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The situation in central Asia and the Caucasus
and European security

REPORT

submitted on behalf of the Political Committee
by Mr Baumel, Chairman and Rapporteur, and Mr Akçalı, co-Rapporteur

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*submitted on behalf of the Political Committee²
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and Mr Akçali, co-Rapporteur*

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¹ Adopted unanimously by the Committee.

² *Members of the Committee:* Mr Baumel (Chairman); MM Urbain, Blaauw (Vice-Chairmen); MM Antretter, de Assis, Bianchi, Brancati, Bühler, Sir Sydney Chapman, MM Cusimano, Dias, Mrs Dumont, MM Ehrmann, Evangelisti, Eyskens, Mrs Fischer (Alternate: *Schloten*), Mr Forni, Lord Grenfell, Mr Irmer, Lord Kirkhill (Alternate: *Davis*), MM Liapis (Alternate: *Micheloyiannis*), MM van der Linden, Van der Maelen, Marshall, Martínez, Martínez Casañ (Alternate: *Arnau*), MM Puche Rodríguez, Recoder, Rippinger, Roseta, *Skoularikis*, Vrettos, Woltjer, Wray, Yamgnane, Zierer, N ... (Alternate: Mrs *Squarcialupi*)

Associate member: Mr Akçali.

N.B. *The names of those taking part in the vote are printed in italics*

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Contribution from Mr Akçali, co-Rapporteur.

*Draft Recommendation**on the situation in central Asia and the Caucasus and European security*

The Assembly,

- (i) Recalling problems raised following the break-up of the Soviet Union, by the appearance of eight new independent states in central Asia and the Caucasus which are attempting to define their role and find their place in relation to one another and the major powers around them;
- (ii) Stressing the need to help these states in the difficult tasks of stabilising their internal situation and establishing democratic and pluralist structures based on a flourishing economy, while at the same time taking their characteristic ethnic, cultural and religious diversity into account;
- (iii) Recalling also the principle of the inviolability of the borders of those countries, many of which were the outcome of arbitrary decisions taken at the time by the Soviet authorities without any care as to whether they corresponded to the ethnic, linguistic and cultural reality of the regions in question,
- (iv) Noting with consternation that civil war continues to rage in Afghanistan apparently without any real desire on the part of the parties to the conflict to seek a peaceful solution by opening negotiations,
- (v) Welcoming the peace settlement putting an end to the conflict in Tajikistan but fearing that the exclusion of certain interested parties from that settlement, the presence of forces involved in the Afghan war on Tajikistan soil and the ambiguity of the role of Russian forces in that country may give rise to further tension that could rock the stability of neighbouring countries such as Uzbekistan and Kirghizstan,
- (vi) Supporting the peace plan drawn up by the OSCE's Minsk Group to find a peaceful, lasting and fair solution with regard to the future status of the province of Nagorno-Karabakh,
- (vii) Wishing also that the plans for a peaceful, political settlement of the conflict in Abkhazia should be successfully implemented as quickly as possible to the satisfaction of all the parties concerned,
- (viii) Convinced that peacekeeping missions to crisis flashpoints in central Asia and the Caucasus should be entrusted to multinational forces, not exclusively recruited from the Russian army or the armies of the CIS member countries;
- (ix) Desirous that the rivalry between certain countries of the region where each is seeking to be recognised as a major regional power, will quickly give way to a spirit of cooperation and solidarity on the basis of equality among all countries within the neighbourhood,
- (x) Noting that a large number of foreign firms and powers are engaged in cut-throat competition to exploit the natural wealth of the depths and coastal surrounds of the Caspian Sea and that the coastal states, in particular Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan, are thus exposed to all kinds of pressures from countries competing for profits from exploitation of such resources;
- (xi) Desirous that an equitable international arrangement, negotiated in conjunction with all interested countries and companies, will put an end to "the pipeline war".
- (xii) Noting with concern that persistent tension between the United States and Iran is leading to the development of a Moscow-Tehran axis, the implications of which are causing unease to several countries of the region in question,
- (xiii) Concerned also by the support of certain countries for the Taliban forces in Afghanistan whose advance could threaten the stability of several of its central Asian neighbours,

