

consider the move. The grand scheme was received by Congress and the people with apathy. When the move, scheduled for 1989, never materialized, there was no love lost from the public. Hardoy, 124-125.

¹²¹ Rapoport, 33. Later, Rapoport notes that while centrality is still a core attribute of a capital, centrality is "weakening in the face of decentralization and multiple centres of influence and power." Rapoport, 57. Considering the earlier point in this paper regarding the schism of Kazakhstan's political and financial capital, Rapoport's observation about weakening

centrality due to multiple centres of influence is especially relevant.

¹²² Matloff, "Puzzle over capital move in Central Asia."

¹²³ Huelsmeier, "Kazakhstan turns a 'white grave' into its new capital."

¹²⁴ Kazakh citizen, interview with author, 21 April 2000.

¹²⁵ Timothy J. Colton, *Moscow: Governing the Socialist Metropolis*. (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1995), 455-566.

Calming the Ferghana Valley Experts

A Review Essay by Nick Megoran*

(*Calming the Ferghana Valley: Development and Dialogue in the Heart of Central Asia*. Report of the Ferghana Valley Working Group of the Center for Preventive Action, by Lubin, Nancy and Rubin, Barnett. New York: The Century Foundation Press, 1999.)

Conflict and the Ferghana Valley

The last two years have witnessed a considerable growth of interest in the theme of conflict and conflict prevention in Central Asia. It is primarily Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan that have come under the spotlight, with discussion often centering around the Ferghana Valley region where their borders intersect. Attention has come from the region's capitals, Russia, and the West, and both the UN and the OSCE have recently established networks in the Kyrgyzstani part of the Ferghana Valley to monitor conflict. The Osh Media Resource Centre organized a conference in the Kyrgyzstani town of Osh this May on the way conflict is handled by the Central Asian mass media. (1) The Brussels-based International Crisis Group regards the danger of conflict as so grave that it is establishing a research base in Osh to spot potential crises before they occur. Together with the publication considered here, a gloomy picture of conflict and strife is being painted.

However, this increased interest is itself a cause for concern amongst some local intellectuals and journalists

who feel not only that they are being denied a voice in this process, but that there is a danger of ill-considered research projects becoming self-fulfilling prophecies and actually precipitating conflict themselves. If it is true that superficial or alarmist coverage can heighten tension, then these are concerns which ought to be treated with the utmost seriousness. The aim of this essay is therefore to critically examine the conflict resolution movement in the Ferghana Valley and stimulate further discussion. The recent publication *Calming the Ferghana Valley* provides an excellent entrance to that theme. (2) Not only is it typical of its genre, but is addressed primarily to US policy makers and international organizations and is being widely read by foreign development workers based in Central Asia.

Overview

Calming the Ferghana Valley is the latest in a series of reports prepared by the New York based Center for Preventive Action and sponsored by the Council on Foreign Relations and The Century Foundation, American research institutes. The report is based on the visit of a working group which included two of the report's authors, respected and experienced professors of Central Asian Studies Nancy Lubin and Barnett Rubin, to the Ferghana Valley in March 1997. The third author is Keith Martin, founder of the Cenasia internet discussion group and a program specialist at the Overseas Private Investment Corporation in Washington, DC.

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The book-length report begins with a short executive summary and is then divided into two parts. The first details the findings of the mission and policy recommendations. Part two presents supporting material. A number of helpful appendices include the texts of the Ferghana Valley development programs of the United Nations and the Soros Institute.

The message of *Calming the Ferghana Valley* is unambiguous: the Valley is "a vulnerable area where signs of possible conflict are clear" (Executive Summary, XV). It argues that it has been the scene of appalling conflicts over the past ten years including inter-ethnic massacres, regional uprisings and religious strife, and believes that the danger of their recurrence is real.

Factors leading to these conflicts are analyzed, including poverty, over-population, unemployment, the narcotics business and organized crime, corruption and administrative incompetence, rising nationalism, state repression and the destabilising impacts of wars and disorder in Tajikistan and Afghanistan. The book argues that the best method of conflict prevention is the establishment of free-market democracies and closer regional co-operation between the Ferghana Valley states. Western donor governments and international organizations should set this as a policy priority.

