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UN Regional Centre for Preventive Diplomacy for Central Asia

Special Representative of the UN Secretary General for Central Asia
Head of the Regional Center

Ashgabat, 10 August 2018

Dear Dr. Benita Ferrero-Waldner,

With reference to your kind invitation, I herewith provide the following contribution from the United Nations Regional Centre for Preventive Diplomacy for Central Asia (UNRCCA) to a formal report by the Eurasian Council on Foreign Affairs on the European Union's proposed new Strategy for Central Asia.

In 2017, the United Nations Regional Centre for Preventive Diplomacy (UNRCCA) marked its tenth anniversary. The Centre was established on the initiative of the five Governments of Central Asia in Ashgabat, Turkmenistan, in 2007 to support national authorities in identifying and addressing existing and potential threats to regional peace and security. The Centre works to help the five Governments of the region to tackle current and emerging threats and challenges. These include terrorism and extremism; drug trafficking; water and energy management; inter-ethnic tensions; and encouraging cooperation and interaction between Central Asia and Afghanistan. The Centre is led by the Special Representative of the Secretary-General (SRSG) for Central Asia.

UNRCCA has enjoyed close cooperation with the European Union consistently since its establishment, including through regular contacts with the EU Special Representative for Central Asia. The Centre also enjoys close contacts with EU representative offices throughout the region and the SRSG meets with key EU interlocutors regularly.

One of the most significant examples of the benefits of UN-EU cooperation in Central Asia is doubtlessly the international response to the tragic events in Kyrgyzstan in 2010. At that critical time, the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General and the EU Special Representative for Central Asia, together with the Special Envoy of the OSCE Chairperson-in-Office, worked together to demonstrate to the Kyrgyz authorities and other stakeholders that the international community spoke with one voice in support of peace and reconciliation in Kyrgyzstan. The work of the UN Special Envoy was soon handed over to the SRSG for Central Asia, who has continued to strive to collaborate closely with EU counterparts ever since. This approach grew into a regular trilateral mechanism of consultations on regional matters among UNRCCA, the EU and the OSCE referred to as the "Troika" format.

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Dr. Benita Ferrero-Waldner
Chair of the Eurasian Council on Foreign Affairs

Another key area of UN-EU cooperation in Central Asia has been counter-terrorism. UNRCCA launched a joint project with the United Nations Counter-Terrorism Implementation Task Force (CTITF) in 2010 with funding from the European Union. This generous financial support continued through the first two phases of the joint project, through 2017. Among other key results, this work led to the creation of the first-ever regional plan for implementing the UN Global Strategy on Counter-Terrorism, which serves as a model for other regions around the world. In April 2018, UNRCCA launched the third phase with CTITF's successor, the new United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism (UNOCT).

Going forward, I would emphasize the need for the EU to remain engaged in the region both in terms of promoting EU values and experiences, notably in the sphere of regional integration, and against the backdrop of the positive regional dynamics that have been changing the region for the better since late 2016. In particular, the recent efforts made by the countries of the region to boost intra-regional trade and improve connectivity should be further encouraged by the EU and the rest of the international community.

Given its interest in development of the "East-West" routes and corridors, the EU could further mobilize European financial institutions and banks in cooperation with the World Bank and the IMF in support of regional infrastructural projects. Such efforts could also be expanded to the water-energy nexus, regarding for instance the construction of dams and hydropower stations or the introduction of modern technologies into the management of water resources in the region. Given that trans-boundary water management is a key area of focus for UNRCCA, EU engagement in this area would provide significant opportunities to expand our cooperation.

From the peace and security point of view, the EU should continue engaging with the Central Asian countries using the platform of the EU-Central Asia High-Level Security Dialogue. This format is effective and has advanced regional cooperation on existing and potential sources of insecurity and instability in the region. UNRCCA and the broader United Nations System could partner with the EU, in line with Chapter VIII of the Charter of the United Nations, to implement concrete initiatives aimed at preventing/addressing existing transnational threats such as terrorism, violent extremism, foreign terrorist fighters and drug trafficking. Such work would also build on our common experience with the joint UNRCCA-UNOCT counter-terrorism project from 2010 to 2017.

The EU's flagship regional projects such as the Border Management in Central Asia (BOMCA) programme and the Central Asia Drug Action Programme (CADAP) continue to be valuable efforts and should not only continue but consideration should be given to expanding them. BOMCA could make valuable contributions by focusing further on border security and management in the context of the reviving cross-border trade throughout the region. UNRCCA and UNOCT could work with BOMCA in this direction in the context of the joint counter-terrorism project, for example. And in light of the recent record-levels of heroin production in Afghanistan, greater cooperation between CADAP and the United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and its Central Asian Regional Information and Coordination Centre (CARICC) project could enable greater attention to the supply aspects of drug-trafficking, in addition to demand.

It has become obvious over the recent past that the Central Asian countries are coming closer to a common understanding on the importance of engaging with Afghanistan not only on security issues, but also on development. Both the United Nations and the EU should support these efforts. To this end, enhanced interaction between EU special envoys on Central Asia and Afghanistan with the SRSG of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) should be encouraged.

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In addition, several of the Central Asian countries are currently in a process of settling the disputed borders that have remained unresolved since they achieved independence more than 25 years ago. EU Member States possess rich experience and best practices in the field of border delimitation and demarcation, as well as in the peaceful settlement of territorial disputes, which could be valuable to Central Asian partners.

Indeed, the EU experience about forging a common regional identity and developing vital regional institutions could also provide useful models to the Central Asian countries as they explore and develop the new dynamics amongst themselves. This experience could be conveyed, inter alia, through a revitalization of EU-Central Asian platforms such as those on the environment, and on rule of law. The United Nations on several occasions has made a point of the usefulness and relevance of these cooperation formats, which brought all five Central Asian countries together around sometimes sensitive and contentious issues, promoting European values the UN shares, such as separation of powers, the independence of the judiciary and other aspects of good governance and human rights.

The value of the ongoing dialogue on human rights between the EU and individual Central Asian countries is rising. It is important that the EU, as it negotiates new cooperation agreements with the individual Central Asian countries (including enhanced PCAs), fully reflects its human rights concerns. Cooperation and regular consultations between the EU and the UN and OHCHR on human rights are crucial to maximize synergies and increasing impact through joint messaging in the region.

Finally, the regular consultations between the SRS of UNRCCA and the EU Special Representative for Central Asia provide a solid basis for cooperation and should continue. The UNRCCA and EU often share the same priorities and concerns in Central Asia. In particular, the Centre could benefit from further EU support on such outstanding issues as transboundary water management and environmental degradation, countering terrorism and preventing violent extremism, and promoting cooperation between Central Asia and Afghanistan. Increased UN-EU cooperation can have a knock-on effect, improving coordination and cooperation among other international actors in Central Asia while offering real benefits to the people of Central Asia.

To sum up, the EU has undertaken significant efforts to help the countries of Central Asia across a range of fields. New regional dynamics are providing new entry points and greater odds of success for regional cooperation initiatives. It is critical that the EU not only remain engaged in Central Asia but also do whatever it can to capitalize on the current regional situation so as to help the Central Asian countries to make progress on a range of issues that have effectively been frozen for many years. Investments in peace and security in Central Asia have never had such good chances of success and are critical to fostering regional cooperation, mutual trust and a bright future for the entire region.



Natalia Gherman
Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General for Central Asia
and Head of the United Nations Regional Centre
for Preventive Diplomacy for Central Asia