SOVIET LEGACY IN CENTRAL ASIAN AND TRANS-CAUCASIAN REGION: A FUTURE PERSPECTIVE

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Introduction

Soviet Union was not a colonial power in the traditional sense, but had many characteristics of the imperialists and dominated the Central Asian and Trans-Caucasian region for about seventy years. With the disintegration of Soviet Union in 1991, fifteen Republics declared their independence. Soon after independence the region, which in cultural terms is an area of Turko-Persian civilization, hub of different world orders and rich in natural resources, attracted the major world players. The intervention of these powers supported reviving the oppressed Islamic, Turkic and anti-communist sentiments of the people.

The paper aims to highlight the roles of various powers—Iran and Turkey, active in establishing their influences by using religious and nationalistic slogans, which had been suppressed during the long term Soviet rule.

In the Soviet era the socialist bearings were imposed with full thrust in all spheres of life and oppressive methods for the introduction of atheism were used. Castigatory campaigns were launched against all the religious forces, and Islam especially was beleaguered because it was thought, to be the more reactionary and conservative of all the religions. They viewed Islam as a Mullah force and suspected it to be supported and financed by the British Imperialists to counter socialism. In this socialist repression, mosques were closed and women were forbidden to dress up according to the Islamic traditions but Islam survived itself in “Muhallahs” smaller communities rather than in populous areas.

Similarly Soviet pursued a policy of territorialization and systematic ethnicization of the population which often led to ethnic and clan conflicts. Soviet’s policy of divide and rule” was “national in form, socialist in content and in accordance with the objectives of
the Soviet leadership to undermine the supra national Islamic and pan-Turkic sentiments of the people. The leadership considered the Marxist ideology, to be the more progressive than any other ideology and their policy used to impose an ethnic representation by the republic, supervised by a high culture in the form of Sovietism.

With the independence, the leaders of these republics who had come from Soviet “Nomenclatura” became the teachers and preachers of nationalism. They had a hostile towards Russia and open to the West. This achievement of independence was sudden but not necessarily unwanted, as historically there had not been any such movements of nationalism in the region except for Georgia and Armenia. The drawn out Soviet dominancy did not cause any identity crisis to the people as, soon after independence the pan-Islamic and pan-Turkic sentiments of the people started to revive.

Moreover the different legacies left by Soviet Union including the Soviet minorities which in some states is greater than the titular nationals posed various problems like bilingualism, dual nationality issues, cross border infiltration and core periphery relations etc. Russia for a few years just after the independence was silent, but in Putin era, the Russian involvement in the region became prominent. Russian interest in the region is motivated by, firstly Russia considers this area as its sphere of influence and secondly the area is rich in natural resources. Efforts are underway by these various actors to increase their influence over the area and thereby get control over its vast reservoirs of oil and gas, which is likely to pose challenges to the Russian interests.

Soviet legacies

The concept of nationality was unknown in Central Asia before the coming of Soviet rule. Ethnic groups were not identified with a particular territory but lived interspersed and intermixed. States based their legitimacy on dynastic and religious factors rather than on ethnic solidarity. It was the Soviet Union, who created the nations of Uzbek, Tajik, Turkmen, Kyrgyz, Kazakh and Azeri, and were completely artificial. Soviet policy was strategic and manipulative, designed to divide and rule the region by preventing its inhabitants from uniting in a single pan-Turkish or pan-Islamist
entity. All the Soviet institutions in Central Asia gave rise to genuine national consciousness by creating administrative culture and political habitus of nationhood. Central Asian elites and population appreciated the practices of nationalism introduced by the Soviets and inflicted them with their own culture and social norms.

Similarly the Soviet’s imperialistic characteristics made it a core country while the republics worked as periphery. These peripheries not only used to provide raw material for the core country but also market for the Russian goods. The whole administrative processes, resources and budget were determined by the Moscow. Different states were given a specific production task a specific quota and no attention to develop their regional economy. Most of the Central Asian republics relied on agriculture for their economic growth. In the Soviet era, the pattern of agricultural development was determined by the consumption and export needs of the centre rather than by those individual republics, leading to over reliance on a single crop as the mainstay of the economy.

In Soviet era, all the skilled workers and industrial managers were Russians, after Soviet withdrawal, inadequate untrained workforce remained in these republics. It caused many social and political effects like a dualistic society made up of better non indigenous population and the poor unskilled indigenous people, and a type of dependency on the non-indigenous population. Similarly Soviet economic system was self contained, and left inadequate trade links among Central Asian republics and with neighboring countries.

