

Key Developments in the Central Asian CBM Process

Roger D. Kangas

With continuing problems in Tajikistan and in neighboring Afghanistan, the Central Asian states have become more attentive to addressing the issue of regional security. Indeed, it has been the focus of numerous meetings and summits in Central Asia (defined as the former Soviet republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan), the goal of which is the lessening of tensions in the region with minimal outside involvement. Complications arise, though, when one takes into account such factors as Tajikistan's need to keep a Russian military presence in the country and Turkmenistan's opposition to any larger cooperative measure that could conflict with its policy of "positive neutrality." In spite of skepticism that this talk would not translate into real action, one can point to several key measures taken which can be considered confidence-building.

Initially signed on 26 April 1996, and later formalized on 27 April 1997, the Agreement On Confidence on the Frontier Area is a five-party document signed by the presidents of Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and the People's Republic of China. The agreement has several key components: it provides for the reduction of military forces within a 100 kilometer-wide zone along the border which China shares with the four Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS); it includes the withdrawal of certain kinds of offensive weapons therein; and it also outlines the manner in which troop movements and exercises can be regulated in the "border zone." The treaty envisions a future scenario that has only a limited numbers of border units (troop commitment undetermined) defending the 8,000-kilometer long frontier.

While the Russo-Chinese border is perhaps the more important one in the agreement—and one that eventually entails the transferring of 114,000 square kilometers of Chinese territory to Russia and 60,000 square kilometers of Russian territory to China—the Kazakh, Kyrgyz, and Tajik presidents are just as concerned about maintaining a peaceful border with their neighbor to the east. Each of these states' armed forces are modest at best and are no match for the Chinese People's Liberation Army. In addition, trade with China can only increase if the border is relatively secure. For example, reports out of Kazakhstan in 1997 note that almost twenty-four percent of all foreign commercial trade in that country is with China, which is expected to increase in the immediate future. Finally, the fact that there are significant Uighur populations in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan that are cognizant of what is happening to their co-ethnics in China means that the governments must be sensitive to China's needs. Out of geographic reality, both Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan are not signatory states to this agreement, although trade and diplomatic ties with China on the part of both of these states is quite positive.

The border accord compliments a number of other measures taken over the past several years in Central Asia. As early as May 1992, the CIS Agreement on Mutual Defense was signed in Tashkent. To date, all adhere to its basic principles of mutual defense which includes subsequent agreements on border defense (with Russian border forces in all states except Uzbekistan) as well as cooperation on air defense and information exchange. Turkmenistan, although it has Russian troops on its soil via a bilateral agreement, has not signed on to all aspects.

The belief that the CIS should not be the sole framework of regional security has resulted in an increased cooperation with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO) Partnership for Peace (PfP) program. On 15 December 1995, the presidents of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan announced that they would form a joint battalion which would be supported by the PfP program. While there is still discussion as to whether it will operate in Central Asia, where it is currently based, or participate in overseas missions, the Central Asia Battalion (CENTRAZBAT) has begun exercising as a unit. Comprised of three combat companies (one from each country) and a full complement of support units, the 530-member battalion is the cornerstone of regional cooperation in military matters. It is based in the southern Kazakhstani city of Chernyaevka and is financially supported by the three states on a forty percent/forty percent/twenty percent ratio (Kazakh, Uzbek, Kyrgyz). In September 1997, it participated in the CENTRAZBAT-97 exercises in southern Kazakhstan alongside a 500-person detachment from the US 82nd Airborne, as well as representatives of other armed forces. While such activities should not be construed as preparation for US or NATO involvement in the region, they do support the notion that the Central Asian states are looking at means by which they can help improve their own force projection capabilities and level of regional cooperation outside of the CIS. Recently, there have been some suggestions that the Tajiks may participate in the military exercises in 1998, although specific levels of commitment are unclear. Likewise, true to their stance of positive neutrality, Turkmenistan has declined to participate.

Finally, the Central Asian states have also turned to the common forum of the United Nations to declare the region "nuclear-free." Discussed and signed in the summer of 1997, the agreement is a simple UN-based resolution whereby the five states of Central Asia have agreed to ban the production, deployment, and transportation of nuclear weaponry in the region. Although one could note that, since the dismantling of the former Soviet nuclear arsenal in Kazakhstan, such a declaration is more rhetoric than substance, it does underscore an overall belief that regional cooperation is a means to accomplish security goals. In January 1998, the five presidents of the Central Asian nations met at Ashgabat to discuss opportunities for regional cooperation. They agreed to embark upon more substantial multilateral efforts in trade, communication, and regional security.

In summary, the Central Asian states have become more active in initiating confidence-building measures since the early 1990s. And while the level of participation varies from state to state, along with the motivation to do so, it is clear that the broader question of regional stability and a need to formulate policies outside of Russian control have become much more open issues of discussion.

