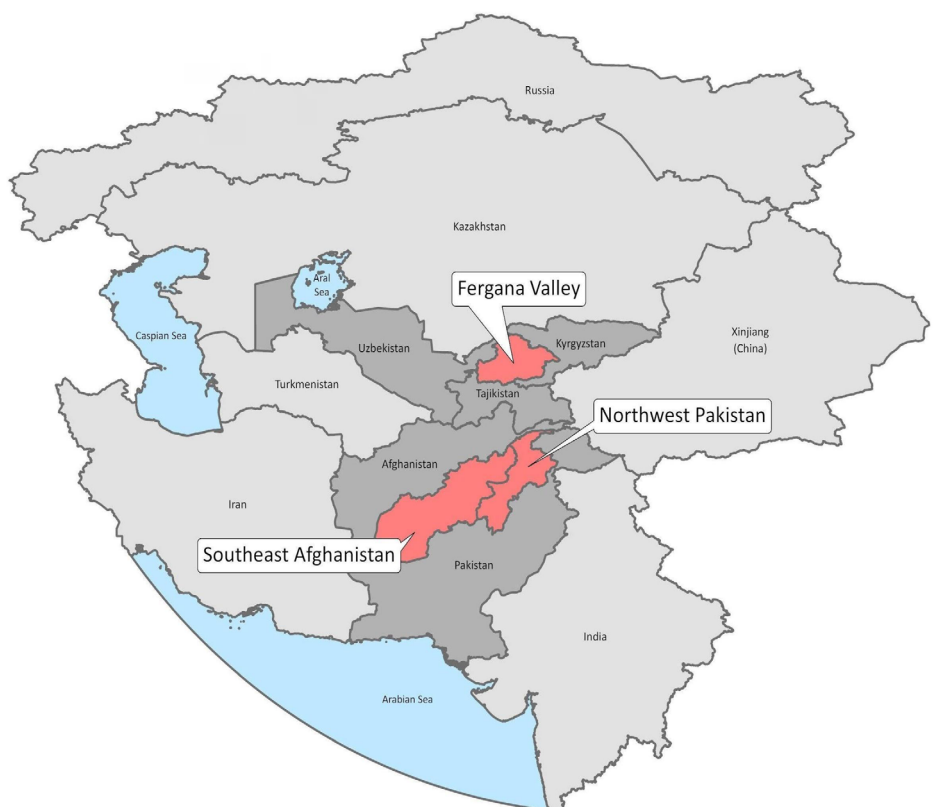




CENTRAL & SOUTH ASIA 2019–2028

STRATEGY

Search for Common Ground (Search)'s strategy for "Central and South Asia," focuses on the dynamics within and around five countries—**Afghanistan, Pakistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan**. This conflict geography is made up of three interlocking conflict systems: Afghanistan's recurring and ongoing war; social and political divisions in Pakistan, particularly in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) on Afghanistan's border; and the conflicts of the Ferghana Valley and beyond in Central Asia. As part of Search's organization-wide strategy, this region was identified as one of eleven transnational *conflict geographies* in which Search will focus its efforts over the coming ten years.



KEY DRIVERS OF CONFLICT

A plethora of dynamics fuel violence in these states, deepening divides and driving loss of life. Six key factors emerge that, if addressed, have the potential to reduce violent conflict and improve peace and stability, within and across borders:

- The attempts to create a full peace process in Afghanistan depend on the inclusion of key influencers in Afghan society beyond the political elite.
- A lack of regional integration in Central Asia leaves the region, especially border areas of the Ferghana valley and between Afghanistan and the Central Asian Republics, vulnerable to violent extremism and economic and political shocks, especially in Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan.
- **The reforms in Uzbekistan are a central building block to economic growth, promoting regional integration**, and creating legitimate pathways to address grievances for various sub-sectors of society.
- The marginalization and persecution of ethnic and religious minorities is systematic in nature, manifesting very differently from place to place, but driving conflict everywhere.
- The role of women is central debate points in the array of ideological struggles and clashes that dominate political life - from family to national politics.
- Governance and public structures are ill equipped to handle the stressors created by all types of migration - thereby creating this as a conflict fueler.