Soviet era was characterized by a colonial attitude, secularization, Russification and the establishment of ethnic borders that left ethnic groups divided. Russian minorities since independence have very little mixed with ethnic people. Titular nationals were divided among lingual and regional lines. Russians in these republics, support dual nationalities, two state languages and often foment separatist movements.

Seeds of Pan-Turkic Revival
The term “pan-Turkism” is used to describe the idea of political, cultural and ethnic unity of all the Turkic speaking people. The disintegration of Soviet Union resulted in the creation of new Muslim Turkic speaking states in Central Asia and Trans-Caucasia, as well as an increased activism of Muslim population within the Russian federation. In all there were fifty four million Muslims in the former Soviet Union, more than ninety percent of whom were Turkish and organized in different sub ethnic groups like Volga, Tatars, Crimea Tatars, Kazakhs, Turkmen, Uzbeks, Kyrgyz and Azeri. At the time of independence of CARs, Turkey’s relations with these republics were less harmonious, despite the linguistic and cultural similarities between them. These newly independent republics did not want to import a new ideology, but rather to develop the broadest cultural and economic infrastructural ties with the world at large. The independence move in CARs raised hopes for Turkey, the Turkish politician who were only vaguely aware of the existence of the other Turks in the Soviet Union, rediscovered the world of about one hundred and twenty million Turkish people. Turkey at the time was trying to extend its model as a secular state in the Islamic world, and strengthen its economic position as a bridgehead between the East and the West. It was also making its efforts to get a leading role in the region, extending from the Adriatic Sea to China, including the Central Asian republics, the Caucasus region, the Black Sea and the Balkans. Turkey’s long borders with Soviet Union, neighbor of Iran and Syria-enemies of Israel, important position in the Gulf War, gave it a strategic and reliable position in the western camp. During the independence years of the Central Asian Republics, the Turkish economy was heading for crisis, therefore it did not provide the economic aid in the desired quantity. However in the cultural sphere, when Prime Minister Suleyman Demirel visited Central Asia, he announced to support a program of expanded cultural contacts, including satellite T.V broadcasts and scholarships for Central Asian and Caucasian students to study in Turkey. The Turko-Soviet successor states regarded Turkey as one of the best economic partners. From the very start Azerbaijan had intense
relations with Turkey to get technical and cultural assistance to counter Russia.\textsuperscript{12}

A meeting in Antalya-Turkey was held in which the deputy Parliamentary Speakers of Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Turkey signed a protocol to create an inter-parliamentary assembly of the Turkish speaking people. Moreover Turkish cabinet of ministers decided to lift visa requirements for post Soviet states.\textsuperscript{13} Ankara’s decision to lift visa requirements aims to pursue its expansive intentions\textsuperscript{14} and gather all the Turkic speaking people on one platform.

The present day Russia has significant Russian minorities within its borders and an upsurge in pan-Turkism could lead certain regions like Tataristan, Baskirdistan and Yakuistan to seek independence.\textsuperscript{15} Russia was angered by the pro-Turkish stance, which the Azeri government adopted in its policy following independence. Russia provided encouragement and finances to ethnic communities inside Azerbaijan to resist the government’s policy of Turkification and pursue its policy of “divide and conquer.”

Turkey, working in close collaboration with the European Union and a long outstanding ally of the United States, makes efforts to create a natural gas pipeline running from Central Asia across the Caspian Sea, through Azerbaijan and Turkey into the Mediterranean and reduce the EU’s dependence on Russian energy pipelines.\textsuperscript{16} In response, Russian government devised plans with the governments of Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan to construct a pipeline that will pump gas from Turkmenistan through Kazakhstan to Russia, which will not only increase Russia’s control over Turkmen gas reserves but Russia would also export its gas to Europe more profitably. In the region as a whole but particularly in the Caucasus, Russia, Iran and Turkey use ethnic tensions as a mean to impedie their competitor’s ability to gain a solid handle on energy resources.\textsuperscript{17}
Islamic Renaissance vs. Secular Approaches

Historically speaking, in Soviet era when Stalin was in power, restrictions against religious practices had been a central aspect of government policies. Stalin disbanded the Islamic revolutionists to suppress any unrest in the region. Many Islamists fled to Afghanistan along with their followers and Stalin re-drew the borders to divide the region into many socialist republics. This demarcation of borders was not in accordance with the geographical or ethnic consideration of the people but “to consolidate the Russian rule and suppress any kind of opposition in the region.”

