

Event Report

**Kyrgyzstan's Evolving Interests and Priorities
in Central Asia**

EIAS Briefing Seminar

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Kyrgyzstan, located in the heart of the Eurasian landmass, has a rich and ancient history. In recent years, the openness of the society and accountability of the authorities to the people have started to deliver their fruits; aided by a steady growth rate of around 9 percent. With its huge human potential, it is crucial for the country to keep the positive trends.

The country has seen a considerable expansion of trade in recent years – the total trade turnover increased nearly sevenfold to USD 11.8 billion between 2005 and 2013. Kyrgyzstan's geographic position between major energy producers (Russia, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan) and large energy importers, foremost among them China, makes Kyrgyzstan a potentially valuable transit state for certain pipeline projects. Furthermore, Kyrgyzstan is blessed with considerable deposits of mineral resources, including gold and other metals. Many opportunities for growth also lie in expanding the generation of hydroelectric power from the country's ample rivers and streams for sale to neighbouring countries.

EIAS was honoured to welcome Kyrgyzstan's Minister of Foreign Affairs, H.E. Mr Erlan Abdyldaev, for a speech and subsequent dialogue with the audience on the country's foreign policy interests, priorities and challenges, both in Central Asia and beyond.

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As a landlocked country, connectivity with its neighbours is of critical importance to its overall economic development. In this regard, the ADB-funded Central Asian Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC) programme has prioritized the development of six corridors (four of which traverse Kyrgyzstan) to promote regional trade, link Central Asia's economic hubs, and connect landlocked countries to other Eurasian and global markets. Kyrgyzstan also stands to benefit from China's One Belt One Road initiative and the many connectivity projects that will traverse the region.

Keynote Speech

Kyrgyzstan's Foreign Minister, H.E. Mr Erlan Abdyldaev, began his speech highlighting the fact that Kyrgyzstan has the only parliamentary governance system in the Central Asian region. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Kyrgyzstan was the first country to introduce its national currency, become a member of the World Trade Organization, and then open its borders to the international community.

Since then, ground-breaking changes have occurred within Kyrgyz society, evolving significantly and rapidly. In particular, important changes have recently started to take place in the social, political and economic life of Kyrgyzstan. Despite the difficulties faced during the democratic reforms, especially after the tragic events of 2010, Kyrgyzstan identified the objectives to meet in order to achieve further development. These objectives are now clearly reflected in the *National Sustainable Development Strategy*, which identifies key directions of the political, economic and social development of the country for the coming years. For the implementation and accomplishment of the stated objectives, the *Government Program and Plan on Transition to Sustainable Development* based its directives on democratic principles, rule of law, enhancement of statehood, formation of a common civic identity, economic integration into the international community and further development of multiculturalism.

Minister Abdyldaev strongly reaffirmed that the most important area of activity for all branches of the central government was the formation of a truly law-governed state through enhancing its electoral system. In addition, the Foreign Minister underlined the active efforts aimed at a stronger economic development of the country and the creation of the most attractive conditions for investors. Furthermore, he highlighted the most important economic sectors of the country such as the mining industry, energy, tourism, agriculture, transport, the financial sector and businesses based on new and environment-friendly technologies. Great achievements have been made in all of these areas, and major progress was also made in the fight against corruption, described as one of the main factors hindering economic and social development of the country.

The democratic reforms embraced by Kyrgyzstan are also demonstrated by the past parliamentary elections in October 2015. For the first time, the elections were carried out using the latest electronic technologies, and the electoral process has been praised as

fully open and transparent. The voter turnout reached 59 percent of the total number of the registered voters. In order to ensure a broad and open observation of the electoral process, Kyrgyzstan invited more than 40 national and international organizations from 69 countries across the globe. The number of observers totalled 613 people. Parliamentary elections represented another step toward enhancing democracy, guaranteeing the unity of the people, safeguarding internal political stability and sustainable socio-economic development of the country. In general, the international community recognized the elections as open, competitive and transparent, and positively assessed the political will of the authorities to improve the electoral process. Indeed, thanks to these reforms embraced by the government, the Kyrgyz Republic was elected as a member of the UN Human Rights Council.

Minister Mr Erlan Abdyldaev expressed his concerns about the deteriorating global situation, where the international community faces the threats of polarization, growth of armed conflicts and new challenges to security and stability. He personally believes that countries must put aside all disagreements and actively fight against terrorism and extremism through joint efforts. In particular, Kyrgyzstan strongly condemns all acts of terrorism irrespective of their motivation, wherever and by whomever they are committed: terrorism has its roots and causes, but it has no excuse.

According to the Minister, it is necessary to adopt preventive measures to avoid harmful ideological influences. In this regard, Mr Erlan Abdyldaev stated that the concept of extremism should not be considered restrictedly in terms of the use of violent methods, but it should be considered in a wider way. Indeed Kyrgyzstan supports state policies focused on counteracting extremist manifestations, ensuring an effective protection of the secular nature of the state and enhancing cooperation with the traditional religions in implementing the rights of citizens and the freedom of religion.