This strategy was developed through a broad consultative exercise in which Search staff engaged with a wide range of actors, analyzed the conflict dynamics and identified the geographic focus and strategic pillars of change.

Conflict in this geography has largely emerged from **strategic competition among the world's powers who all have deeply vested strategic interests in the region**. Russia, China, India, Pakistan, Iran, and the United States and its NATO allies are all deeply engaged in the affairs of Afghanistan and the Central Asian Republics. The forces at play are tremendous, the resources invested are prodigious, and the stakes are high.

With its large size and high levels of instability it's easy to see this region as made up of a multitude of completely independent conflicts. However, the **three defined epicenters are inextricably connected**, and have been for centuries. At the heart of the conflict system, and the primary epicenter, is the **ongoing war in Afghanistan** where 20 armed groups are operating. The Taliban is the largest, controlling 59 districts and large tracts of rural areas of the country. The recent growth of ISIS in Khorasan (ISIS-KP) demonstrates that Afghanistan is still targeted by extremists as a territorial host for groups with global ambitions. To the south and east, Pakistan is the largest country of the geography; it is hugely diverse, a patchwork of ethnic and religious groups. While on the surface, Pakistan is democratic, having experienced a relatively peaceful transfer of power in 2018, the government is still dominated by the military, and ethnic and religious minorities experience acute marginalization and persecution. **Pakistan faces its own insurgencies** including the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), ISIS-KP, and a number of movements in Balochistan. The five former Soviet Republics of Central Asia lie to the north of Afghanistan; historically, this was an integrated geography with deeply entwined history, identity and economic activity. **Tensions in the Ferghana Valley** - which is divided across Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan - and the **Uzbek reform efforts** are dominating dynamics shaping the whole region.

Afghanistan has enormous potential as an economic corridor - a land bridge to the sea which connects Central Asia, and China to the rest of the world. But this depends on Central Asian integration; **peace and prosperity in the region are interdependent**. There are opportunities for diplomatic, social, and economic cooperation to promote stability and increase agency in the face of the superpowers that sandwich the geography. **The economic and political reforms in Uzbekistan, the peace process in Afghanistan, and the political changes in Pakistan create openings for increased collaboration as well as political and security cooperation.**

KEY DRIVERS AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR PEACE

Despite the high levels of violence, the cycle of war, and the seemingly omni-presence of authoritarianism, there are many reasons to have hope about the trajectory of this conflict geography. There seems to be an **opening to catalyze a peace process in Afghanistan** brought about by war fatigue and a shift in the US posture towards the Taliban. Kyrgyzstan has enjoyed a peaceful transfer of power. **Uzbekistan's reform efforts** are creating civic space and the potential for increased regional cooperation. There is unprecedented **investment in infrastructure development** which carries the promise of connecting the region to global trade routes through the Belt and Road Initiative. Most importantly **people everywhere across the region are clamoring for involvement in the changes that are happening around them**. Collectively these factors support four central factors for peace shaping Search's approach:

- **There is an unprecedented momentum to end the war in Afghanistan.** Afghanistan is living a precarious moment, intermittently frustrated by the opaque and exclusionary nature of the ongoing peace talks and hopeful that maybe this is their moment to bring 40 years of war to an end. With overwhelming war fatigue, a broad-based consensus seems to be emerging among the population in support of a peace process.
- **Despite living in authoritarian or conflict dominated environments, the expectations of participation have become an increasing norm in the public.** Across the region, civil society and community activists are seeking channels for participation in the broad political events and decision-making processes which are unfolding. There is space for influence, to develop an 'expand the tent' model of inclusion.
- **A generation of young leaders in the region is organizing in creative ways to assert its voice and is in need of support.** From Kyrgyzstan to Pakistan, there are youth-led organizations which have emerged and are driving public dialogue on the most pressing and challenging issues of the day. There is immense potential to engage youth leaders across the region in all aspects of this strategy.
- **Women are organizing and driving people-to-people engagement at a regional level.** Some of the most dynamic work to develop people-to-people relationships between Afghanistan and other parts of this conflict geography is being pioneered by women in civil society. This lays the foundation for business and government cooperation across the region.