The Sovietization of the region involved a massive assault on Islam. Religious properties were confiscated: mosques and Madrassas were closed and destroyed, the Ulema were persecuted and the Soviet Muslims were isolated from contacts with the rest of the Muslim world. The years around the breaking of the Soviet Union are characterized by a sense among the Muslims that seventy years of Soviet rule and repression of religion had made them forget, what it means to be a Muslim.

Perestroika and Glasnost, in which the liberalization of social and political policies took place, allowed the Muslims to reestablish their organizational framework. This trend intensified with the collapse of Soviet Union, and resulted in a huge number of Madrassas across Central Asia. In Afghan Soviet war, those Central Asian people, who had been recruited in the Red Army to fight for their communist masters against their co-religionists, were taken as war prisoners in Afghanistan. Those prisoners of war were indoctrinated and got impressed with Mujahideen ideology. Soon after disintegration of the Soviet, the elites in the newly independent states were looking towards the Russian model while the dissatisfied youth having conservative and aggressive nature towards the unIslamic practices looked at the Muslim states as model. They strengthened the ethnic and anti Russian sentiments in the region. Similarly some external factors like the long border with the war ravaged Afghanistan helped the insurgents move freely across the borders. Opposition within the state or in exile used Islam as a “campaign winning slogan” to get popular support. Moreover Iran
and Turkey are also likely to use religion for expanding their influence in the region.

After independence of these CARs and TCRs, religious schools were opened, religious literature became available, programs on religion Islam broadcasted on Radio and Television, republics recognized Islam as one of the foundations of the national culture and laws on religious associations were passed. Hizb-ul-Tahrir- an international organization, having the vision of establishing the caliphate system and unifying the whole Muslim Ummah became active. Similarly Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, which is a militant organization and having close links with Taliban and Al-Qaeda started insurgencies and hostages. Similarly, in Tajikistan the Islamic Renaissance Party contributed in the outbreak of civil war and opposed the continuation of the former communist regimes. Other militant groups also got influence and power in the region, who wanted to overthrow all the secular regimes.

The Iranian support of Shia community in Azerbaijan raised the Islamists there. Dozens of Iranian preachers and organizations actively engaged in various religious activities. Dozens of mosques and Madrassas were opened. This growing militancy in the region poses serious threats to the interests of the secular regimes. On the one hand the communist minded ruling elites of Central Asia and Transcaucasia can best serve the Russian interests but on the other hand the growing radical Islamism is totally antagonistic to the Russian secular appraisal. The Islamists not only try to contain the Russian interests but also struggle to overthrow the secular regimes in the region. The American intervention in Afghanistan further escalated the insurgent movements across the Central Asian borders, which is a serious security threat to Russia or any power in the region.

Central Asia’s Openness to the West and Russia Centric Compulsions

For Russia, relations with the Central Asian and Trans-Caucasian Republics is not a part of the new Great Game, as this region has been under Soviet dominancy for about seventy years.
The decade of 1990s was an era of lack of influence of Russia and especially after the U.S intervention in Afghanistan attracted the other powers to intervene in the region. In the mid 1990’s, Russian policy started taking a greater stance, and in 2000 when Putin came into power he focused his policy objectives towards his neighbors. The clear policy objectives were never defined but Russia called it near abroad and the area was a top priority of Moscow.

Russia constructed its policy on two bases that is “security and economy.” Both these policy objectives could be pursued by geographical, cultural, social and economical heritages, left by the Soviet Union. Central Asian and Trans-Caucasian republics have authoritarian leadership, which often receive criticism from the west for their lack of democratic credentials. And the Russian policy “not to criticize the leaders” get grooming to pursue its goals. Similarly Russian policy of youth education, Russian language channels and buying up Central Asian companies further raise its profile. These are some resources which the other intervening actors lack.

The EU is a new actor with growing interests in the region. It seeks stability in the area out of fear of overspill effects of war in Afghanistan and an access to the oil and gas reserves. The EU’s strategy for Central Asia is welcomed in the region, where countries look for alternatives to Russia’s economic and security dominance. Its interests are less likely to collide in Central Asia but in Caucasia there are some policy implications for EU. It is because its access to Central Asia is geographically and economically blocked by Russia. In security realm, Central Asia works as a buffer zone for Russia. The Kremlin is of the view that stability can be obtained by supportive, healthy and non critical relations with Central Asia and by making a variety of regional organization like CSTO and SCO.

