

**Reconciling Ethnic Interests:
Key to Central Asian Peace and Prosperity**

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Abstract

The National Delimitation plan of 1924-25 did not, in truth, solve the national and ethnic problems of Central Asia despite tall claims made by the Soviet State of the day. The artificial division of territories along ethno-linguistic lines was far from being perfect. Hundreds of thousands of people of one ethnicity were left outside the territory of their group. This article is an attempt to discuss three ethnic clashes that took a heavy toll of life and property occurred between 1989 and 2010 that is just on the eve of implosion of Soviet Union until present times. These are the Ferghana clashes in 1989 in which Meshketian and Turks, brought from other places and settled in Ferghana, were subjected to rapacity by ethnic Uzbeks. The second instance is of Tajikistan happening in 1990 soon after the republic declared its independence from the Soviet Union. The third and more recent instance of widespread ethnic clashes is of Kyrgyzstan that took place in April 2010. The sizeable population of Uzbeks in Osh and Jalalabad in Kyrgyzstan clashed with ethnic Kyrgyz.

The article concludes that unless Central Asia becomes strong in its economy and industry the chances of ethnic clashes remain.

Key words: Farghana, Tajikistan, Uzbeks, Kyrgyz, Central Asia

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Introduction

The history of peoples of Central Asia, as ethnic group, nations, and citizens is similar to other colonial experiences, but still unique as a result of the "Soviet experiment." (Lance, 1996-97, 83) Before the implosion of the Soviet Union, the question of ethnicity was gaining importance in Soviet Central Asia as in some other parts of the globe. The claim of the erstwhile Soviet Union that through Socialist ideology and economy, the question of nationalities had been solved to a large extent was found untenable while keeping in mind the ethnic tensions which marked the pre-demise period of the Soviet power. Naturally, some new and really viable methods shall have to be devised to forge lasting reconciliation between the antagonistic nationalities failing which disaster and destruction would be threatening them seriously. The events in Farghana, Dushanbe and more recently in Kyrgyzstan are testimony to our perception. Closer investigation into three instances of ethnic conflict in more recent times could give us an insight into the nature of the conflict and its various dimensions and aspects. This will help build up a theoretical study of ethnic conflicts in the vast region of Central Asia.

One thing is clear. The Soviet system, whatever it was, could not help remove the causes of ethnic conflict in the region. All that it did was to put the matter under carpet and through the use of state power maintain uneasy calm.

The purpose of this article is to understand why ethnic tensions perpetuated despite so called economic uniformity under the Soviet system. Economic disparities need to be removed and irritants identified. The study would also take into account the ultimate course of mutual dialogue as the instrument best suited to resolve conflicts.

With this purpose before us let us make a concise study of the three recent conflicts in Central Asian region.

Artificial divisions

The essential question is what is the nature or the cause of prolonged

ethnic tension in the Central Asian Republics? Commentators and historians have tried to find a convincing answer to this question.

Contemporary Central Asian republics, as political entities with defined boundaries and organizational structures were created by the Soviets during the 1924-25 under "national delimitation" plan that divided Central Asia into several new ethno-linguistic units. But the national delimitation plan has been the most contentious issues in contemporary Central Asian history. (Firdous, 2009) *"A major criteria for the viability of the state structures as they exist today, is the sanctity of clearly delineated territory, it is here that today we find in Central Asia numerous claims and counter claim, a clear pointer to the fact that the lines on the map of the region, may not, in fact be unproblematic."* (Gupta, 1997)

The delimitation¹ resulted in such a situation where significant numbers of people belonging to different nationalities found themselves living beyond the boundaries of their titular state. For example, 433,000 Uzbeks found themselves beyond the boundaries of Uzbekistan. Of them there are 120,000 on the territory of present day Kyrgyzstan; 98,000 in Tajikistan; 78,000 in Kazakhstan; 73,000 in Karakal Pakistan; 64,000 in Turkmenistan. Uzbekistan included about 82 per cent of all Uzbeks residing at that moment in the former USSR, and Tajikistan included 75.2 per cent of all Tajiks. (Revolutionary Vostok, 1936, 116-125)

