

Alternative Futures for Afghanistan and the Stability of Southwest Asia: Improving Regional Cooperation on Water

Session 4: the Helmand River Basin and the Harirud and Murghab Rivers

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EastWest Institute Brussels Centre

Event Report

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GERDA HENKEL STIFTUNG

Introduction

On Thursday, June 25, EWI's Preventive Diplomacy Initiatives hosted the fourth installment of the policy dialogue series, *Alternative Futures for Afghanistan and the Stability of Southwest Asia: Improving Regional Cooperation on Water* in Brussels. The session focused on the Helmand River Basin, shared between Afghanistan and Iran, and the Harirud and Murghab River Basins, which are also shared with Turkmenistan. Participants considered challenges to cooperative management of these water sources and proposed strategies to overcome these challenges. This was the final session in a four-part dialogue series convened with the support of Gerda Henkel Stiftung and EWI's Parliamentarians Network for Conflict Prevention and Human Security.

The Helmand River is the longest river in Afghanistan. It is approximately 1,300 km (800 miles) long. It rises in the Hindu Kush mountain range, about 40 km west of Kabul, north of the Unai Pass, and it has five tributary rivers. Crossing southwest through the desert of Dashti Margo, it forms the Afghan-Iranian border for 55 km before flowing into the Sistan marshes and the Lake Hamun region around Zabol at the Afghan-Iranian border region.

The water of the Helmand River basin is used extensively for irrigation, though an increase of mineral salts has decreased its usefulness for irrigation. The Helmand River basin's water is crucial for Afghan and Iranian farmers in Sistan and Baluchistan alike. With an area of more than 8,000 km² of fertile soil, the Sistan district is dependent on Lake Hamun and its only perennial tributary, the Helmand River. However, a major environmental disaster has been in progress during the past century. Lake Hamun has gradually diminished and with it almost the whole of the water-related local economy has gone. The environmental catastrophe of the Hamun Lake bears similarities to the Aral Sea degradation. A number of existing and planned hydroelectric projects further complicate the coordinated management of the water resources of the Helmand River basin.

As for the Western Harirud and Murghab Rivers basin, the Harirud basin is centred on Herat and rises in the central Hazarajat and flows westwards through the northeast of Iran before exhausting itself in Turkmenistan. The Murghab River rises in the Paropamissus range, which separates it from the Harirud basin, and it also flows northwards into Turkmenistan. The Harirud originates in the Koh-I-Baba Mountains to flow westwards into Iran. It then forms the border between Iran and Afghanistan and further downstream between Iran and Turkmenistan before ending in the Qaraqum desert in Turkmenistan. The Murghab flows from Afghanistan directly into the Qaraqum desert in Turkmenistan.

The Western Harirud and Murghab basins represent approximately 12% of the available water resources in Afghanistan. They are particularly crucial to the success of agriculture in the intensively irrigated area of Herat. The Western Harirud and Murghab basins form part of the wider Amu Darya River basin.

The main issue addressed at the meeting, chaired by EWT's Matthew King, was the role scientific and technical cooperation can play in overcoming political obstacles. In particular, the participants were asked to consider:

- The prospects for progress towards enhanced regional cooperation on water for agricultural development and energy production;
- The political implications and limitations to cooperation on water at the regional level.

The keynote speakers were Dr. L. Jean Palmer-Moloney, Associate at NASA Ames Research Center, Biospheric Science Branch, Earth Science Division and Dr. Anna Tengberg, Senior Technical Advisor Land Degradation, Regional Technical Advisor International Waters, UNDP. The main issue addressed at the meeting was the value of scientific and technical cooperation in overcoming political obstacles.

Scientific Data – Challenge and Opportunity

Dr. Jean Palmer-Moloney of NASA's Ames Research Centre showed that dramatic changes have taken place in the Helmand Basin since the late 1970s. Satellite imagery demonstrated the disappearance of vegetation and groundwater. Dr. Palmer-Moloney outlined the implications of these changes, particularly for the Sistan wetlands and the population that relies upon that threatened ecosystem for survival and livelihood. She explained that increasing public health concerns, in particular respiratory diseases, as a result of the drier climate are contributing to emigration from the area.

Palmer-Moloney stressed that the lack of data is a major hindrance to policy development on water in the region; much of the most up to date hydrological data on Afghanistan was collected between 1945-1978.

Dr. Anna Tengberg, the UNDP's Bangkok-based Regional Technical Advisor International Waters, said the Helmand Basin faces an environmental crisis comparable to the well-known Aral Sea disaster. Cooperation on the technical aspects of water management, and on building the base of current data, can be an institutional strengthening mechanism and can reinforce national inter-ministry capacities. In spite of this, the UNDP has had difficulty in raising support in Afghanistan for the full implementation of a Joint Commission on the Sistan Wetlands, indicative of the political sensitivities that have hampered regional cooperation to date.

Regional Possibilities

“Can diplomacy turn a cause for concern into a purpose for joint collaboration?” one participant asked. Several participants agreed that the opportunities presented by regional and international cooperation on

data gathering and analysis could help to overcome the political stalemate. There is growing demand on a decreasing supply of water resources in the region, and the challenge is to find a way to use that shortage as a push towards regional cooperation, to find technical solutions in a way that mobilizes the political will to implement those solutions. Unfortunately, there has been very little coordination of current local efforts and even less of a regionally comprehensive approach. Enhanced regional coordination amongst international community efforts can further promote such a comprehensive approach. As stated by a representative from the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the international community has started a slow shift towards a broader regional approach, although there have not as yet been any comprehensive regional initiatives or cooperation by donors on water specifically.