Re-imagining the Ferghana Valley

Perhaps the most glaring contrast in the book is the enormous disparity between the magnitude of predictions made and warnings given and the paucity of supporting evidence presented. The report is rich in phrases that resonate with the drama of turmoil and violence. *Calming the Ferghana Valley* approvingly quotes U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Strobe Talbott, who foresees Central Asia as "a breeding ground of terrorism" and "a hotbed of religious and political extremism" (Executive Summary, XV). The authors concur: Ferghana is a "vulnerable and tense area," where the "inherent potential for conflict" means that "new violence is likely, indeed, almost certain" (Executive Summary, XVI). The situation is grave: "Conflicts animated by regionalism, ethnicity or Islam (or fears of Islam) are only compounded by the growing refugee emergency throughout the Ferghana Valley." Ethnic conflict is thus highly likely. "As land becomes more scarce, competition is widely perceived to take place along ethnic lines -- especially between Uzbeks and Kyrgyz in southern Kyrgyzstan..." (p. 63).

It would be expected that a wealth of evidence would be presented to demonstrate the exigence of this threat. It is not. The Ferghana Uzbek-Meskhetian Turk riots of 1989 and the Osh Uzbek-Kyrgyz riots of 1990 are used as the primary substantiation, endlessly repeated and re-worked into a Sword of Damocles hanging over the region. However, the very fact that they have not recurred surely brings into question their foundational use to support such dire warnings. The authors seem frustrated that local people were not eager to discuss the Osh tragedy, and warn that denial will not help the process of healing. However, it can just as plausibly be argued that this apparent unwillingness to talk about the events is actually part of a complicated set of responses and mechanisms that local people have developed themselves to prevent a repeat. They do this by blaming the intrigues of Moscow and the KGB, shifting the blame from the other ethnic group.

There are many positive developments in Uzbek-Kyrgyz relations in southern Kyrgyzstan, both government and community inspired. Opportunities for higher education in the Uzbek language have expanded enormously. Uzbeks are concerned at issues of discrimination such as the very low representation of Uzbeks in state administrative positions. Many also resent the articulation of political and cultural events in Osh within a discourse of Kyrgyz nationhood which renders the historic Uzbek presence invisible, such as the Osh 3000 celebrations this October. These are real concerns which need addressing by the state. Nevertheless, many Uzbeks also speak about the economic and political benefits they have living in more open Kyrgyzstan as compared to their relatives across the border in repressive Uzbekistan. Only a trickle of Uzbeks have left Kyrgyzstan out of fears for the future, compared with large Russian out-migration. In much of the Ferghana Valley intermarriage between different groups is high and multi-lingualism common. Many Uzbeks regard Kyrgyz-Uzbek relations as less tense now than they were five years ago, and believe that President Akaev has restricted the actions of nationalists in the parliament. Whilst there are still very real problems which could potentially lead to disorder and violence, the Ferghana Valley has moved out of the crisis period of a decade ago.(3)

How could it be that the report largely overlooks this? Part of the reason is that it is woefully lacking in accurate and detailed field research. The bulk of the text of *Calming the Ferghana Valley* consists of superficial

generalizations and poorly-grounded speculation, buttressed by the endless repetition of a handful of isolated incidents of violence over the past decade.(4) In a survey of political change in the former Soviet Union, the late Graham Smith found that "If the cases of inter-ethnic violence are mapped over the period of the post-Soviet transition, it is clear that the occurrence of new violent ethnic conflicts has declined sharply since the early 1990s." (5) This is also true of the Ferghana Valley.

Why is it then that, contrary to all the evidence which would point in the opposite direction, the Valley has been redefined in the past two years as an area rife with internal conflict? The answer to this question is multi-faceted, but it partly arises as a result of locating problems better understood at the regional (Central Asian) scale at the scale of the Ferghana Valley. This is almost useless for medium or short term conflict prevention or amelioration. Major threats of violence come primarily from instability in Tajikistan and Afghanistan (as the actions of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, which attacked Kyrgyzstan in the summers of 1999 and 2000, demonstrate). The authors themselves very pertinently draw attention to this problem. Such threats need to be addressed at the inter-state level. Likewise, *Calming the Ferghana Valley* recommends action to fight corruption and improve education systems, issues which are best addressed at the national level. Altercations can also spring from everyday disputes over scarce resources. Examples of this in the Valley most often revolve around water and land distribution along state borders. These sour inter-village relations and sometimes lead to brawls, but rarely have an importance beyond the micro-scale. They need to be tackled at the community level, but the book – which largely confines itself to general prognostication about these themes on an abstract level – does not attempt to look at any of these in detail. It is therefore hard to see what use the report can actually be, apart from being used as a means to call for more U.S. government aid to the area.

Once an area becomes associated with 'ethnic' or 'religious' conflict in the popular imagination then facts which do not support this may be downplayed and those which back up this claim are more easily accepted. That is exactly what has happened with the Ferghana Valley, an area easily imbued with the romance of being 'at the heart of Central Asia.'