Even as late as the days of Gorbachev during 1980's it was officially acknowledged that the delimitation had left behind many

1. The delimitation was an administrative decision imposed on the region from the centre, some would say, of a "divide and rule policy" National-and-territorial delimitation in the 1920s-30s and the ensuing years of the Soviet power had left a number of territorial problems in interrelationships between Central Asian countries unsolved, and they became the reason for conflicts. Thus, the Ferghana valley, distributed among the Kirghiz, Uzbek and Tajik republics. The borders drawn between these newly formed republics were intended to be divisive rather than representative of national composition. (Lance, 1996-97, 85)

seething problems which could not be overcome even with great severity with which delimitation was enforced. (Sabol, 1995)

But the problems exacerbated soon after the implosion of the erstwhile Soviet Union in 1991. The reason was partly the iron fist of Soviet power had vanished and secondly, euphoria of jingoism and narrow nationalism gripped the population. The local leadership fumbled for national symbols and national cultural icons in order to arouse narrow national feelings among the people. At the same time pent up sentiments for last six decades found unleashing. The results of this type of frictions were nothing short of disaster. (Clem, July 1982)

One would like to concentrate on the three incidents of inter ethnic tension in Central Asia in which two took part only months before the collapse of Soviet Union and the one very recently. These are of Ferghana (Uzbekistan) in 1989 and Dushanbe (Tajikistan) in February 1990 and now Osh (Kyrgyzstan) 2010.

Farghana Crises in 1989

The daily review quoted, Lt. Gen. A. V. Anikiyev, Head of the political Directorate of Soviet Interior Ministry saying as this, *"Horrible torture of old folks and children, downgrading treatment of women, sadistic killing of innocent people of Turkish, Uzbek and other nationalities... such things happened."* (The Daily Review, 1989) This was about Fergana program in early June 1989. Forty years ago, thousands of Meshketian Turks had been deported to Farghana¹ which had resulted in demographic disproportion. The natives and the deported population were at the loggerheads all these years, obviously for economic and social reasons. (Radio Free liberty

1. Farghana is not really a valley, more a large fertile basin, 300km (185 miles) long, by 70km (45 miles) wide. It is surrounded on three sides by high snow capped mountains: the Heavenly Mountains (Tian Shan) to the north and east, and the Pamirs to the south. The Ferghana is lush, its climate warm, its fields of rice and potatoes well watered by the snow melting from the mountains above. After the Soviet carve-up, most of the Ferghana ended up in Uzbekistan.

Europe, 1989) On June 1-2, 1989, the Meshketian ethnic groups were subjected to brutalities and vandalism which only exposed how skin deep Soviet treatment of Nationality issue was. By June, no fewer than 71 people had been killed. Among the 100 citizens hospitalized, 88 were Uzbek, and 12 Meshketian Turks.

According to a subsequent report published in *Pravda* of June 15, 1989, 1500 people had received gun shots and knife wounds, many died in homes and hospitals and many homes and hospitals, buildings and vehicles were burnt (*Pravda*, June 15, 1989) In a sense this carnage bore some similarities with the one that had happened in Alma Ata previously. Both incidents occurred territorially not far from each other. In character and content both were ethnic riots, both sides claiming to uphold their respective identity, the Kazakhs in Kazakhstan and Uzbeks in Uzbekistan. In both the cases the adversary was non- ethnic viz. in Kazakhstan it was the Russian and in Uzbekistan it was the Meshketian Turk. In other words the natives were pitted against Meshketian Turk. In other words the natives were pitted against the non-native. Secondly, the first to act were the indigenous natives both in Ferghana and in Alma Ata. Again the reaction of the local government to the management of the crises was somewhat identical, viz. go slow, cautious and compromising.