(xiv) Earnestly hoping that the policy being conducted by Kazakhstan to find its place, while maintaining its independence vis-à-vis its powerful neighbours, will be successful,

(xv) Desirous that the Energy Charter Treaty drawn up by the European Union should be the touch-paper for a more coherent overall European policy towards the countries of the region and that the EU should make efforts to iron out certain differences between Europe and the United States as to the policy to be pursued in the region,

(xvi) Convinced that WEU, several member countries of which are involved in the exploitation of the natural resources of the Caspian Sea region, has a responsibility to contribute, within the framework of its area of responsibility, to crisis prevention and to the pacification of all crisis flashpoints of the region,

RECOMMENDS THAT THE COUNCIL

1. Study to what extent WEU might contribute, at the request of the OSCE, to maintaining peace in crisis flashpoints such as Nagorno-Karabakh, particularly once the parties have agreed to accept the first stage of the peace plan drawn up by the Minsk Group;
2. Study the possibility for WEU member countries to help certain countries of the region upgrade their military equipment and train their armed forces for the purpose of strengthening their defence and independence and in the interest of maintaining peace;
3. Launch an initiative vis-à-vis the UN Security Council in support of Uzbekistan's proposal to convene, under UN auspices, a peace conference on Afghanistan and establish "a contact group" to include all parties to the conflict and the United States and Russia;
4. Support in addition the plan to convene an international peace conference, under United Nations auspices and with OSCE involvement, to discuss the conflict in Abkhazia;
5. Take initiatives within the CFSP framework to enter into dialogue with the United States to iron out any differences of views that exist on some aspects of policy towards central Asia and the Caucasus;
6. Support, with the European Union, every effort to enable central Asia and the Caucasus to become a flourishing, stable and peaceful region, *inter alia* by promoting regional cooperation,
7. Enter into regular political dialogue with the eight new independent states of the region for that purpose.

Explanatory Memorandum

*(submitted by Mr Baumel, Chairman and Rapporteur
and Mr Akçali, co-Rapporteur)*

I. Introduction

1. Europe's interest in the developments in central Asia and the Caucasus is of recent date, having emerged since the birth of eight new independent states situated between the Black Sea and the Chinese border¹. All of them used to be part of the former Soviet Union and are now members of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). Until the break up of the Soviet Union most of them had never genuinely known independence

2. Because of its geostrategic position, vast natural resources, ethnic diversity and variety of cultural and religious traditions, the entire Caucasus and central Asian region is of considerable interest to the major powers bordering upon it and especially to Russia, to which most of the newly independent countries belonged before the 1917 revolution. Many regional conflicts have broken out in these areas and equitable solutions to some of them have not yet been found. The power struggles during the 19th century between Russia and Great Britain are now a thing of the past and the number of other powers taking an interest in this part of the world has considerably increased since the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

3. Without listing them comprehensively, mention might be made of the United States, Turkey, Iran, China, Pakistan and several European Union member countries, including France, Germany and the United Kingdom, while international organisations such as the OSCE, NATO the United Nations, the Council of Europe and the European Union have begun to devote part of their political activity to the countries of central Asia and the Caucasus. Western European Union, which has responsibility for security and defence matters, has so far merely kept a watchful if increasingly interested eye on the situation, but without taking any practical action.

¹ Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kirghizstan and Turkmenistan in central Asia, and Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia in the Caucasus

4. The WEU Council has thus made several statements on the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute in support of the attempts made by the OSCE to arrive at a peaceful settlement of the conflict. In its document *European Security: a joint contribution by the 27 WEU countries*², adopted in November 1995, the WEU Council devoted a special chapter to Europe's world economic interests, which noted, *inter alia*, that:

"Most European countries are largely dependent for their supplies of energy and raw materials on countries whose political and economic stability over the medium term cannot be taken for granted. Gas and oil are conveyed, at least in part, through pipelines crossing countries of uncertain stability. In the event of a major crisis, the disruption of those supplies is a distinct probability and maritime transport routes could be vulnerable. The flow of gas and oil to European markets through reliable pipeline and maritime routes hold great political and strategic significance."

