

**“Preventing Conflicts in Central Asia:  
The Experience of the Swiss Development Cooperation”**

Markus Müller, Former Head (Swiss Development Cooperation, Central Asia)

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Davis Center for Russian Studies, Harvard University

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Markus Müller recently served as the head of the Swiss Development Cooperation in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan for 5 years. From his experience at this post as well as others, Müller knows well the “extreme complexity behind any sort of outbreak of conflict”. He witnessed the civil war in Angola and the conflict in northern Mali. Müller remarked that he is not sure whether he follows these conflicts or if they follow him, but he is sure of the fact that one cannot generalize on the causes of an outbreak of violence. The Swiss Development Cooperation aims to prevent such outbreaks of violence. This organization became involved in Central Asia once it was identified as a high-risk area for conflict.

Müller proceeded to analyze the negative factors that could lead to potential conflict in Central Asia, and then offered a few positive factors which would decrease the likelihood of armed conflict. The negative factors fell into 5 main groups: political, ecological, economic, security, and societal.

**Political** The main political factors that could lead to potential conflict are the following:

- 1) The suppression of opposition forces, which is occurring in, for example, the Ferghana Valley.
- 2) Rule of law, or lack thereof.
- 3) The “Nasty Guy” syndrome, that is the leadership by an individual who seeks out or promotes conflicts, i.e. Milosevic.

**Ecological** A few of the potentially threatening ecological issues in Central Asia are:

- 1) Unsustainable use of natural resources, i.e. in Karalpakstan.
- 2) Water shortage (which has already led to diminished relations between Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan).
- 3) Land and water pollution.

Müller emphasized that the basic reason for water management problems is due to the fact that there is not a reputable institution at the political level that deals with these issues. In addition, the forecast system which determines how much water will flow downstream is inefficient. Müller also offered a few water management scenarios and solutions which faced a few small villages in Kyrgyzstan.

**Economic** The poor economic situation stems from the following factors:

- 1) Financial inequality, i.e. the lack of a middle class.
- 2) Misery and poverty (the GNP of the Central Asian states is equal to 15% of Switzerland’s GNP).

**Security** Security factors that could increase tension in the area include the following:

- 1) Drug trafficking.
- 2) Border demarcations, or lack thereof.
- 3) Organized crime.
- 4) Incursions of Islamic extremist groups.

**Societal** Finally, threatening societal factors include the following:

- 1) Collapse of the social protection system.
- 2) Perception of unequal distribution of land.
- 3) High unemployment, especially amongst the young.

Fortunately, there do exist **positive factors** which will decrease the likelihood of armed conflicts in Central Asia:

- 1) Foreign assistance, through the work of NGOs.
- 2) Economic consequences of the drug trade.
- 3) Power balancing between the different clans.
- 4) The emerging civil society (Müller feels this is a key factor).

Finally, Müller offered a few **peace promotion activities** which stem from the work of the Swiss Development Cooperation:

- 1) Tolerance education in the school system.
- 2) Mediation, facilitation and dialogue.
- 3) Cross-border cooperation project.
- 4) Conflict assessment/analysis/early warning.

In conclusion, Müller stated that small local projects are not enough to dissolve potential conflicts in Central Asia. It is important to create a permanently working forum at the national level. And this project, as well as the ones listed previously, can succeed if they are properly financed. “Words alone will not make it...More significant funding is needed in order to address and resolve key problems”.