in democratizing agendas, others more slowly, while some “underwent little or no democratization”. Democratization and empowerment of the people is however crucial for stability and human security, but even those at the forefront of the effort have recently retrenched a number of civic freedoms, cracking down on and controlling the media, while the general climate is characterized by rampant corruption.

Finally, if Islam has traditionally been a peaceful and apolitical aspect of Central Asian societies, the conflict in Afghanistan could exacerbate Islamism. Beyond religious fundamentalism the Afghan situation can have negative spill over effects in Central Asia, threatening stability and human security, with for instance the flow of refugees, or financing and training by Al Qaeda of Uzbek fundamentalist groups in northern provinces of Afghanistan. The conflict has also led to proliferation of conventional arms and narcotics, which has induced particular instability and human insecurities, most especially in Tajikistan.

The strategies to improve human security in Central Asia must therefore address all these issues comprehensively, through intra and inter-state dialogue, also including the international community, combined with aid to be injected in the economy and support given to civil society.