As far as the Caucasus and the countries of central Asia are concerned, the Council stressed that it was in Europe's interest to encourage fruitful cooperation with the countries of the region and to ensure that any conflicts that divided it were settled by peaceful means, according to the principles defined by the United Nations Charter and by the OSCE. The Council furthermore confirmed its support for sovereignty and independence for all CIS member states

5. However WEU has not as yet studied how it might translate the above assessments into a concrete policy on central Asia and the Caucasus and the Political Committee therefore decided to devote an in-depth report to the subject

6. The Political Committee set up a Subcommittee to prepare its report. The Subcommittee visited three countries in the region – Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan – during the first half of October of this year. The discussions that took place between Subcommittee

² Assembly Document 1493, 20 November 1995.

members and many parliamentary and government representatives of the countries concerned yielded a wealth of information, strengthening the conviction of those who took part in the visit that Europe, and WEU in particular, should henceforth devote a great deal more thought to the significance of this part of the world

II. Geographic and historical background to the region

1. Central Asia

7. In geographic terms, Asia can be divided into two regions: one, dominated by China, which includes Mongolia, Tibet and Gansu and Xinjiang provinces; the other, belonging to the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) – in other words the former USSR republics of Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Kirghizstan and Kazakhstan. Between the two blocs lie Mongolia, Afghanistan and the eastern part of Iran known as Khorasan.

8. The territories of central Asia are peculiar in that they are landlocked and essentially either steppe lands, arid desert (Gobi, Takla Makan) or red (Kizil Kum), white (Ak Kum) or black (Kara Kum) sands. Many rivers dissect the region: the Yenisei to the north which flows down from the Altai Mountains, to the north-east the abundant hydrological system that feeds the Amur and Lake Baikal, to the south-east the upper waters of the Huang Ho (Yellow River); to the west the rivers rising in the Tian Shan and the Pamirs feeding the Aral Sea and Lake Balkhash, the Ili, the Chu, the Talas, the Syr Darya, the Zeravshan, the Jhelum, the Amu Darya (2 540 km), the Tarim (2 179 km) flows through Xinjiang.

9. Central Asia is a region essentially dominated by mountains: the Altai, the Tian Shan, the Pamirs and the Hindu Kush. These take the form of massifs, punctuated with plateaux (Mongolia, Dzungaria) or river valleys (Tarim). Travel is difficult via mountain passes at altitudes of over 4 000 metres or corridors caused by land subsidence (for example the fault line that links the Turfan depression to Urumqi).

10. Vegetation is generally very sparse (outside the river valleys). Precipitation varies between 100 mm per year in the Gobi desert and western Gansu, 200 mm in Upper Tibet, the Sistan and the Tarim basin as far as the western

Gansu, in the foothills of Turkmenistan, and 1 500 mm in Lhasa province on the summits of the Hindu Kush.

11. The eastern regions of *Kazakhstan* (total area 2 715 000 km²) include the steppes of Faim (Bek Pak Dala) and mountainous areas as far as the Lake Balkhash basin (340 m) turning into semi-desert towards the coast of the Aral Sea. The low-lying parts of the area (rarely higher than 100 m) are inhabited by nomadic peoples. Kazakhstan's borders total 12 012 km: 1 533 shared with China, 1 051 with Kirghizstan, 6 846 with Russia, 379 with Turkmenistan and 2 203 with Uzbekistan. The country also borders on the Aral (1 015 km) and the Caspian (1 894 km) Seas. It has abundant natural resources: oil, coal, manganese, nickel, cobalt, copper, molybdenum, lead, zinc, bauxite, gold, uranium, iron and chromium. Kazakhstan is a country with severe environmental problems. Radioactive and toxic discharge has been detected the length and breadth of the country, usually on former military sites. Some towns have high levels of industrial pollution. In addition to all this is the problem that the Aral Sea is drying up as a result of its two main feeder rivers being diverted for irrigation purposes.