Speaking on combating terrorism, the Foreign Minister stressed the engagement at the national, regional and international levels in the fight against this evil. In particular, the Kyrgyz Republic fully supports the *United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy* (UN-GCS), which provides a solid basis for effective counteraction to international terrorism, creating a framework for cooperation between countries and international organizations in this area. In addition, for the purpose of the UN-GCS implementation, the Central Asian states adopted the Joint Action Plan on November 30, 2011 in Ashgabat, which is also being implemented by the Kyrgyz Republic as part of its national strategy.

Enhancing the unity of the people of the Kyrgyz Republic and working towards the improvement of interethnic relations are the most important preconditions for the successful development of the country. Special attention is paid to improving the general education of the population and enhancing a close cooperation with youth. In this regard, a new version of the *State Policy Concept* in the sphere of religion in the Kyrgyz Republic for 2014-2020 was developed.

At present, the Kyrgyz Republic has acceded to 10 of the 16 international unified UN documents regulating the offenses and counteraction measures in the field of terrorism. Efforts aimed to align national legislation with the ratified international conventions, amend the existing legislation and develop new regulations are continuously underway.

It should be noted that terrorism is closely linked to drug trafficking, and the drug threat emanating from Afghanistan is one of the major barriers to sustainable development of the countries in the region. According to the latest data of the UN Office on Drugs and Crime, a record amount of opium poppy was cultivated in Afghanistan in 2014 (6,400 tons, according to UNODC estimates); the total cultivated area was 224,000 hectares.

Speaking about security, the Foreign Minister also mentioned the problematic and porous border with Afghanistan. The territory of the country remains the main hotbed for spreading the drug trafficking through Central Asia to Russia and the Eastern European markets along the "northern route". At that point, part of the drugs remains in the Central Asian region, which leads to the involvement of the population in drug-related business, worsens the crime situation and increases drug abuse.

Modern drug trafficking has transnational features, such as good organization, creation of sustainable routes for drug trafficking, established mechanisms for money laundering, influential patrons in the state bodies, including in the law enforcement agencies. Moreover, in recent years, narco-expansion is becoming more aggressive, and it feeds terrorism and extremism.

All actions embraced by Kyrgyzstan are aimed to combat illicit drug trafficking, counteract drug trafficking and organized crime, enhance effectiveness of border management in order to prevent trans-boundary activities of organized criminal groups, legislation reform, fight against corruption, prevention and treatment of drug addiction and HIV/AIDS. These aims are comprehensively reflected in and implemented through the *UNODC Integrated Country Program for Kyrgyzstan for 2014-2016*.

Foreign Minister Abdyldaev concluded his speech underlining that the main task of the Kyrgyz Foreign Ministry will be the gradual implementation of a foreign policy aimed at creating favourable conditions for the development and security of the country, stressing a stronger attention to the development of good-neighbourly relations with Central Asia countries, and developing equitable bilateral and multilateral relations.

Q&A

Among the different questions that were raised during the debate, a particular concern was expressed by the Foreign Minister on the current situation in the Middle East shred by protracted conflicts and interreligious confrontation. With the spread of Daesh and other similar radical groups in the region, as well as their fighters approaching the borders of Central Asia, the country is facing an increasing propaganda and recruitment of Kyrgyz citizens as mercenary terrorists. Indeed activities of radical Islamist forces are observed at the external borders of the countries in this region such as Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Accordingly the Minister remarked the intention of Kyrgyzstan to collaborate with regional partners - fighting against terrorism and drug trafficking - to ensure stability and sustainable development of Central Asia.

At the same time, despite the major regional conflicts in Syria and Iraq with continuous destructive activities carried out by the extremely radical terrorist organization "Islamic state" (IS), the Afghani problem remains the most acute in the Central Asian region. Indeed speaking about Afghanistan, the Foreign Minister reconfirmed the sincere interest in a peaceful and stable development of the brotherly neighbouring country. Increase in

violence and suspension of peaceful negotiations between the contending parties led to huge losses and victims among the civilian population.

During the second session of questions the Minister emphasized also the good relationship with the EU. In particular, he underlined the importance of cultural collaboration, supported by the several flagship initiatives launched by Brussels. In addition, thanks to the development of trade and economic relations, an equitable and mutually beneficial basis has been institutionalized.

The final part of the debate was focused on the Chinese “One Belt One Road Initiative” that is designed to boost trade, ensuring transit along interstate highways and railroads and coordinating approaches to the energy sector development. In particular, thanks to the Chinese investments in energy transportation, pipelines and railroads have been built. According to the Minister, this initiative is creating the perfect framework for long-term regional collaboration.