But Ferghana pogroms bore some similarities with the Alma Ata (Now Almaty) ethnic clashes. In Ferghana, turmoil spread to a wider area such as Tashkent, Kokand and Yaipin. Gangs of criminals armed themselves and indulged in looting and arson and what is very interesting in that former internal security activists compromised with the gangsters who shouted extremist slogans like "*we shall stifle Turks, we should stifle Lenin's bastards-the Russians. Long live Islamic banner...*" (*Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 1989) These slogans show a blend of nationalism and religion. The upsurge for nationalism was followed by distribution of money among the activists. Lt. Gen. Pankin of Soviet Interior Ministry admitted that he had information

about 50 to 100 Roubles being given to people participating in extremist demonstration. (Pravda, 24-26 July 1989)

Of 80000 ethnic Turks in Central Asia, more than 5000 lived in Farghana region in 1989. At the root of these clashes lay the socio-economic reasons. Ferghana youth had been demanding rise in cotton price and safeguard against ecological imbalance owing to chemical industries. There was widespread unemployment, and the Meshketian Turks, by dint of their hard labor, could find entry into administrative cadres. No sincere attempt has been made to solve these problems and many more. Return of Meshketian to their homeland wherefrom they were driven away way back in 1944 was a question towards which the Soviet Union never paid its attention.

Tajik Crises in 1990

In February 1990, bloody riots shook Dushanbe, the capital of Tajikistan. A variety of causes were ascribed to the eruption of these clashes. (i) Housing accommodation being very acute in Dushanbe, the rumor spread that preferential allotment of houses would be enforced for fresh arrivals from Ferghana and Caucasus disaster. People picked up this point as a rallying point against the government. (ii) The Ferghana sufferers coming to Dushanbe to seek shelter revived the memories of Uzbek–Tajik animosity. (iii) Continued inclusion of Tajik speaking regions of Samarkand and Bokhara in Uzbekistan the most important dividing between Iranian Tajiks and Turkic Uzbeks. Displaced Uzbeks from Ferghana was a quick reminder of that acrimonious phase. (iv) For years the Tajiks were beset with the chronic malady of unemployment or underemployment. In Dushanbe alone, some 70,000 people were jobless. (FBIS, May 12, 1990)

The series of articles titled ‘sell or hope’ by Pravda Correspondent, Viktor Panamarev mentioned of growing dissatisfaction among the Tajiks over continued Soviet involvement

in Afghanistan. Panamarev contended that there existed some nefarious nexus between militant Islam, Pakistani intelligence and the CIA help in fanning separation in Tajikistan. (Pravada, July 1990) In the riots that erupted on February 12, 1990 in Dushanbe, 15 people were killed and hundreds seriously injured. Within 48 hours the rioters had looted 24 stores, 19 consumer service establishments, 25 kiosks and stalls, 6 administrative buildings a public telephone station and a saving bank. (Demographic Yearbook of the USSR, 1990) & (ITAR TASS News Agency, 1990)

Tajik crisis remained the major instance of a widespread civil war in this Central Asian Republic after it declared its independence from the Soviet Union in 1991. Several elements went into the making of Tajik civil war in that year which lasted till 1996, when a truce formula was introduced through the mediation of Iran. (Schoeberlein, 2002a, 66-69) There were the pro-fundamentalists from Garm, and there were the Khujandis and Kolabis at loggerheads with their respective interests. The Khujandis considered more akin to Uzbek-Turkic group were in power in Tajikistan during the Soviet days. But Kulabis, considering themselves of pure Tajik ethnicity, wanted that power centre should shift to their population. This resulted in bloodshed and violence between the two communities.

Though there is a sizable number of Uzbeks settled in Tajikistan, fortunately, except for the acrimonious relations between the governments of Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, respective populations avoided any serious and destructive ethnic clashes. Nevertheless the big irritant remains unresolved. It is the inclusion of Tajik speaking areas of Bukhara and Samarkand into Uzbekistan. The Uzbek governments have been trying to bring about demographic change in the ethnic sector in these two major towns and Tajik government and people have been sore on this. The possibility of a major clash between these two ethnic groups over the two major cities of Central Asia cannot be ruled out.