A representative from NATO's Science for Peace and Security Section warned that efforts in the South Caucasus to use scientific cooperation as a step toward political cooperation have had difficulty gaining political support. Dr. Tengberg replied that the regional cooperation mechanism that the UNDP is struggling to implement in Afghanistan and Iran has been used successfully elsewhere. However, the major obstacle in the Sistan Basin is a lack of trust between the parties. For a number of reasons, it has been difficult to generate such trust in the region. Donors are perceived to side with one state over another, or, as was mentioned by some participants, give contracts only to their national teams, restricting local ownership of projects.

Taking a regional perspective with a coordinated donor approach might facilitate progress across a range of issues by removing the perceptions that cooperation is a game with losers and winners. A representative from the Embassy of Tajikistan reiterated this sentiment and, encouraging efforts to enhance regional knowledge and data collection, said that "We need to see the regional possibilities."

The Knowledge Gap

Throughout this dialogue series, the participants have emphasized a significant need in Afghanistan for increased scientific knowledge and technical capacity. The gaps in knowledge and capacity are even more pronounced at the local level. Afghanistan, its neighbors and the international community must overcome these gaps if policy decisions in Kabul are to have any impact. Participants further noted that it is difficult to find value in regional treaties if there is no local capacity to implement them. It is one thing, a participant said, for lawyers to negotiate an international agreement, it is quite another for the people in the rural areas to be able to effectively implement the water management capacities that are necessary to address the growing demand for a resource in ever shorter supply.

Next Steps

This was the final session of the policy dialogue series, which was initiated in cooperation with EWT's Parliamentarians Network for Conflict Prevention and Human Security. EWT's Preventive Diplomacy Initiatives will publish a policy report of the series later in the year, to be disseminated to key officials, decision-makers and experts as part of a new strategy for regional security and as a contribution to an exit strategy for the international community. A high-level international conference (to be held late 2009 or early 2010 - date and venue to be confirmed) will kick-start a new regional cooperation framework for water issues, building on recommendations from the policy dialogues series.

Participants List of Session 4

1. **Huub ALBERSE** : Policy Officer Afghanistan, Peace building and Stabilization Unit, Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs
2. **Joeran ALTENBERG** : Project Assistant, Environment, Conflict and Cooperation, Adelphi Research
3. **Lizza BORNAY-BOMASSI** : Project Assistant, Preventive Diplomacy Initiatives, EastWest Institute
4. **Astrid CARFAGNINI** : Intern, Preventive Diplomacy Initiatives, EastWest Institute
5. **Nicole CASEY** : Consultant, Science for Peace and Security Section, Public Diplomacy Division, NATO
6. **Birte GAETH** : Assistant to Ms. Angelika Beer (MEP), European Parliament
7. **Anna KERN** : Assistant to the Brussels Director, United Nations Environment Programme
8. **Abdul Hamid KHAN** : Chairman, Balawaristan National Front
9. **Matthew KING** : Project Manager, Preventive Diplomacy Initiatives, EastWest Institute
10. **Karoline KLOSE** : Intern, Preventive Diplomacy Initiatives, EastWest Institute
11. **Tatiana LEVCEVA** : Political Advisor to the EU Special Representative for Central Asia, Council of the European Union
12. **Christine LYNCH** : Project Assistant, Preventive Diplomacy Initiatives, EastWest Institute
13. **Manijeh MAHMOUDZADEH VARZI** : Engineer, Former student of Irrigation and Water Engineering Group, Wageningen University
14. **Jamil MAQSOOD** : General Secretary, United Kashmir Peoples National Party
15. **Hassan MASHHADI**: Director, All Hazards Management
16. **Jamelle McCAMPBELL** : Coordinator for Stabilization and Reconstruction of Afghanistan, Mission of the USA to NATO
17. **Dr. Susanne MICHAELIS** : Manager, Science Communication, Science for Peace and Security Programme, Public Diplomacy Division, NATO
18. **Suhrob MIRZOALIEV**: Second Secretary, Embassy of Tajikistan to the Kingdom of Belgium
19. **Dr. L. Jean PALMER-MOLONEY** : Associate of NASA Ames Research Center, Biospheric Science Branch, Earth Science Division, Independent Consultant, National Geospatial Intelligence Agency
20. **Benjamin STURTEWAGEN** : Project Coordinator, Preventive Diplomacy Initiatives, EastWest Institute
21. **Turdimurat TURSUNMURATOV** : First Secretary, Uzbekistan Mission to NATO
22. **Dave VERGE** : Intern, Preventive Diplomacy Initiatives, EastWest Institute
23. **Rachel VOGEL** : Intern, Environmental Security International
24. **Dr. Kai WEGERICH** : Assistant Professor, Irrigation and Water Engineering Group, Wageningen University

Via Conference Call

25. **Dr. Najam ABBAS** : Research Fellow Central Asian Studies, Institute of Ismaili Studies
26. **Saifullah AHMADZAI** : Senior Research Analyst, Centre for Conflict and Peace Studies (CAPS)
27. **Saeid FERDOWSI** : Programme Officer, UNDP Iran
28. **Sergiy ILLARIONOV** : Senior Development Officer, Acting Head of the ANDS Support Unit, United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA)
29. **Dr. Anna TENGBERG** : Senior Technical Advisor Land Degradation, Regional Technical Advisor International Waters, UNDP Regional Centre Bangkok