

Pursuing military stability in Central Asia—a European perspective

Zdzislaw Lachowski (SIPRI)

Mr President, distinguished guests, Ladies and gentlemen, etc.

Let me first congratulate the Kazakhstan Institute for Strategic Studies on the tenth anniversary of its activities under the auspices of the President of Kazakhstan. Among many research institutions in Europe and elsewhere, SIPRI was among the first to acknowledge the importance of current and future regional security in Central Asia. Our projects on *Russia and Asia: The Emerging Security Agenda* carried out in 1998–99 and on *The Security of the Caspian Sea Region* conducted in 2000-2001, contributed to research into the security problems of this part of the world, and the results of the research were published in two books. We believe the cooperation which was established during those studies with the Kazakhstan Institute for Strategic Studies and other research centres in the region should continue for the mutual benefit of all parties.

My brief presentation falls within the main purview of SIPRI's research activity, i.e., aspects of military security, arms control and confidence building. It is not a detailed analysis of the past, but rather it offers observations from the lessons of the past and their relevance for the region in the qualitatively new situation which has evolved since 11 September 2001.

Introduction

Before 9/11 Central Asia was *terra incognita* for many people in the Western world. When the states of the region gained independence after the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, Central Asia was tacitly recognized as still being the zone of Russia's special interest. In the 1990s the security problems of the region rarely drew the close attention of the world community. Although essential in the regional context, these problems were seen as posing no major threat to wider international security. The United States had begun to build its influence in the area, although at a slow pace, mainly through the development of military-to-military relations with individual countries. Through its CSCE/OSCE process, Europe had sought to reach out to the region, although not with much conviction or energy. Apart from the relative insignificance of Central Asia in their policy, the Western countries were discouraged by the seemingly insurmountable problems that affect the area.

The main challenge in Central Asia is instability. All five countries suffer from serious political, social and economic problems (such as the weakness of democratic institutions, human rights abuses, disputes over access to water and natural resources, drug trafficking, poverty, unemployment, corruption and Islamic militancy). Their statehood is new; it did not exist before 1991, and the shock of the Soviet Union's collapse caught them unprepared. Democracy was alien to these states, and even today, despite the presence of its trappings, it is not much practiced in current policies. The inability of the regional states to cooperate on important matters, including in the

military security field, persists, in spite of numerous bilateral and multilateral military cooperation accords. This is compounded by the lack of confidence and misperceptions among the actors. None of the Central Asian countries has effective, well-equipped and well-trained armed forces. They are therefore dependent on external assistance to address common problems and threats. Fortunately, border and ethnic disputes and occasional minor sabre-rattling among the Central Asian states have not developed into open conflict. These old problems and the terrorist threat call for more attention to be paid to the issue of military stability in the region.

Arms control in central Asia

The collapse of the Soviet Union sparked the impulse to regulate one of the main security issues in the region—normalization of relations with China. The military security arrangements pursued were closely tied to the issue of borders, because. On the one hand, the Central Asian countries were simply unable to effectively control their frontiers with China and, on the other hand, they wanted to put an end to implicit Chinese territorial claims on themselves. The consecutive successful steps taken in the 1990s were crowned in 1997, with an agreement on mutual reductions of armed forces in the border areas. The distinctive features of the agreement were:

1. It derived from the 1990 Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe, although the Central Asian document was tailored to the region. Consequently, it dealt with somewhat different agreement-limited armaments; two—Eastern and

Western—sectors, a different verification regime for armed forces and border units; a limited number of inspections, and so on.

2. The agreement covers only the 100 km-wide areas adjacent to the former Chinese–Soviet borders instead of the entire territory of the states in the region, and provides for some exclusive ‘sensitive’ zones within the zone of application;
3. It provided for a formula ‘China and Russia plus three’—including a ‘joint party’ of Russia plus Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. This signified the junior status of the three Central Asian states, which lacked sufficient arms control culture, understanding and experience to be able to tackle various issues under the terms of the agreement on their own.
4. Unlike the CFE treaty, the information exchanged on armed forces in the zone of application is kept secret from other countries and the public.