Kyrgyzstan Crises in 2010

More recently, the ugly scene of ethnic clashes happened in Kyrgyzstan, the eastern Central Asian republic with borders touching both with Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. Kyrgyzstan has not had a peaceful era after it declared its independence from the Soviet Union.¹ Five years after the tulip revolution that led to the ouster of the Kyrgyz president, violent clashes between thousands of anti-government demonstrators and police in the capital Bishkek on April 7, 2010 left at least 65 people dead and 500 injured, and President Qurbananbek Bakiyev was overthrown.²

After the Soviet carve-up borders, most of the Ferghana ended up in Uzbekistan. But pockets of territory also ended up in Tajikistan in the south and Kyrgyzstan in the east. Uzbeks fled to the Kyrgyz-Uzbek border to escape ethnic violence as it occurred intermittently in the past. The cities of Jalalabad and Osh, with their large Uzbek populations, were left on the Kyrgyz side of the border.

None of this was much of a problem as long as they all remained inside the Soviet Union. But the collapse of the Soviet empire in 1991 led to a rapid reassertion, some might say re-invention, of national identity. To the Kyrgyz majority, the Uzbeks represented a fifth column, intent on breaking away and joining newly independent

1. Kyrgyzstan even emerged as a “model” of reforms in the early 1990s; in a region where conservative instincts dominated, the liberal economic policies and democratic discourse of the first post-independence president Askar Akayev seduced western donors and other outsiders into regarding Kyrgyzstan as an “oasis of democracy”. The reformist spirit died down within a few years. Akayev did not establish a police state like his neighbors, but the rule of the presidential “family” over lucrative businesses was part of a pattern of widespread corruption. Elections were increasingly fraudulent, and opposition parties and critical journalists were harassed by the authorities. (Vicken Cheterian, June 15, 2010)

2. Now Roza Otunbayeva is the head of the provisional government. She is a former Communist Party secretary. There is every apprehension that Russia will turn events to its own advantage. (Downing, April 13, 2010)

Uzbekistan. Moscow sent troops, the violence ended, stability returned. This had happened twenty years ago when Soviet state was still intact. Now 20 years later ethnic trouble is back with harsher dimensions than ever before. One figure in particular stands out, a local millionaire Uzbek businessman called Kadijan Batirov. Kyrgyz officials claim Mr. Batirov took to the airwaves broadcasting on Uzbek language TV. The demands, they say, were the same as 20 years earlier: autonomy, Uzbek language, and Government jobs.¹

On June 7, 2010 violence in southern Kyrgyzstan between the Uzbeks and Kyrgyz intensified, and lasted for five days between the two groups resulting more than 170 deaths. An estimated 250,000 people have fled their homes. Interim president Roza Otunbeyeva, who took over after the overthrow of President Qurmanbek Bakiyev in April, has struggled to retain control in the south of the country. The violence has re-opened historical grievances among ethnic Kyrgyz and Uzbek groups. Local NGO's have put another interpretation of the conflict – that an absence of authority by the provisional government in southern parts of the country has frustrated the local population, and forced many to appeal to their ethnic and kinship identities to protect themselves at a time of great political uncertainty. (Marat, June 17, 2010)

In Osh², Uzbek community is considerably wealthier than the Kyrgyz. Historically they are traders and farmers. One finds in Osh

1. In 1990, as the Soviet Union teetered on the edge of collapse, violence erupted in Osh. The immediate spark was a dispute over land. But beneath it ran a deep current of ethnic tension. Uzbek community leaders wanted their own autonomous region in southern Kyrgyzstan, recognition of the Uzbek language and government jobs. Arable land in the region had traditionally accompanied by Uzbeks, though the once nomadic Kyrgyz inhabits were increasingly moving into these areas. With Kyrgyz officials dominating positions of authority, Uzbeks feared that land was increasingly relocated to Kyrgyz residents. (Schoeberlein, 2002b, 92)

2. The population of the Osh region of Kyrgyzstan is composed of Kyrgyz people (54.6%), Uzbeks (27.1%), Russians (about 10%), Tajiks (1.5%), Ukrainians (1.3%) and many others. (Asankanov, 1991)

that many big hotels, shops and business are dominated by Uzbeks. They live in large houses and live luxurious life. The Kyrgyz are traditionally pastoralist with large herds of animals and sheep. They have not done well in the post-Soviet economy - 800,000 Kyrgyz men, many from the south, have left to work in Russia. This indicates to what unemployment and joblessness is rampant in the republic.

