“For me, the term Central Asian region comes from the outside. In particular, Europeans see the post-Soviet republics as a single region. However, the Central Asian countries do not perceive themselves necessarily as part of a single or integral region” suggests Professor Dr. Thorsten Bonacker in an interview to cabar.asia.

cabar.asia: Would it be appropriate to say that from the conflict studies point of view, Central Asia is considered a highly conflict-prone region, and if this is the case, what are the reasons?

Thorsten Bonacker: To begin with, I would like to say that Central Asia is not considered a highly conflict-prone region. If we consider various ratings and studies, then it can be argued that the conflict potential of the region is not very high, because existing conflicts remain at the latent or the minimum level of the violence threshold. If we talk about the post-Soviet period, then we can say that, in addition to the civil war in Tajikistan, there was no major violent conflict in the region. Even taking into account ethnic clashes in the Ferghana Valley, one can say that the region is not very stressed and these conflicts do not have the potential for large-scale violence. Yet this does not deny the fact that there are numerous contradictions, disagreements and clashes of interests in the region.

cabar.asia: Which conflicts in Central Asia, in your opinion, will remain relevant in the long run, and which ones will be resolved?

Thorsten Bonacker: Recently, the focus of conflict studies has been directed to the sphere of water and energy issues, which could be explained by the region’s specific geographical location.

On the one hand, some of the region’s states are dependent on energy recourses, while on the other there are those that possess and import energy resources. Naturally, these conflicts can be managed as states can identify mutual interests in negotiations. However, due to the geographical conditions, a certain conflict potential will remain. This is why joint institutions and an atmosphere of mutual trust is crucial in order to avoid an escalation.
At the same time, the second big topic is regional relations, first of all, with Russia and China. This is an area for potential conflicts that will affect the region.

What is important here is that, at the moment, Chinese foreign policy in Central Asia does not seem to be directed against Russia. Rather, it seems more likely Moscow and Beijing cooperate in implementing their policies. In my opinion, there is no threat of escalation in these relations, but they still have a conflict potential. And of course, projects like the New Silk Road affects the interests of Western powers in the region.

If you consider the conflict potential in the region you also have to take the development of neighboring states, namely, Afghanistan and Iran, into account. The relationship between Tajikistan and Iran, for instance, has dramatically declined over the last years. And of course, the conflict in Afghanistan impacts the situation, especially in the border regions of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan.

A fourth aspect is the peculiarity of both domestic policies and the socio-economic development in the region. Both the question of presidential succession in countries like Kazakhstan and of ethnic heterogeneity in, for instance, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan contains potential for instability. Although it is important to note that, in particular, ethnic heterogeneity as such is not a driver of conflict, but the question is how political elites deal with it and whether this creates group competition over scarce resources or power positions.

Lastly, shrinking spaces for civil society and political participation, and the curtailment of freedom in Tajikistan should be considered as a highly problematic development that increases tensions between the state and society.

cabar.asia: Do you think that the Astana meeting to discuss the Central Asia concerns without Russia is something new, or has a chance to become traditional?

Thorsten Bonacker: In terms of what is relevant for conflict resolution in the region, it is necessary to bear in mind the lack of institutions that form the basis for integration and regional conflict resolution. It is worth acknowledging that Russia has played an important role in this regard, acting as an intermediary and taking responsibility for solving certain issues. After the collapse of the USSR, each state built and developed its relations with Russia in its own way. Relations with Russia were, at that time, more important than relations with the neighboring states of Central Asia.

Recently, it seems that this is going to change. Central Asian states are beginning to pay
more attention and work to improve relations among themselves.

Nevertheless, it is worth noting that relations with the Russian Federation have not lost their significance. I therefore remain skeptical about the issue and the region’s prospects of moving away from the impact of and dependency on Russia’s policy, given its scale and depth.

**cabar.asia:** Region’s cross-border issues have been a cornerstone for many years. Can they cause outbreaks of conflicts in the region and what can countries do to reduce the effect?