12. *Uzbekistan* (449 000 km²) is formed of a succession of deserts and fertile valleys traversed by several mountain ranges. To the west, the country is drained by the Amu Darya which once flowed into the Aral Sea. The region is now in the process of becoming desertified following the intensive demand on its water resources. The fertile Zeravshan valley lies to the centre and east and is the site of major settlement. At its eastern end lie the fertile, well-drained foothills of the Termez and Tashkent ranges. The Ferghana valley, a rift valley 300 km long and 100 km wide, supports many flourishing vineyards, orchards and gardens. Uzbekistan's borders with its neighbours total 6 221 km in length: 1 37 shared with Afghanistan, 2 203 with Kazakhstan, 1 099 with Kirghizstan, 1 161 with Tajikistan and 1 621 with Turkmenistan. The country also has significant deposits of the following natural resources: natural gas, oil, gold, uranium, silver, copper, lead, zinc, tungsten and molybdenum. In environmental terms, rising pesticide and natural salt concentrations have led to the drying up and desertification of the Aral Sea. Water pollution due to industrial effluent and heavy use of

fertilisers and pesticides are at the root of a number of health problems and soil salination and contamination by agrochemicals (including DDT).

13 *Turkmenistan* (448 000 km²) is almost exclusively desert or semi-desert (Kara Kum). The only fertile regions are the Kopek Dag foothills and the oases that are the sources of rivers (Tedzhen, Murghab and Amu Darya). The principal consequence of modern irrigation methods has been the drying up of the Aral Sea.

14. *Tajikistan* (143 000 km²) and Kirghizstan (128 000 km²) are pastoral regions with virtually no agriculture other than on the mountain slopes and in the few existing valleys. Tajikistan has little cultivable land above 2 000 metres. Kirghizstan consists of a series of mountain ranges (4 000-7 000 m) dissected by valleys and of the closed basin of the Issyk Kul.

15 *Afghanistan* (650 000 km²) consists of a succession of high parallel chains (5 000-7 000 m) rising to the east of the Pamirs and Karakorum, separated by the high peneplains of the Wakhan (4 000 m). The terrain falls away to the west, with valleys at a lower altitude (2 500 m) and summits at heights below 4 000 m. To the east the descent from the high Kabulistan plateau (1 800 m) overlooking India is through the 50 km or so of the Khyber Pass, which, at its highest point, reaches an altitude of 1 280 m. To the north the low plains of Afghan Turkestan (500-800 m on average) stretch to the Amu Darya linking it with western Russian Turkestan. The region enjoys mild winters and hot summers and consists mainly of steppes covered with scrub. The south-west of the country is drained by the Sistan, whose low-lying arid and stifling basin lies at an altitude of 500 m or less.

16. With the exception of Tajikistan, the changeover to independence was relatively peaceful for the central Asian countries which had been part of the former Soviet Union, owing to the vast distances separating them from the centres of Soviet power. These countries have always enjoyed more freedom in managing their own internal affairs. Russian expansion into the area began in the mid-18th century, at a time when anarchy was rife, with the Russian vanguard providing protection for the Kazakh Khans; however the Russian empire had very little interest in the region. By the end of the

19th century it had effectively conquered the entire area, to ward off possible expansion of the British empire from India and to ensure border stability in the south of the empire. Russia and the central Asian region established considerable economic links but Russia did not interfere very much with local institutions.

17. The region underwent major social change under Soviet domination. Significant progress was made in the fields of public health, education and infrastructure. However, such economic changes were paid for dearly, as was the case in the countries of the Caucasus. For example, collectivisation led to the death of almost two million Kazakhs, in other words nearly 40% of the Kazakh population, between 1930 and 1939.

