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Integrated Cooperation on Explosive Hazards Program in Central Asia

by Luka Buhin [OSCE Office in Tajikistan]

The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) Office in Tajikistan (OiT) facilitates regional cooperation and coordination in the field of mine action in Central Asia, predominantly focusing on but not limited to inter-military cooperation. This approach falls under the OSCE concept of comprehensive and cooperative security. One of the best examples of this cooperation is the OSCE extra-budgetary project, the Integrated Cooperation on Explosive Hazards Programme (ICExH), which has been running since mid-2013. The project received financial support

from the governments of Austria and the Netherlands in the past, while the Office of Weapons Removal and Abatement in the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Political-Military Affairs (PM/WRA) has provided funding since 2014.

OSCE developed the project in an effort to improve the explosive hazards situation in Central Asia as well as in Afghanistan.¹ This encompasses issues related to explosive ordnance disposal (EOD) and includes demilitarization of explosive ordnance and countering improvised explosive devices (IED).



Figure 1. Map of Central Asia.
Figure courtesy of OSCE/Umed Egamberdiev.

Building Confidence in Central Asia

Although the scale and threat of explosives hazards vary in Central Asia, the governments, military forces and humanitarian demining organizations face similar challenges—from the illicit use of abandoned or uncontrolled explosives, unsafe storage and transportation of munitions, to inadequate investment in the life management of serviceable ammunition.

A series of unplanned explosions at munitions sites in Central Asia during the 2000s—and particularly in Abadan, Turkmenistan, on 7 July 2011—demonstrated that the regional explosive hazards problem was a broader threat than those covered by the traditional framework of mine action, and included the illicit use of abandoned and uncontrolled explosives and the unsafe storage and transportation of munitions. Thus in early 2012, the OSCE OiT's emphasis changed from a top-down regional coordination of mine action in Central Asia to a bottom-up approach via EOD, risk education and management trainings, conventional ammunition destruction, stockpile security, stockpile management, and the encouragement of regional technical dialogues during exchange visits. This important change in emphasis helped shape the design of the activities, outputs and intended outcomes of the ICExH project.

Understanding the Context

Developing regional projects demands an in-depth understanding of the context in which the project was initially developed and subsequently implemented. This was explicitly underlined in the external mid-term evaluation of the project.²

A number of factors affected the initial ICExH project:

- An absence of commonly accepted international norms and agreements related to conventional weapons destruction and humanitarian mine action.
- An absence of regional political consensus combined with a lack of enthusiasm to cooperate on regional security issues, as well as the perceived threat that cross-border and/or regional cooperation, even on a technical level, may have significant political implications.
- Discrepancies between the expressed political will of countries in the region and poor implementation of stated intentions on the ground. This fact is also reflected on a country level where a hierarchical and formalized decision-making and decision-implementing system is practiced.
- Discrepancies in understanding mine action (including its components), since not all of the countries have



Tajik and Afghan students share their experiences with EOD operations in Dushanbe, Tajikistan (November 2015). Photo courtesy of OSCE/Nozim Kalandarov.



An explosive hazards awareness instructor from DanChurchAid (DCA) in Dushanbe, Tajikistan, with students from Kyrgyz, Tajik and Turkmen Ministries of Defence (March 2015).

Photo courtesy of OSCE/Nozim Kalandarov.

established mine action programs. Consequently, programs differ between countries, i.e., from a predominately militarized approach to a mixed involvement of civilian, military and law enforcement agencies.

The challenging political-military situation in Afghanistan and elsewhere in Central Asia means that establishing and sustaining regional cooperation is difficult. Studies of cross-border cooperation efforts in Central Asia show that effective regional cooperation takes time to develop and requires gradual implementation.³ The ICExH project's initial efforts to establish a regional mine action body to coordinate personnel and resources in Central Asia from the top-down were eventually abandoned in favor of focusing on tangible technical-level cooperation.

Building National and Regional Capacities

Until recently, military forces predominately handled explosive hazard reduction and response tasks in Central Asia. The military capabilities in Central Asia are influenced by former Soviet military doctrine. In many instances, the military units' demining procedures more closely resemble minefield breaching used in wartime than humanitarian demining deployed in peacetime. Similarly, the standards used to store,

transport and destroy munitions and other explosives fall short of today's international peacetime norms.

However, there are positive aspects to this. First, the States in the region are responding to explosive hazards challenges with their own military forces, although the presence of international actors is required to a limited extent. Second, the development of demining and EOD capacities is clearly driven by the needs of military and security forces as well as the agenda of regional nations that wish to participate in U.N. peacekeeping operations requiring these capacities.

In the development phase of the ICExH project, a particular challenge was to identify the common denominator of explosive hazards challenges in relation to national and regional capacities. The project uses a decentralized approach in providing capacity-building opportunities via the Tajik and Kazakh Ministries of Defence as key national partners. In conjunction with the Tajikistan National Mine Action Centre (TNMAC), the Tajik Ministry of Defence already possesses capacities and experiences in mine action, including EOD. Similarly, the Kazakh Ministry has a well-established explosive ordnance demilitarization program. Both of these allow the ICExH project to anchor the training programs within the existing structure(s) and/or future training school(s).



A Tajik junior instructor, under mentorship of USARCENT, demonstrates subsurface clearance procedures during a battle area clearance operation to Armenian, Kazakh, Kyrgyz and Tajik students in Lyaur, Tajikistan (April 2016).
Photo courtesy of OSCE/Nozim Kalandarov.