SEARCH'S APPROACH AND OBJECTIVES

Search's overall mandate is to unleash the agency of people, amidst large proxy conflicts, to become powerful forces for peace. We work with the people in state and non-state institutions as well as the public to build relationships across dividing lines and to reinforce the social fabric of their societies so that they are not so easily exploited and, in turn, become forces for peace. While, especially in the midst of a peace process in Afghanistan, massive institutional and state-building efforts will be underway, an investment in the people within these high level processes is clearly missing. In order to establish buy-in into these structural changes and include the voices of those traditionally sidelined, we need work that focuses on the power and influence of a diverse cross section of society.

There are significant opportunities for Search in this geography. We have had some engagement in each of the five countries targeted and the region has a wide range of willing partners in civil society, government, and the private sector who will enable Search to create enduring changes with institutional buy-in. A vibrant youth sector in all countries will ensure that engagement with young people in each of the strategic pillars is a substantial part of our approach. The ensuing strategy focuses on **six key objectives which are part of the conflict system and which Search has the potential to influence**:

1.

To create broad-based, top-to-bottom buy in to the peace process in Afghanistan: The success of any dialogue in Afghanistan, which aims to end 40 years of war, depends not only on the key actors in the conflict but on the broad involvement of stakeholders at different levels and an informed and engaged public which believes that peace is possible and that citizens have a role to play. Therefore, the strategy focuses on fostering *vertical integration* into all aspects of a peace process which emerges, particularly ensuring youth participation and public engagement.

Theory of Change	Programmatic Approach
<p>IF the Afghan public actively pressure the array of stakeholders to find a negotiated solution to the conflict AND there is broad engagement in public dialogue and discourse - bottom up and top down - about the societal changes needed, THEN this builds demand for a peace process AND all actors are more likely to create a formal peace process AND the public is more likely to accept the changes that would emerge.</p> <p>IF key stakeholders at every level of society - in particular youth and women - have channels to contribute to a formal political dialogue aimed at ending the war, THEN a) there is a higher chance that a formal peace process will occur because there will be political pressure from many constituencies to make it happen; b) an ultimate agreement is more likely to address the complex local realities and genuine root causes of the conflict because expertise from diverse perspectives will be leveraged; and c) it is more likely to be implemented effectively because many people will have buy-in and know their role in the process.</p>	<p>As events unfold in this arena, we will elaborate and approach which is in line with the context, consistently focusing on public engagement, localization of peacebuilding in relation to a national process, and inclusion of key stakeholder voices into formal negotiations. Some potential areas of the approach will likely include:</p> <p>Develop an Afghan concept of inclusion (expand the tent model). Working with the many actors who are clamoring for a role in the formal peace process, Search will seek to develop a concept of inclusion that is about broadening the types of inclusion and engagement.</p> <p>Implement UNSCR 2250. Organize explicitly to promote youth involvement in the formal and informal aspects of the peace process at every level.</p> <p>Equip key leaders and institutions which are responsible for the peace process to practically craft an inclusive process. Recognizing that inclusion is a skill, leaders need both the will and skills to bring people into the peace process in a meaningful way.</p> <p>Develop channels for public information and engagement. Use media to both inform the public about the unfolding nature of the peace process and to create broad-based public dialogue on the key issues that are at play.</p> <p>Localize peace process and peacebuilding. Build capacities and processes to address local disputes and power struggles, particularly those which have influence locally.</p>

2.

To facilitate regional integration among Central Asian Republics + Afghanistan: The division among the Central Asian republics since independence has been fueling conflict in this geography. Integration - focused on improving trade, normalizing relations, and creating regional instruments for economic, political, and security cooperation - needs to occur at the country-to-country and local level simultaneously. Amplifying and highlighting what unites youth across Central Asia and celebrating the region's long-standing history of diversity and coexistence can also challenge the current ethnically-based dividing lines. The integration of relationships between the Central Asian countries and Afghanistan is an additional dimension, as Afghanistan seeks to fulfill its long-term economic promise and develop security within its territory, it needs viable and highly-functioning partners to its north. The regional relationships will be critical. Search aims to contribute to this change through a combination of top-level track II work and community-based programming - including fostering economic ties - focusing on borderlands.