Some deficiencies (as seen from a European perspective) notwithstanding, the Central Asian arms control agreement was a success compared to the less productive efforts made in other regions towards similar arrangements. It is the only major multilateral agreement, except for the CFE treaty, which reduces weapons and regulates military activities. It injected a measure of stability, predictability and reassurance in this part of the world and helped resolve several outstanding issues. The implementation of the agreement is a ‘learning by doing’ process for the Central Asian

participants both through inspections and at the forum of the all-party Joint Control Group which is tasked to monitor developments and verify the information provided. These states are gaining valuable experience and coordinating their policies both as the 'joint party' to the agreement and vis-à-vis China. This is not without problems, but for the most part they are said to be minor.

It can be hoped that with time the process will evolve to encompass new actors (other members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization plus perhaps Mongolia) and better, more open and transparent military security cooperation. While the agreement has helped to resolve the border issues between China and its western neighbours, territorial disputes have emerged in recent years between Uzbekistan and its neighbours. A similar region-wide security arrangement may prove worth considering in the future to allay the fear of use of force to resolve such disputes, although currently the US presence mitigates the situation in the region.

Confidence building in the military sphere

All five Central Asian states adhered to the Vienna Document on confidence- and security-building measures (CSBM) as early as 1992, soon after the break-up of the USSR. The other participating states were aware of the numerous problems faced by the newcomers. They were not closely familiar with CSCE practice, including its security dimension, and, consequently, deserved a period of education and special treatment. It was agreed that, exceptionally, practical issues that might arise during the initial stages

in implementing CSBMs on their territories should be 'taken into consideration' by other participants. Since then the CSCE/OSCE has carried out intensive CSBM educational and advisory activities for the Central Asian participants. The question of the contiguous areas of the former Soviet Central Asian republics that share frontiers with non-participating states was referred to the OSCE implementation assessment mechanism for discussion, but has not been definitively resolved.

The Vienna CSBM implementation record of the Central Asian participants is uneven and somewhat unsatisfactory. Information on military forces, budgets, and defence planning and other CSBM activities were long lacking, incomplete or delayed. Some states provided information, others did not. There has been some improvement since 2000, although, on the whole, these countries still do not fully meet the Vienna Document criteria. In part, this is because the OSCE participants have followed old patterns and approaches, which have resulted in the host of incrementally growing obligations, procedures and mechanisms as well as the costs of implementing and sustaining them. States have to cope with the costly and time-consuming burden of providing detailed military-related information, carrying out numerous inspection and evaluation tasks and obligations, handling communications problems, and so on. The newly-formed states simply could not afford to comply with all provisions of the Vienna Document. Minor non-compliance issues have usually been of a non-political character and have stemmed from various technical or financial causes or been the result of

inexperience. Therefore, as a rule, they have been overlooked or let pass by other participants in the system.

However, in 2000 three flagrant cases involving compliance issues concerning Central Asian states drew attention. In March 2000 the USA requested inspection of an area in *Uzbekistan* in which army-level activity could have been conducted. The Uzbek authorities denied the request for inspection on the date requested because they could not resolve 'organizational issues' in the short time frame envisaged. They suggested that the inspection be carried out at a later time and, subsequently, claimed that they lacked sufficient resources to receive an inspection because of the demands of an ongoing military exercise. The reply also suggested that the area which the USA had requested to inspect exceeded the Vienna Document application framework, and a readjustment of the specified area was proposed. The Uzbek response was met with harsh criticism by the USA. Five months later Uzbekistan refused a second US inspection request because of financial and technical problems and because another inspection had been carried out 10 days earlier. A similar case was *Tajikistan's* refusal to accept a Spanish inspection visit in October 2000. All three cases were intensely discussed in the Forum for Security Cooperation, and many states expressed concern over the poor implementation of the provisions of the Vienna Document 1999 and suggested ways to improve it.

All this demonstrates that the Central Asian countries are still not fully prepared to meet the requirements that are met by their European counterparts. They still require further training, education

and other assistance to learn the CSBM *acquis* and build professional military cadres. However, it is unclear to what degree their non-compliance stems from objective factors or in what measure their implementation record is affected by subjective, political obstacles.