ICExH Project

The key objective of the ICExH project is to provide targeted capacity development and technical assistance in responding to explosive hazards. This is done through IMAS compliant trainings focused on training instructors, exchanging information and shared best practices, and developing regional training institutions. The ICExH project is also designed to foster dialogue by providing a platform where mine action professionals in Central Asia are exposed to contemporary EOD, risk education and training management practices, which includes international standards and operating procedures.

During the initial ICExH project training cycle from 2014 to 2015, over 70 specialists from Afghanistan, Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan attended EOD level 1 through 3+ (IED disposal and explosive ordnance demilitarization) and risk education courses. The EOD trainings were delivered in Dari, Russian and Tajik. The ICExH project's second training cycle, which commenced in 2016, introduced Central Asian junior instructors to support the course's delivery. Eight junior instructors from Afghanistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan in

conjunction with senior instructors from the United States Army Central (USARCENT) delivered EOD level 1 and level 2 courses in April 2016.

In total, 55 civilian and military professionals from Central Asian States and Afghanistan traveled to Tajikistan (August 2013) and Bosnia and Herzegovina (November 2015). Furthermore, the ICExH project webpage was developed and is regularly updated to support networking and information sharing. The web page (www.osce-icexh.org/index.php/en) is available in English, Russian and Tajik.

At the project's inception, the Tajik Ministry of Defence agreed to host a regional training program managed by the OSCE OiT. Additionally, the Ministry committed to establishing the Regional Explosive Hazards Training Centre, which will host IMAS-compliant national and regional courses in explosive hazard reduction and response. During the summer of 2014, trainings were held in two locations: the Engineering Demining Regiment in Dushanbe and the Field Training Centre of the Military Institute in Lyaur. Additional construction for a new, self-sufficient training center is planned to begin in late 2016. Moreover, with a signed tripartite memorandum of understanding (MoU) between the Kazakh Ministry of Defence, OSCE Office in Astana and the OSCE



A USARCENT instructor evaluates student performances during the student-led lessons on the EOD level 3 course in Dushanbe, Tajikistan (July 2015).

Photo courtesy of OSCE/Nozim Kalandarov.

OiT, organizers can begin planning for the regional EOD level 3+ demilitarization manager's training in 2016 and 2017.

Partnerships Nexus

On average, between 30 and 40 governmental ministries and agencies, foreign embassies, and national and international organizations from at least eight countries are engaged in the execution of a regional training course in Dari, Russian and Tajik.

USARCENT is the main training partner for the ICExH project. In addition to providing and delivering EOD courses level 1 through 3+ (IED awareness and disposal), USARCENT provided training ordnance and aids to the future regional training center of the Tajik Ministry of Defence. The explosive hazard awareness and reduction pilot course implemented in March 2015 was developed and delivered with in-kind support from the Lebanon Mine Action Centre (LMAC), DanChurchAid (DCA) and the United Nations Mine Action Support Team (UNMAST) as a part of the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL).

The durable partnership between the OSCE OiT and the host country enables a seamless implementation of the project at the ground level. The Tajik Ministry of Defence, in its capacity as the training program host, provides training venues, in-country logistic support and junior instructors, while

TNMAC provides training certification and validation. Trainings are organized at the Tajik Ministry of Defence's Engineering-Demining Regiment and at the Field Training Centre of the Military Institute.

In Kazakhstan, the tripartite MoU signed between the OSCE offices in Astana and Dushanbe as well as the Kazakh Ministry of Defence in August 2015, confirmed cooperation efforts from mid-2015 to mid-2018. The ICExH project's wide partnership network is a testament of its regional prominence and of its partner nations' interest to participate in this joint endeavor. It took OSCE OiT more than seven years to develop such a network. Sustaining the ICExH project partnership network will maintain regional cooperation momentum in addressing the issues relating to explosive hazards in Central Asia.

Wider Impact of the ICExH Project

The ICExH project enhances and supports continuous technical explosive hazard coordination and dialogue, which encourages broader confidence and security building (CSB) in Central Asia. Currently, the project is the only consistent and ongoing CSB measure addressing the issue of explosive hazards within the region.

In addition to supporting the progress of Central Asian States toward compliance with international disarmament



A USARCENT instructor explains the necessity of collecting an IED's forensic evidence on a mock-up device in Dushanbe, Tajikistan (October 2015).

Photo courtesy of OSCE/Nozim Kalandarov.

conventions, the ICExH project is helping to reduce threats to national security (i.e., IEDs laid by insurgents and terrorists, unplanned explosions at ammunition storage sites, and transnational crime). It also supports Central Asian States' aspirations to participate in U.N. peacekeeping operations with their explosive hazards reduction and response capacities. Graduates of the trainings, seminars and exchange programs are technical specialists and managers who are influential in terms of shaping policy and implementation measures to reduce the threat posed by explosive hazards in the region.

The project also supports the establishment of the Regional Explosive Hazards Training Centre in Tajikistan and regional explosive ordnance demilitarization trainings in Kazakhstan. Training opportunities will be provided to military, security and law-enforcement forces as well as other relevant civilian agencies. The ICExH project supports the wider role of the OSCE in mobilizing actors and developing a cooperation platform among its participant States in Central Asia. Through its multilateral capacity building and technical level dialogue approach, the OSCE OiT validates the case for confidence and security building in Central Asia. ©

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Luka Buhin joined the OSCE Office in Tajikistan in February 2012 and served as a mine action officer before becoming the program officer in charge of the ICExH project in November 2014. Previously, Buhin was a part of the ITF Enhancing Human Security team and managed various national and regional mine action projects in Southeast Europe, South Caucasus and Central Asia between March 2006 and January 2012. Buhin holds a bachelor's degree in political science with a defense studies specialization and a Master of Science degree in international economics from the University of Ljubljana (Slovenia).