

Central Asia's Road to Prosperity Runs Through a Peaceful Afghanistan

Afghanistan will loom large at the upcoming "Security and Sustainability" conference in Uzbekistan.

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KABUL — As much as Central Asia is an actual place with its boundless steppes, rugged, breathtaking mountains, and diverse cultures of its own, it is also a repository of unique traditions of tolerance, scholarship, and trade. Eclipsing the world's expectations and capitalizing on growing stability, the region — which stretches from the Caspian Sea in the west to China in the east — has taken charge of its own economic and political destiny.

Yet, as the region gathers in Samarkand on November 10-11 to take part in a key "Security and Sustainability" conference — organized by the government of Uzbekistan and facilitated by the UN — looming large will be the conflict in Afghanistan, an unsparing struggle which steadily undermines regional progress through the specter of terrorism, a rampant narcotics trade, and new humanitarian crises.

Though the conflict in Afghanistan now spans nearly four decades, new and intensifying violence draws in militants from around the region. Almost daily, fighting takes an immense human and economic toll. The ongoing chaos helps fuel a booming narcotics trade, mostly in heroin, which finances extremist networks and a cross-border trade in weapons.

The United Nations is not alone when it stresses that a peaceful Afghanistan is a necessary factor for stability and prosperity in Central Asia. Indeed, a sustained push for peace in a conflict in which there will be no military solution, nor any one victor, is the best guarantor of sustained prosperity, as well as an antidote to the spread of violent extremism.

As the UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Afghanistan, one of my important roles is to help Afghanistan coordinate regional peace efforts and work to facilitate dialogue with an aim to end the war. I have been encouraged by the proactive roles of all five major Central Asian nations in keeping with their regional interests. Kazakhstan, through its seat on the UN Security Council, has already leveraged international and regional diplomatic cooperation on several fronts; Uzbekistan, which sits at the heart of the region, has embraced its role as a central player, particularly by offering venues like Samarkand for UN and multi-lateral cooperation. In the same spirit, Turkmenistan has established vital energy links and a functioning rail connection with Afghanistan; Tajikistan provides Afghanistan with a large proportion of its electrical needs, and has greatly increased its trade with Kabul; and Kyrgyzstan has for years been working on Afghan reconstruction and is helping to promote a regional Afghan Studies Center in Bishkek. All five nations have embarked on exchanges of students and professionals. They all insist that peace in Afghanistan is a national priority aimed at ensuring long-range progress.

In Samarkand, I am sure that political and economic leaders and experts will look to help us address these issues in collaboration with both the UN's Regional Center for Preventive Diplomacy for Central Asia (UNRCCA) in Ashgabat and the UN's Regional Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) for Central Asia in Tashkent. These dedicated bodies are focused on

trans-national problems, including drugs, crime, terrorism, and environmental degradation, all of which directly threaten progress across Central Asia.

Making peace in Afghanistan requires the focus and concentration of like-minded leaders and citizens who oppose the alternative: a nexus of disorder, which fuels violence, illicit trade, and lost lives. When these challenges – which infect not only Afghanistan but the entire world – are properly addressed through improved laws, steady enforcement, and better regional cooperation, Central Asia can build on what it does well: developing its vast human and natural resources and expanding both trade and commerce on a regional and international level.

Afghanistan, largely on its own, and often fending off foreign interference, is attempting to address violent extremism in several ways. The National Unity Government aims to increase its accountability to the Afghan public by tackling corruption, while also encouraging openness with one of the most vibrant free presses in the region. A rich and traditional society is now being challenged by an energetic young generation demanding more individual rights and freedoms. At the United Nations we do our best to encourage these positive trends, while also helping Afghanistan design a solid path to a sustainable peace.

Yet, Afghanistan's struggle to dampen down extremism on the one hand and encourage an open society at the same time does not exist in a vacuum. Central Asia, in the midst of a vibrant new political dialogue of its own, has much at stake in Afghanistan's own struggle as it deals with its own challenges and continues on its fast and dynamic path toward prosperity.

Common interests imply greater collaboration. The peace dividend I foresee through enhanced cooperation in all spheres, including on environmental, legal, educational, and political issues, is multidimensional and virtually limitless. It is about connectivity through roads, rails, power, and the internet; infrastructure that links citizens on a political, social, and economic level, and which taps into the best aspects of globalization. It requires an open exchange of views on everything from creating inclusive and secure communities to sustainable development across national borders.

To be sure, steady progress can be made without the loss of the region's ancient traditions and unique character. From the great astronomer Khojandi and the algebra genius Khwarazmi, to the composer Farabi and the Sufi poet Maulana Balkhi (a.k.a. Rumi), Central Asia has produced some truly impressive minds and, with the expansion of educational and scientific opportunities taking place across the region today, this looks certain to continue.

Progress is in the national interest of everyone, but – as it expands – it has a multiplying effect, drawing in neighbors and helping to strengthen and stabilize economies of scale. From a development perspective, the region is incredibly rich, but not without the exchange of goods and services. Central Asia and Afghanistan stand to prosper by addressing a lack of connectivity: extending well-traveled land routes and building new corridors to the sea.

First steps first though: The Samarkand conference, and the meetings that will follow, hold forth fresh opportunities for cooperation and friendship. Leadership and determination – including on the path to peace – will help guarantee partnerships between players in the region and also with the United Nations, which, as always, stands ready to work with all governments and peoples in Central Asia.

As we counter and eliminate what plagues us – from violent extremism to drug trafficking, and even ecological disasters in the making – together we open new doors. The road may well be long and steep, but the arc of progress, I am assured by my Central Asian and Afghan friends, bends toward peace and prosperity.

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