More successful cooperation seems to exist between the 'joint party' of the four CIS states and China. As information on the implementation of the 1996 agreement on confidence-building measures in the border areas is strictly confidential, it is difficult to be specific about its success. According to scarce indirect information, most of the problems that have been resolved in the Joint Control Group (which monitors both arms control and CBM information and implementation) have not been substantial and have been solved.

The impact of 9/11

In the wake of 11 September 2001 and the US-led intervention in Afghanistan the political status of Central Asian was upgraded in the context of the global war against terrorism. Consequently, its military dimension is also undergoing a change. The USA, which became the main security manager and economic donor in the region, has removed the immediate threat to the security of the Central Asian countries and guarantees a measure of military stability. The anti-terrorist coalition forces, which are based in several countries of the region, have defeated the external enemy, the Taliban, and almost eliminated al-Qaeda and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU). Uzbekistan, which in 2001 planted mines along its borders with Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan (without informing its neighbours) in

expectation of IMU attacks, now acknowledges the absence of threats from a military point of view.

Success in stabilizing Central Asia will largely depend on the degree of cooperation and rivalry between China, Russia and the USA. The Soviet-style armies of Central Asia are seeking to restructure their forces to enable them to face the new threats of terrorism, insurgency, drug trafficking, etc. The US engagement in the region started the process of supplying military aid and assistance, and the USA is helping the Central Asian states to train and deploy modern armed forces. In early January 2002 the USA lifted restrictions on the transfer of defence equipment to Tajikistan, as a result of the latter's close cooperation with the US-led coalition against global terrorism. This raised concerns about a possible 'militarization' of the region and repercussions in other spheres—political, economic, social, etc.

All the Central Asian countries participate in NATO's Partnership for Peace programmes, at various levels of engagement, and most of them have embarked on a path of military reform. The extent of reform in these countries may look rather impressive on paper, but in reality it is much more modest. It suffers from the lack of resources, manpower, weak political will and inertia, low levels of professionalization as well as the absence of clear vision for the armed forces' future shape and tasks. It can be assumed that military spending has increased across the region, but the lack of sufficient official data and doubts about the reliability of existing information make it impossible to assess its volume.

At present, Russia seems unable to resume a more prominent role. This is not easily accepted by Russian political elites, especially the Russian military. One major problem is that expectations differ in Russia and in its Central Asia neighbours. While Moscow still prefers to perceive the region as a buffer zone protecting its southern borders from Islamic fundamentalism, the former Soviet republics would like to see their relations with the former protector based on more equal terms.

In a pragmatic demonstration of its awareness, Russia has not objected to the US presence in the region in the aftermath of 11 September. However, Russia's determination to play a decisive role in Central Asia has recently been reiterated. Russia seeks to solve regional security problems by involving the regional actors rather than the outside powers in any future plans. This is illustrated by: joint military exercises with the aim to combat international terrorism in the region; attempts to further institutionalize security cooperation with countries of the region (e.g., through the Collective Security Treaty Organization which was set up in 2002); a stronger military engagement through a rapid reaction force developed with the participation of some states of the region; and the acquisition of new military basing rights. China has also shown increased interest in the region's stability, and recently it participated for the first time outside its homeland in military exercises in Kyrgyzstan.

The Central Asian states now face a unique period in their history. They are in the focus of world interest, and are seeking to take advantage of this 'window of opportunity' and open themselves to

more varying cooperation, including in the military field, with the three main actors and NATO. Their commitment to create a nuclear-weapon-free zone in the region is commendable, and would greatly enhance international nuclear non-proliferation efforts aimed at eliminating the potential corridors for illegal transfers of weapons of mass destruction and radioactive and other dangerous materials.

The military forces of these countries have only taken tentative steps to become more civilian-controlled, transparent and accountable. The recent OSCE-sponsored seminar on the Code of Conduct in politico-military aspects of security demonstrates the international community's willingness to help promote democratic values, especially civilian control over the military, in pursuing stability in the region. Less advanced is readiness of the Central Asian countries to cooperate among themselves, although the common threat of terrorism has a potential unifying effect. However, further steps are needed to build the sense of security and stability, including more contacts and cooperation, confidence-building, transparency and mutual reassurance. Military stability is not a cure-all and does not eliminate the root causes of insecurity, but it exerts a positive influence on other spheres of security, expanding the political room of manoeuvre in the modernization of a country.