18. Even more important than promoting economic development, the Soviet regime gave priority to the need to create national identities in the region. At the turn of the last century, the peoples of central Asia identified themselves either as members of local groups or tribes or as members of a particular Muslim community. No group had a sense of national identity: Uzbek, Kazakh or Kirghiz. Fearing the emergence of a strong pan-Turki or Muslim identity which could be used to mobilise the peoples of central Asia against Moscow, the Soviets conducted a policy of divide and rule through the creation of national identities in central Asia. In 1924, Moscow divided central Asia into five republics which, for the first time in the region's history, were ethnically defined. Dialects were chosen and elevated to national languages, each using a different Cyrillic script. A national history was invented for each republic and the new national identity attributed its own historical figure (for example, Tamburlaine in Uzbekistan). These national identities were also strengthened by the creation of specialist national economies.

2. *The Caucasus*

19. The countries of the Caucasus (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia) are locked in by three regional powers, Iran, Russia and Turkey and by two seas, the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea. Because of its strategic location, the region has, throughout history, been a battlefield for the empires of the region (Achaemenid, Greek, Roman, Parthian, Byzantine, Arab, Mongol, Ottoman, Persian, Russian). Despite the fact that down the ages, the peoples of the Caucasus often

found themselves under the sway of powerful empires, these countries have a strong sense of national identity and a history that can be traced back through many centuries. The Georgians and Armenians take great pride in their conversion to Christianity and religious identity.

20. Russian settlement began in the mid-16th century when the region was divided up between the Persian and Ottoman empires. It took Russia three centuries to impose total control over the area. Russia annexed Georgia in 1801 and, after beating off the Ottomans and Persians, seized Azerbaijan in 1813 and took control of Armenia in 1828.

21. The Russian presence was initially welcomed on account of the protection it brought against the Persians and Ottomans. However the Russian occupation retained its repressive character until 1845, when measures were relaxed somewhat. This period saw the birth of successive emancipation movements.

22. During the Russian revolution, Armenia, Georgia and Azerbaijan rejected Bolshevism and agreed to create a republic of the Transcaucasus. The union lasted only five weeks and the three countries gained individual independence. Following brief periods of occupation by the Turks, Germans and British after the first world war, the Red Army took control of the Caucasus in 1921.

23. Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia were administered as a federation by the Soviets until 1936, when they became republics. There was controversy over the process of establishing their borders. The Nakhichevan and Nagorno-Karabakh regions were assigned to Azerbaijan although Nakhichevan is completely surrounded by Armenia and the population of Nagorno-Karabakh is preponderantly Armenian.

24. Nevertheless the creation of these states on the basis of ethnicity strengthened Armenia and Georgia's national identities. As the Azeris had always been close to the Tartars and the Turks, their national identity emerged. During the Soviet occupation, the Armenian, Georgian and Azeri national tongues were given special status and the peoples of those republics were among the best-educated in the USSR. Although it conferred advantages upon them, the USSR destroyed other aspects of community life. In particular it set its face against all the initiatives

taken in the 1920s by the countries of the Caucasus to introduce the Latin alphabet as the official script. As in other regions of the USSR, collectivisation met with armed opposition. The purges there were no less severe in spite of Stalin's Caucasian origins.

25. With the coming of Perestroika in 1986, the countries of the region saw their opportunity to exact further autonomy. Georgia quickly laid claim to sovereign status and Armenia to the Nagorno-Karabakh region. These demands brought an explosion of violence in their wake.

26. The Armenian campaign in Nagorno-Karabakh to unite the enclave with Armenia led to confrontation in 1988, followed by anti-Armenian demonstrations in Azerbaijan. In April 1989, in Tbilisi, Georgian nationalists responded to Abkhazi agitators demanding greater autonomy by staging a demonstration. This initially anti-Abkhazi demonstration soon took on the flavour of an independence rally and was quashed by the Soviet army. The Soviets were also responsible for the violent break-up of a demonstration in Baku in January 1990. These incidents strengthened the country's determination to speed up the independence process. The hand of Moscow was automatically assumed to be at work in any separatist movement in those countries. In all of them nationalist forces assumed power after the failed Moscow coup in 1991. The existing power structures established by the Russians collapsed, leading to instability and internal power struggles.