NATO is another competitor of Russia in Central Asia. NATO needs these republics for access to Afghanistan. The NATO forces in Afghanistan if become unable to control the situation, it would have bad consequences for Russian security. Because the militants movements, which already have roots in these republics can expand to CARs and TCRs, and would affect the Russian security interests in the region. Russia signaled an interest in
discussing Afghanistan in NATO-Russian Council (NRC), but this move suspended when Russia invaded NATO partner Georgia for its tilt towards the European Union. The Russian aggression on Georgia revealed the fact that any intervention by the external actor for its influence building in the Russian sphere of influence would never be tolerated.25

A three-sided diplomatic scrum is intensifying in Central Asia. U.S.A, Russian and Chinese officials are stepping up their efforts to make energy export deals with the regional leaders. Russia seems to be the most aggressive diplomatic actor, engaged in efforts to maintain its influence, while Washington is interested to maintain its position in Caspian Basin and China is quietly, but persistently making economic inroads in Central Asia with the main aim of securing the energy, the country needs to keep its economy growing.

The Uzbekistan’s move to evict the U.S troops from its base is a proof of how the Russian influence nourishes in the region. After that the Kyrgyz government declared to evacuate the Manas airbase from the U.S forces. Soon after this declaration a meeting was held in Moscow in which the Russian President Dmitry Medvedev promised an aid package to Kyrgyzstan worth 2 billion dollars.26 The decision to close the Manas base is driven by Moscow’s opposition to the U.S military presence in a region that it has for centuries regarded as its sphere of influence. The Russian ruling elites clearly see the reestablishment of Moscow’s influence in the former Soviet republics and if the Central Asian leaders draw their hand of cooperation, it can increase Washington’s dependency on Moscow.

Conclusion

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the emergence of independent states in Central Asia and Caucasia provided an opportunity for the new powers to intervene in the region. Turkey and Iran are trying to avail this opportunity and explore new political and economic roles in the region. Turkey shares ethnic and linguistic ties with the Turkic states of Central Asia while Iran shares a common language with Tajikistan and the same religion Islam with
all the Central Asian Republics. Both Turkey and Iran are making efforts to pursue their interests by raising the slogans of pan-Turkism and Islamism. Islam and nationalism, which had been suppressed during the Soviet era, started reviving. The Central Asian states borders with the war ravaged Afghanistan, allow movements of Islamists across the borders. Similarly Islam is used as a campaign winning slogan by opposition within and outside the country. This growing militant Islam not only produces instability in the region but also poses serious threats to the Russian interests in the region. Similarly most of these republics have a Turkic speaking origin, which is used by Turkey as a slogan of nationalism to gather the people of these republics under Turkish nationalism.

Central Asia is a hub of different world orders and many world players struggle to build their influence in the region. China, U.S.A, E.U, Russia and NATO, all are stepping up their efforts to get an access to the energy reserves of these republics. Both Russia and U.S.A are the most aggressive diplomatic actors while China is quietly, but persistently making its economic inroads in the region. The Central Asian leaders wish an outreach to the West, and the Russia which perceives the growing influence of these external players as a threat to its interests, makes efforts to rebuild its influence by its legacies, left in the region. The Iranian and Turkish intervention in the region could easily be facilitated by their slogans of pan-Islamism and pan-Turkism. On the other hand the Russian influence in the region would also try to survive and its future prospects would depend on, how much Russia tries to curtail influence building of external powers in these republics.

Notes

1 Tahir Amin, “World Orders in Central Asia” A research paper pp-1
3 Shireen T. Hunter, Central Asia since Independence (Washington: The Centre for Strategic and International studies Publisher, 1996), pp.3-4.
5 Ibid.
7 Ibid. p.67
8 Ibid. p.70
11 John C.K.Daly, “Pan-Turkism takes step forward in Eurasia, Publication: Eurasia Daily Monitor Volume:5 Issue: 39
12 Jos Boonstra, “Russia and Central Asia: From Disinterest to Eager Leadership,” EUCAM Project. Madrid
18 Ahmed Rashid, The Resurgence of Central Asia: Islam or Nationalism, Oxford University Press, 1994, p.36
20 Ibid.
21 Ibid.
19 Jos Boonstra, “Russia and Central Asia: From Disinterest to Eager Leadership,” EUCAM Project. Madrid
24 Ibid.
25 Ibid.