Some evidence is that the violence was organized. The Kyrgyz interim government has released telephone recordings it says are of the former president's son plotting to stir up ethnic violence, and therefore media including the independent Kyrgyz-language newspapers "Alibi" and "Apta," took a decidedly pro-Kyrgyz stance from the beginning. (Najibullah, August 25, 2010)

The Uzbeks, whom press reporters met, say there is evidence to show that Kyrgyz military was directly involved in the killings. The Kyrgyz authorities say the guns and armored vehicles were stolen. Whatever the truth, the little trust that once existed between the two communities is now gone. The police force and the ranks of the military are filled almost entirely by ethnic Kyrgyz. To the Uzbeks they are part of the problem, not the solution.

Referendum has ushered in a new government in Kyrgyzstan. But in the current situation it is easy to understand why the Uzbek population of Osh and Jalalabad wants a return of Russian troops. The old colonial master may have created the problem, but now it is the only one that both communities trust. In an interview to *The New York Times*, Professor Alexander Cooley of Columbia University's Harriman Institute observed: *"I don't believe in a narrative of long-simmering ethnic tension. Indeed, ethnic distinctions between Uzbeks and Kyrgyz are so slight as to be hardly distinguishable. Both are predominantly Muslim and they speak a mutually comprehensible Turkic language. The most notable distinction, the one that is most responsible for the animosities that led to the recent violence, Central Asian experts say, is economic: Kyrgyz are traditional nomads, while Uzbeks are farmers."* (Kramer, June 14, 2010)

The question is what inferences should be drawn from the overall ethnic or nationality scenario in Central Asia while we have brought two or three incidents under focus. There is no denying the fact that tensions among ethnic groups prevails in much larger measure than what may be visible at the surface. It is evident that religion may not be able to play a decisive role in cementing cordial relations between various nationalities and ethnic groups. Ethnic mobilisation is likely to remain a salient feature in Central Asian politics as the population of each state consists of different ethnic communities, each with its distinct language, history, tradition and culture. Ethnic communities will continue to compete for a greater access to political power and socio-economic advancement vis-à-vis competing actors. (Ahmad, 1997, 341)

Conclusion

One finds that not one but several reasons became catalyst to the eruption of violence in the region. There are ethnic tensions; there are economic interests and there is personal aggrandizement. There are clan allegiances as well. A graver danger lies in that a weak Central Asia torn with animosities and tensions provides space to big powers for intervention and interference, which ultimately leads to regional tensions and endangers international peace.

From this analytical study into the ethnic crisis in Central Asian Republics, it is evident that this serious malady needs to be cured to avoid more crises in future. The basic issues of poverty, inequality, corruption, and the misuse of political power should be addressed as soon as possible. World community must devise a mechanism to reduce tensions between major ethnic groups in Central Asia. That is in the interests of world peace. China has deep energy interests in the region, the US and Russia both have strategic interests and Muslim states like Saudi Arabia and Pakistan have socio-cultural interests. How all these conflicting interests can be reconciled depends on the maneuverability of Central Asian leadership.

Obviously Kyrgyzstan lacks leadership of vision and foresight. Democracy is not normally the cup of tea for Central Asian people with deep rooted nomadic and pastoral traditions. Restraint on all sides is the need of the hour, and political leadership is faced with great challenges. It is premature to say that the leadership will rise to the occasion. Of late the factor of energy has come up to play its role. Kazakhstan has found large deposits of oil and Turkmenistan has natural gas. China, India and other major countries are hungry for oil and gas and would put everything at stake to maintain access to Central Asian energy resources. If ethnic clashes continue, foreign powers may decide to intervene to save the humanity from impending crisis. Therein lays the great significance of Central Asia and its natural resources.

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