III. Destabilisation factors and risks in the region

27. Apart from the civil war in Afghanistan, ethnic and religious conflict has either broken out, or is threatening to do so, both in the new republics of central Asia and the Caucasus and even on Russian Federation. Chinese and Iranian soil. Moreover, Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Syria are all affected by the Kurdish problem.

1. Tajikistan and Afghanistan

28. Tajikistan declared independence on 9 September 1991, in 1992 a chaotic and extremely bloody civil war broke out in the country, still torn by rivalries between opposing clans. Despite the presence of some 25 000 Russian

soldiers, who had entered the country by way of Uzbekistan, the death toll rose to approximately 100 000³ while some 600 000 refugees fled the country. In late 1992, the victorious popular front militia had set up a pro-Russian regime in Dushanbe, under Mr Rakhmanov, the country's current President. Like many other opponents of the regime, Mr Nuri, the leader of the Islamist forces had to flee to north Afghanistan, from whence he organised political and military resistance to the Dushanbe regime

29. On 27 June 1997, after approximately five years of civil strife, a peace treaty was signed between President Rakhmanov and the head of the united opposition, Mr Nuri. Russia, concerned by the recent gains made in Afghanistan by the Taliban movement, regarded as an Islamist threat to neighbouring countries, was all the more anxious to achieve a settlement of the conflict. In the opinions of some commentators, Moscow is mainly seeking all-round acceptance by all the country's political forces, and hence consolidation, of a lasting Russian military presence in Tajikistan as a factor for stability⁴. It should be recalled that the Russian troops are there in the guise of a joint CIS peace force and that their mandate does not cover intervention in internal conflict within Tajikistan⁵. The reality, however, is that they served to protect the installation of the neo-communist regime of President Rakhmanov

30. But a settlement was also in Iran's interests, as its people are closely related to the Tajiks. Several Tajik opposition members took refuge in Tehran. However, since 9 August 1997, new military skirmishes have broken out near Dushanbe and the ceasefire is still not entirely secure

31. The problem of finding a peaceful and lasting solution to the conflict in Tajikistan is of particular interest to Uzbekistan and the matter was discussed in some detail during the Subcommittee's visit to Tashkent. Uzbekistan is concerned, *inter alia*, about being marginalised as a result of the development of a Moscow-

Tehran axis, which in its view is already producing effects in Tajikistan and Afghanistan.

32. Thus the Uzbek Deputy Foreign Minister, in his talks with the Subcommittee on 9 October last, stressed the very close "cohabitation" between Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. According to him, some 600 000 Tajiks live in Uzbekistan and a large number of Uzbeks have made their home in Tajikistan. In some border districts, villages have mixed populations. Uzbekistan, which expressed a wish to be involved in a peaceful settlement of the conflict in Tajikistan (and in Afghanistan), especially as regards the rights of refugees to return to their home country, did not take kindly to the fact that such settlement was achieved without its involvement.

33. He takes the view that any peaceful solution should involve all the parties to the conflict and that Uzbekistan could take a leading role in bringing stability to the region. According to the thesis of a specialist in the French Foreign Ministry⁶, the peace agreement in Tajikistan between the (supposedly pro-Iranian) Gharmis and (pro-Russian) Kulakis, which excludes the Lenibadis tribe (close to Tashkent), has lent credence in Tashkent to the idea that Moscow and Tehran are seeking to engineer the formation of a Greater Tajikistan

34. As far as recent developments in the seven-year old civil war in Afghanistan are concerned, Uzbekistan is not the only country on its borders to fear the consequences for developments in Tajikistan and its own security of a Taliban victory. However, of particularly serious concern is the fact that none of the belligerents seem prepared to sit down at the negotiating table. The Tajik commander, Shah Massoud, appears to be the only warlord of any importance to continue to offer any resistance to the Taliban offensive, despite the recent return of the ethnic Uzbek leader, General Abdul Rashid Dostom, former warlord of northern Afghanistan. There is no disagreement in principle between Russia and Uzbekistan over the danger represented by the Taliban forces' progress towards Tajikistan's borders. However Uzbeks do not approve of

³ Estimates published in the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 27 June 1997

⁴ *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 27 June 1997.

