The regional approach: A tool for the OSCE in Central Asia?

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For some time in the OSCE frequent reference has been made to the 'regional approach' as a method to deal more efficiently with problems linked to two or more states located in a region. Such an approach is supposed to be a promising way to reduce the potential for confrontation and to increase the willingness to cooperate at a regional/sub-regional level. Looking at Central Asia the use and distribution of water resources in the broadest sense seems to be the most important issue to be dealt with in a regional approach for this part of the world. The reason why this is the case, is obvious: The major river systems in the arid region, in which water generally has to be considered as a scarce resource, cover more than one state. Efforts to find solutions for efficient international water resource management have been made, but so far without any considerable impact.

The term 'Regional approach' has been appearing in a growing number of speeches, policy papers, mission mandates, even in agreements between the OSCE and Participating States like Memoranda of Understanding, but not explicitly in OSCE high-level documents. The 1999 Istanbul Summit Declaration uses the terms 'broader view of the region' and 'regional strategy' (paragraph 11, related to South Eastern Europe). With a view to Central Asia (paragraph 14) it recognizes 'the importance of addressing economic and environmental risks in the region'. This wording seems to cover the substance of what is understood by a 'regional approach'.

The documents of the OSCE Istanbul Summit in 1999 call for intensified regional cooperation for South Eastern Europe and Central Asia. At least for the neutral observer, the Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe could constitute an example in which the request for a regional approach is heard and implemented. In the other region mentioned things seem to be less clear. As far as Central Asia is concerned, some, but not all the governments of the countries in Central Asia favour the regional approach, while others merely pay lip service when welcoming it, others do nothing to avoid the impression that they dissaprove of such an approach. It is fair to conclude that for the time being the regional approach which has been applied in the case of Central Asia has not been very productive. There might be several reasons for this: a lack of political will among certain political leaders and governments in the region is an important factor. At the same time the possibility should not be excluded that the design and the political presentation of the regional approach by the international community are lacking vital elements to make it attractive.

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Against the background of high political priority for the regional approach expressed by several consecutive Chairmanships of the OSCE, the question of how to make the Regional approach work, how to promote it, is of permanent relevance to OSCE field activities in the regions concerned. OSCE field activities in Central Asia reflect the strong references to the regional approach in their mandates. They are requested to 'assist in arranging OSCE regional events, inter alia, regional seminars', and 'to liaise and co-operate closely with ... other OSCE Centres in the region, in order to maintain the coherence of the regional approach of the OSCE'. Numerous attempts in the field to implement the regional approach and to provide visibility to these efforts make the difficulties evident.

In the light of the experience gained, some answers can be given to the question of why difficulties and obstacles continue to prevail and what can be done eventually to remove them.

When trying to provide substance to the regional approach, to make it work in practice, some general considerations play a role: There are obviously two partially contradictory perceptions of the regional approach, depending on the position of the actors involved: For the OSCE and many of its Participating States the notion of a regional approach is attractive — and for good reasons. The concept sounds fascinating, not to say magical. It sounds like the key to a solution to a complex task, it sounds like synergy, like combined efforts. The label promises a fresh remedy. It seems to be so convincing that at first glance nobody would even dare to express doubts concerning its efficiency. Countries, which are the object and 'beneficiaries' of such an approach might look at things in a different way. They might perceive it as the reflection of the incapacity to understand their individual needs and ambitions, or worse: an unwillingness to do so. It is therefore very important to take such sensitivities into consideration. The question whether they are legitimate or not, is not relevant in the present context.

The regional approach is frequently recommended for regions in which countries only have recent experience as regards their national identity and independence. They might still be focussing more on what constitutes the differences from their neighbours than on how to overcome — by cooperation — divisions caused by the move towards independence.

A clear example for this is Central Asia: For the time being, focus will be placed on demarcation and effective control of borders, the creation of national institutions, the development and strengthening of national identity. There is a strong feeling that nothing should be done or created, which might be reminiscent of the structures of the past with its artificial and superficial doctrine of friendship and cooperation among peoples and nations. People remember this as a big lie, having nothing to do with reality.

Sometimes the memory of what used to be the rule of the political game in the region in former times is not beneficial. One can hear the argument: 'Why should we enter into new obligations which will remain — as in soviet times — dead paper?' Such reluctance is understandable and from the beginning should not