

9th Annual Worldwide Security Conference  
**Reshaping Economic Security in Southwest Asia and the Middle East**

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**Speech by Ambassador Patricia Flor, EU special Representative for Central Asia**

*Plenary Session: economic security and regional cooperation in Southwest Asia and the Middle East: regional perspective*

I am honoured to have been invited to give a speech today and it is a great pleasure for me to attend this very promising Conference on key questions of security.

1. Central Asian states have been engaged in "reshaping" for more than 20 years after their having achieved independence through the disintegration of the Soviet Union. This period has not always been peaceful. Tajikistan saw civil war in the nineties, Kyrgyzstan experienced bloody ethnic clashes last in 2010. Overall, transition to a market economy, to new political systems, to rule of law has turned out to be a difficult and long one which is still under way in 2012.

Central Asia as a region is of increasing importance to the EU which through the recent review of its Central Asia Strategy for a new Partnership clearly committed to deepening its relations and reinforce its actions in this region. Regional cooperation continues to be one priority of the EU Central Asia Strategy. However, deeply rooted reservations and mistrust among neighbouring countries hamper these efforts and few institutional frameworks for regional cooperation exist. Nonetheless, to promote regional cooperation and improve relations between neighbours is a must and should be accompanied by confidence building. There is also a need to reduce tensions that arise from trans-border disputes. And one has to admit, such disputes and tensions are a reality, for instance over water between upstream and downstream countries or over state borders which have still not been delimited completely.

Today, the EU and Central Asian States are increasingly focusing on common threats and challenges which again call for increased regional cooperation. These threats to security and stability in the region are interrelated and of a transnational nature. Terrorism, organized crime and various forms of trafficking (in human beings, illicit drugs and weapons) have the potential to destabilize individual countries and/or the region as a whole. The sometimes porous and geographically complicated borders in the region make it difficult to respond effectively to these threats. Of course, poverty and lack of economic opportunities offer an unhealthy breeding ground for crime as well as radicalization of the population thus increasing security risks.

2. The Soviet border of old cut through a region where traditionally many linkages existed between Central Asia and Afghanistan, but also with Iran, Turkey, India and others. Afghanistan has become a key issue for discussion within the EU Central Asia political dialogue over the past years and is more than ever an important topic as the ISAF withdrawal becomes a reality.

Developments in Afghanistan (notably in the northern parts of the country) do have the potential to seriously affect the security and stability of the region as a whole. Keeping the broader region stable and prosperous requires to foster dialogue and cooperation to address existing and possibly emerging transnational threats, while at the same time looking at crucial economic and social challenges. No doubt, without poverty reduction, economic development and cross border trade, security and stability cannot be sustained. Engagement with and around Afghanistan should therefore also be seen as an opportunity for economic cooperation and development in the wider region.

Therefore, the EU remains committed to a broad regional approach, and will work hand in the hand with the international community, in the spirit of ongoing processes and initiatives, such as the Istanbul Process/Heart of Asia or the RECCA V. Of course, ownership by countries in the region and engagement by neighbours such as Russia, China, Turkey, and India are crucial for success.

To reflect realities of this CA-Afghanistan "link", the EU and its Central Asian partners have started developing synergies between various assistance programmes for both Central Asia and Afghanistan (such as BOMCA and BOMNAF) to work on both sides of common borders and provide cross border capacity building as well as foster trade across the Pyanj river.

3. It is part and parcel of EU policy to promote security in a narrow sense alongside a broader concept of human security, including economic security. At the upcoming EU – Central Asia Annual Ministerial Meeting in Bishkek, to be chaired by HR/VP Lady Ashton in person later this month, a high level Political Dialogue on Security will be launched as a regular exercise, as of 2013. We strongly believe that such an institutionalized forum will provide greater opportunities to strengthen dialogue and cooperation on security matters of common concern.

Through the CA Strategy, a strong foundation for EU engagement has been built. To give you a few examples of EU activities in the region: On borders and drugs, we intend to strengthen the implementation of the EU-Central Asia Action Plan on Drugs, primarily through the EU's flagship Border Management and Drug Action Programmes – well-known under the abbreviations BOMCA and CADAP. Our engagement in the increasingly important area of counter terrorism has become more significant through the Central Asia Regional Joint Plan of Action for the implementation of the UN Global Counter Terrorism Strategy. The EU also recently agreed to help counter the threat of spreading chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear (CBRN) materials in the region, with the possible establishment of a Central Asia Regional Centre for Excellence in this field.

But addressing those threats alone, without fostering economic development, reducing poverty and addressing the numerous social challenges in the region, is doomed to fail. The EU will therefore reinforce its key initiatives in the areas of education, rule of law, environment and water, making full use of newly established support platforms and targeted assistance to Central Asian countries. In this regard, we are also glad to count on EU's individual Members States commitments.

The EU will continue to promote economic diversification, including growth and sustainable regional development policies addressing poverty reduction, business services and development of small and medium enterprises. Further energy cooperation and the diversification of energy supply and export routes and integration of energy markets will also

be pursued as part of related programmes. Another area of EU engagement remains water management in the Aral Sea Basin as a whole which by the way includes Afghanistan.

We are also in the process of enhancing support for the monitoring, promotion and protection of human rights and make our bilateral human rights dialogues more results oriented, while at the same time addressing issues of judicial independence, good governance and civil society development in the region.

4. In closing, let me stress that the EU will remain committed to working with Central Asian and Afghan partners to ensure peace and enhance stability and prosperity. Central Asia has always been at the cross roads between Europe and Asia. Historically, its ties with the South – with Afghanistan, India, Iran, and, more to the East, China – used to be strong, but then were partly cut off during Soviet times. The challenge now is to re-enforce positive linkages with the South through trade, culture, energy, security cooperation while maintaining the equally historic relations with Europe to the West. Let us work together for this goal.