Theory of Change	Programmatic Approach
<p>IF the countries of Central Asia - particularly those sharing a border in the Ferghana Valley - are able to advance integration through social cohesion and economic cooperation, THEN, they will reduce the scale of fissures (ethnic and religious divides) which are exploited by external forces, therefore creating benefits for a cross-section of the population in borderlands. This would generate economic growth, enabling the maximization of the use of natural resources, strengthening security, and reducing poverty.</p> <p>IF Central Asia integrates so that there are established mechanisms of collaboration among citizens and government agencies to address issues of common concern and resolve conflict AND there are strengthened relationships between Afghanistan and Central Asian governments, THEN, the countries in the region will more effectively address long-term drivers of conflict AND Afghanistan will have stable economic and political partners to its North, enabling them to pursue a critical role in economic growth and security in the region with a modicum of independence.</p>	<p>Foster cross-border and borderlands people-to-people relationships. We will build linkages among people in the Ferghana Valley in the three countries and in the ethnic enclaves as well as between Afghanistan and its northern neighbors. This will include youth-to-youth relationship building, micro-trade, water management, and other sorts of similar activities among key local actors.</p> <p>Foster state-to-state and leadership relationships. We will bring together key influencers, members of government, and others through a Track II approach to address issues of common concern. We will build on the successful “Working Group” model to convene influencers on security cooperation, religion, natural resources management, migration, drug trafficking, and other such issues.</p> <p>Strengthen the regional identity through communications among youth. Specifically using traditional media and through social media campaigns, work in this area would involve fostering dialogue among young leaders, both at local levels in the Ferghana Valley and through celebrities and other key cultural influencers.</p>

3. To amplify the power of people to shape Uzbekistan’s ongoing reform efforts: There is a clear need to put people at the center of the ongoing reform efforts in Uzbekistan. Alongside the legal and institutional changes that are taking place, the way in which national and societal leaders and the broader public engage in governance needs reform as well. Search will work to create public dialogue on the unfolding political changes and develop channels for engagement in reform efforts. This will be a dual social norm and institutional norm transformation effort, as there is a limited tradition of civic participation and a very weak civil society, especially beyond Tashkent. Efforts will engage both government officials and civic leaders, particularly women, journalists, youth activists, and academics who are seeking to carve out a clear role in this new environment. Search will contribute to growing civic space and strengthening civil society organizations’ role. Ultimately, their efforts will contribute to the creation of a new civic identity, which catalyzes social cohesion, is constructive, and leads to collaboration across dividing lines.

Theory of Change	Programmatic Approach
<p>IF reforms in Uzbekistan bring economic and social benefits AND extend to the way in which the country engages its neighbors, THEN Uzbekistan will be a model for the rest of the region AND can catalyze processes to resolve the long-standing regional disputes and can lead regional integration efforts.</p> <p>IF there is engagement from a cross-section of people in the reform process, including amplifying the voices of those who have been repressed or traditionally marginalized AND constructive mechanisms are created for people to channel their grievances, THEN the reforms in Uzbekistan will have maximum benefit across the society and to take hold and have enduring effects AND the threat of violent extremism - and the resulting destabilizing effects - will dissipate.</p>	<p>The work will be multi-pronged, building on our approaches to inclusive governance and working with both government and civil actors to build collaborative relationships which shape reforms. Some elements include:</p> <p>Strengthening of the women’s movement as a path to strengthening civic engagement. The women’s movement is already widespread in Uzbekistan, with the state organized women’s committees reaching to the village level. Search will engage with this movement to expand the base of civic mindedness among young women in particular.</p> <p>Support to emerging civil society with an emphasis on youth-led formal and informal organizations. Being a post-Soviet country, Uzbekistan has a tradition of youth leadership development and activism, and youth play a particular role in preventing criminal violence and violent extremism.</p> <p>Strengthen the will and capacities of those in leadership to engage with civic actors. Search will work closely with those in power, from the Mahalla (traditional local governance body in Uzbekistan) to the national level, to enable them to engage with new voices, make them feel listened to, and address their core concerns.</p> <p>Develop channels of cooperation and engagement between government and non-government actors. This will create norms of such collaboration and demonstrate the benefits that collaboration can bring to complex reform efforts.</p>

4.