**Thorsten Bonacker:** The region’s border issues are the legacy of the Soviet Union and they have always been a political instrument in interstate relations. This can be observed in the issue of opening/closing border posts, which reflects the level of bilateral relations between states. There are now examples of cross-border issues being resolved positively, in line with overall improving bilateral relationships. It is worth noting that the opening of states is important not only in the aspect of economic cooperation and trade, but also in terms of freedom of movement of people. If you ask how it is possible to resolve interstate conflicts, you should also take the humanitarian dimension and the everyday situation for families living on both sides of borders into account. If conflicts become aggravated at the state and public level, then it can be argued that in this region the relations are highly personified and dependent on the behavior of the elites. Thus, in my opinion, Kyrgyzstan’s ethnic conflicts were conflicts not at the societal, but at the level of elites.

*Of course, there are always certain inter-ethnic issues, but they can be mobilized if the elites desire it.*

**cabar.asia:** Is the EU’s experience relevant to address Central Asia border issues?

**Thorsten Bonacker:** From the EU experience, two things can be learned. First is that regional institutions facilitate sustainable cooperation between states. Unlike earlier in Central Asia, we can already observe an improvement with regards to holding regular meetings for institutionalization, collective regulation and decision making. This will help, first of all, to strengthen interstate trust and to form common interests with respect to a third party. It can be Russia, China or even the EU.

For this development, it is important to create regional institutions. Of course, Central Asian countries participate in various international institutions and various cooperation platforms, but, firstly, they do not have common institutions, and secondly, not all of them are part of
existing international institutions, such as the SCO and CSTO. The second aspect will again lead us to the water and energy issues. The success story of the EU depends to a large extent on the intensification of trade. For example, the elimination of common borders for trade and the expansion of regional trade played a very important role in the overall development of the EU. In the region of Central Asia, this depends more on Russia and China than on the countries of the region.

The third important aspect, as we have already mentioned, is creating a regional identity and solidarity.

*For me, the term Central Asian region comes from the outside. In particular, Europeans see the post-Soviet republics as a single region, perhaps also the Russians and Chinese adhere to a similar approach, in connection with their strategic interests. However, the Central Asian countries do not perceive themselves necessarily as part of a single and integral region.*

This situation will change through the development and strengthening of population movement, tourism and trade.

cabar.asia: Interethnic issues are still relevant in the region. We can even talk about block of interethnic issues. In what countries do you see these issues as most acute?

**Thorsten Bonacker:** The region is quite heterogeneous in terms of population and ethnic composition based on different characteristics. For example, Kazakhstan is an example of a state with ethnic heterogeneity, but at the same time, there is no strong conflict potential. In Kyrgyzstan, there are fewer ethnic groups in terms of quantity, but there have already been several large interethnic conflicts. From my point of view, ethnic conflicts in the region are regulated by political elites aiming to achieve their own political interests.

cabar.asia: As a peace and conflict researcher, what are your recommendations to deal with challenges faced by the region and resolve existing conflicts?

**Thorsten Bonacker:** Meetings, discussions and reconciliation at the political level with the goal of developing trust between regional leaders. Next, concentrate on neighbors when developing foreign policy. It is necessary to exchange and consult not only escalation, but on a constant basis. And, of course, it would be ideal if economic interests and agendas were formed in the region itself and not brought from the outside. For example, labor migration from Tajikistan to Russia could be reoriented within the region.
Dr. Thorsten Bonacker is professor at Philipps-Universität (Germany) and Co-director of the Center for Conflict Studies. He is also a member of the International Center for the Research and Documentation of War Crime Trials at the Philipps-Universität Marburg and the Institute for World Society Studies at Bielefeld University. Additionally, he is a member of the international advisory board of the Centre for Peace History at Sheffield University (UK). In Marburg, he directs two Master programs on Peace and Conflict Studies. His main research activities are in the field of theory and methods of peace and conflict studies, securitisation and postcolonial state building, transitional justice, and reproductive and sexual rights. He is especially interested in politics in Central Asia and Southeast Asia (particularly Cambodia and Timor Leste).

**Interview prepared by IWPR intern Turonbek Kozokov**

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