⁵ *Le Monde*, 13 August 1997

⁶ Olivier Roy *Uzbekistan's foreign policy put to the test: between Moscow and the Taliban* in the *Bulletin du Centre d'analyse et de prévision*, No 69, Spring-Summer, 1997.

Massoud's forces being stationed in Tajikistan with Russian agreement, as they feel this could lead to ethnic conflict within Tajikistan with a ricochet effect that might draw in Tashkent.

35. During talks held with members of the Political Committee Subcommittee, Mr Ismailov, Uzbekistan's State Secretary for Foreign Affairs, reiterated the country's official position with regard to settlement of the Afghan conflict. This was as follows:

first, maintenance of Afghanistan's territorial integrity;

second, rejection of military means as a way of settling the conflict;

third, cessation of all interference in the country's domestic affairs,

fourth, a strict embargo should be imposed on arms supplies to the area of conflict;

fifth, participation of all the main forces involved in the conflict in a step-by-step peace process, with a view to forming a coalition government on the basis of wide representation;

sixth, the establishment under UN auspices of a process of peaceful discussion in which the Islamic Conference would also participate;

the formation for this purpose of a contact group made up of representatives of countries with a common border with Afghanistan, the United States, Russia and representatives of opposing forces within Afghanistan.

According to the Minister, the United States and Pakistan should cease supporting the Taliban and the Russians should withdraw their support for General Massoud. However it is not easy at present to see what incentives might bring the belligerents and external powers involved in the conflict to the negotiating table

2. The Chinese province of Xinjiang

36. The Chinese province of Xinjiang has a major problem with its non-Chinese minorities (Kazakhs, Uygurs and Kirghiz). The autonomous region of Xinjiang Uygur, formerly known as Chinese Turkestan, with an area of 530 000 km², is the sixth largest of the People's

Republic of China, but with a population of only 15 million or so, 60% of whom are Muslim. It is situated in the immediate vicinity of Kazakhstan.

37. In the early 1980s, China's policies towards Xinjiang Uygur were moderate; it released its grip on the Muslim majority, mosques were reopened and Muslim worship was tolerated despite the overtly anti-religious stance of the local government. However, disturbances recurred in the late 1980s with a series of incidents leading to a number of deaths. The Chinese authorities were swift to act to repress this form of "local nationalism".

38. According to press reports⁷, Beijing appears to have leaned even more heavily on the Uygur separatists in Xinjiang province belonging to the Turkish-speaking and Muslim community there. The same sources refer to the presence of several pro-Uygur independence organisations in Alma-Ata in Kazakhstan, including the United National Revolutionary Front (UNRF) which advocated armed struggle against China for Uygur independence. However during the course of the Subcommittee's visit to Alma-Ata in October 1997, none of its Kazakh contacts mentioned the existence of any serious difficulties between China and Kazakhstan arising out of Muslim separatist tendencies in Xinjiang province. On the contrary, they highlighted progress in stable relations between Kazakhstan and China and their desire for increased economic cooperation between the two countries.

3. The conflicts in the Caucasus and Nagorno-Karabakh

39. Nagorno-Karabakh, principally inhabited by Armenians, became part of Azerbaijan in the 1920s as a result of a decision taken by Stalin. The conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh began in February 1988 when the Armenian community of Nagorno-Karabakh demonstrated in favour of being absorbed into Armenia. Azeri refugees in Sumgait then unleashed a pogrom against the Armenians. The conflict worsened following the break-up of the Soviet Union. Outright hostilities began on 8 May 1992 with a lightning attack by Armenians against Nagorno-Karabakh, which they pro-

⁷ *Le Monde*, 28 August 1997