Advance inclusive governance which facilitates participation of traditionally marginalized minority groups in local power-sharing and decision making: This is a broad-based objective which is applicable across the geography, but will manifest differently from place to place. It is essentially a governance objective that is built on the foundation of inclusion of marginalized and minority groups and social cohesion. It is focused on both building horizontal as well as vertical cohesion, specifically focused on those segments of the population which face systemic and pervasive marginalization and persecution. Through social cohesion and governance models, Search will forge relationships which enable local actors to break social and structural barriers to inclusions.

Theory of Change	Programmatic Approach
<p>IF social norms on inter-group relationships/collaboration emerge AND legal/structural drivers of marginalization are removed ensuring inclusive governance, then members of those groups are likely to engage in constructive political or governance actions, channeling grievances positively and addressing problems of shared concern. This reduces the power of insurgency groups - particularly the Taliban and ISIS-KP - to recruit from among these groups.</p>	<p>We are taking an inclusive governance and social cohesion approach to tackling marginalization, focused on building relationships across ethnic and religious dividing lines, building vertical cohesion, and building diverse coalitions of people to address structural causes. This will occur at three levels:</p> <p>Transforming attitudes and perceptions. We will work with mainstream media to debunk stereotypes, to ensure that members of minority groups are portrayed in multi-dimensional ways and have their voices relayed regularly, and to promote the weaving of relationships.</p> <p>Weaving of relationships across dividing lines. We will work with community-based organizations, especially youth-led formal and non-formal organizations, to facilitate inter-ethnic and inter-religious relationships focused on dialogue and collaborative action.</p> <p>Addressing core legal and structural causes of persecution and marginalization. While very sensitive, there are many legal and structural changes which could transform the situation faced by minorities. From addressing the role of religion in Uzbekistan to the relationship with the police in Kyrgyzstan, we would apply our working group dialogue model to bring together coalitions of people who have divergent interests to first address the less contentious issues and later, the more contentious challenges.</p>

5.

To catalyze inclusive public dialogue to bridge the stark ideological divide around gender roles: There are stark ideological and demographic divisions on this issue which are at the heart of the political divide, and there is no prospect for long-term peace without addressing social norms around the roles of women and men. To address this Search will focus on catalyzing discussions on masculinity and heroism in popular culture, and facilitating inclusive public discussion on the role of women in the family and public life, focused on bridging urban/rural and generational divides.

Theory of Change	Programmatic Approach
<p>IF men and women from across rural/urban and generational lines can catalyze a constructive dialogue about gender roles AND there is a shift in the traditional notions of heroism to include positive masculinity in popular culture, THEN the role of women in public life could transform from an ideological flashpoint to an inclusive debate representative of the communities' diverse beliefs.</p>	<p>The approach to this strategic objective is shaped by Search's impartiality. It will bring about dialogue on the core ideological question shaping politics in the conflict, enabling a set of people from within ideologically driven institutions and popular culture to create a public dialogue process. This will be achieved through:</p> <p>Engaging influencers, including religious leaders in a closed dialogue. Dialogue processes will be aimed at developing a constructive framing of the issue. This would be distinct in each part of the geography.</p> <p>Experiential processes for change: from the family to the political arena. Programming will create experiences for key influencers and the broader public which challenge their traditional notions of gender norms and enable them to see 'other' perspectives. This would be both through micro-level and macro level work.</p> <p>Popular culture and public discourse for transformation of social norms. Working with key influencers, we will aim to transform expectations of behavioral norms to reflect the common ground emerging from the micro-level dialogues.</p>

6.

Transform migration from a source of instability and division into a force for peace and social cohesion: The historical and present movement of people and ideas which inextricably ties this region together and have been pivotal in forging the ideologies and relationships that define the geography. It is also one of the biggest sources of instability and division in the region. Work under this objective will be focused on transforming migration into a force for peace instead of a major stressor on the region's social fabric. Search will not only build resilience against the negative effects of migration but will seek to harness the power of population movements to create strong and enduring connections across dividing lines.

Theory of Change	Programmatic Approach
<p>The theory of change for this objective is underpinned by the idea that population movements and increasingly diverse populaces are not inherently negative and have the potential to be forces for peace, if managed effectively:</p> <p>IF communities are more resilient to the negative effects of migration AND if leaders are better equipped to address migration challenges THEN the movement of people builds bridges across dividing lines.</p>	<p>Identifying the leaders with the power to change on the ground realities. As part of the strategy's overarching people-to-people approach, Search recognizes that influential leaders take many forms. An important entry point for this objective is mapping out those leaders - religious, tribal, government - that have the power and cache to change the conditions that precipitate destabilizing migration.</p> <p>Focusing on shoring up community resilience to population changes. Understanding that population movements are a fact of life, Search aims to build the resilience of communities to any negative effects caused. This will be especially important in areas where violent extremist recruitment is common and young people are vulnerable to these groups' messaging.</p> <p>Working across sectors for maximal impact. Recognizing that Search is part of a large ecosystem in this geography, we will work closely with partners in the humanitarian and development sectors to improve outcomes for refugee and host populations.</p>

Our value added to this conflict geography can be explained through a combination of three elements: Search's existing and future **positioning**, the **programmatic approach** that we bring to bear, and our organizational **expertise** and capacity.

- **Positioning.** Search is most powerfully positioned in Central Asia to engage both top-level and community actors in peacebuilding. We have a full team in Kyrgyzstan and can leverage relationships from the highest levels of government to communities. We have a network of implementing partners, who are able to access most communities which would be targeted through this strategy, and subject matter experts who work with us on a regular basis. We have demonstrated an ability to engage and work with Russia and have the potential to build relationships with China. Most importantly, we have earned a reputation as a convening force, able to bring together people from different sides of conflict in an impartial manner to address sensitive issues in a solution-oriented manner. In Pakistan, we have a small network of partners with whom we have worked, and in Afghanistan, we can leverage our new relationships and emerging reputation as an organization with expertise in vertical integration in peace processes.
- **Programmatic Approach.** Our people-centered approach, focused on building social cohesion in combination with a *top-down* and *bottom-up* work is unique. Most efforts in the region have focused on statebuilding or institution building as their fundamental interventions. The cornerstone of our work will be transforming people at all levels (including those in government institutions which are critical to regional cooperation) and ensuring the involvement of a cross section of people in decision-making processes. By combining this work with efforts to engage in long-term social norms transformation, we can leverage our capacities to push the whole peacebuilding sector forward. In addition, we take a long-term *partnership approach*, aimed at rallying support around the strategic objectives we have articulated and building coalitions of unusual partners which transcend funding relationships.
- **Expertise.** Search brings together several areas of expertise in a way which is unique; our experience and learning in supporting peace processes - from Myanmar, Nepal, Sierra Leone, Burundi, and elsewhere - will enable us to effectively implement programming to include citizens in the major political processes which are underway. Together with capacities to facilitate multi-stakeholder dialogue (at all levels), cause scaled attitudinal shifts through media, and in *youth and peacebuilding*, Search will be uniquely capable to cause the changes articulated in this strategy.

However, our own organizational value added is wrapped up in that of the peacebuilding sector in its entirety. With this strategy, Search hopes to develop and strengthen the value added of the entire sector, so that peacebuilding has a meaningful and impactful role to play in the unfolding future of the region.

CONTACT

Regional Director - Asia:

Rajendra Mulmi, rmulmi@sfcg.org

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