This re-imagining of the Valley, done by outside experts in a way which has affinity with unflattering

stereotypes of Valley dwellers often held in the regional capitals, is creating a negative reaction amongst many indigenous intellectuals. The Kyrgyz editor of an Osh newspaper told me how angry he was that the Valley had been redefined by Western and Russian researchers and media as an area with high conflict potential. "Why are these international experts coming and telling us about ourselves rather than asking us? They are using us as guinea pigs, after finishing with the Balkans."

Another editor walked out of the CAMSP Osh conference mentioned above, which had Uzbekistani and Kyrgyzstani journalists debating with each other, saying that it was actually creating conflict rather than alleviating it. These are not uncommon views in the south of Kyrgyzstan. A Kyrgyz newspaper featured a fierce attack on the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities Max van der Stoep (and foreign involvement in conflict resolution in general), accusing him of stirring up trouble: "If this gentleman really wants to work with representatives of 'oppressed' minorities, let him go to Uzbekistan or Tajikistan!" it thundered.(6) It may well be that these are over-reactions which risk stifling important discussion. Nevertheless, that the actions of conflict resolution and prevention experts are leading influential opinion moulders within both the Uzbek and Kyrgyz intelligentsia to deny that minorities experience problems is alarming, as it could harden public and government opinion against investigating minority concerns. More worryingly still, there is some evidence that minorities in the Ferghana Valley are seen to be exploiting expert interest in ethnic conflict by exaggerating their difficulties to gain foreign sympathy and material support. This is already causing resentment on the part of Kyrgyz in the Osh area, and could reverse the positive movements towards the slow process of trust-building between different communities that has been evidenced in recent years. Thus it could be that high-profile but ill-considered programs really do intensify the conflict they set out to mediate. *Calming the Ferghana Valley's* authors were told by the Uzbekistani authorities that the UNDP [Ferghana Valley] program "could instigate rather than contain unrest," (p. 21) but the book does not give much consideration to this line of reasoning.(7)

The strong reactions against conflict studies in the Valley are also a result of a sense that outside experts are making a living out of this theme without working with local experts on an equal basis. "I have been working on this theme all my life," one Osh researcher

commented recently, "so why don't these experts work more closely with us?" The question is a good one; the answer is ideological.

Geopolitics and Ideology

The essential aim of the book appears to be less the prevention of conflict so much as the furtherance of American goals in the region. The authors themselves are candid about this, admitting that "we situate our policy recommendations within a broadly sketched vision of U.S. interests and strategy in Central Asia" (p. 15). The book opens with the fears of Strobe Talbott about terrorism and religious extremism in Central Asia referred to earlier. If this were to lead to outright war, he argues, "it would profoundly matter to the United States." Why? Because the area "sits on as much as 200 million barrels of oil." The authors lament that "access to these riches is threatened...by current and latent conflicts in adjoining territories" (Executive Summary, XV). Therefore "conflict resolution is 'Job One' for US policy in the region," as Talbott puts it. Research is necessary because Central Asia is "a region where our national interests are great, but where critical gaps in our understanding remain large." Much of the book is thus dedicated to the imposition of American political, economic and cultural values – democracy and the free market – onto the area. Lengthy and repetitious discussions about the lack of what it calls 'progress' towards democracy and privatization, without clearly demonstrating their immediate relevance to conflict prevention, fill many pages. This ideological polemic leads to glaring contradictions. For example, in spite of identifying poverty and unemployment as major sources of instability, the authors lament what they see as the slow rate of privatization in the south of Kyrgyzstan which "has kept unemployment numbers artificially low" (p. 80).

Geopolitical speculation occupies a central place in the book. The area is called "A strategically vital region" (p. 17). The explanation given for this is that it borders China, Iran and Afghanistan. It is hard to see what strategic American interests are threatened in the Ferghana Valley by these countries, as U.S. economic activity is minimal there. The answer is of course that these are all countries the U.S. views as a threat ideologically in its attempt to impose its own brand of democracy and capitalism, and they happen to be near Central Asia. They are 'the usual suspects' which, along with the bogeymen of 'terrorism' and 'religious extrem-

ism' evoke paranoia in the North American foreign policy planners' collective psyche. This tendency to view other states as rivals would most likely be a significant impediment to a key plank of the report's proposals, the need for a regional approach.

Special attention is given to America's old enemy Russia. After criticizing the "quasi-colonial exploitation of the region," the authors speak of "the undisputed yearning of the Central Asian states to break free of Russian dominance" (p. 129). A goal of US policy in Central Asia should be to maintain "economic and security co-operation with Russia without ceding it as a Russian sphere of influence." (Executive Summary, XIX). These sentiments are a continuation of anti-Russian propaganda that existed in Britain from the nineteenth century 'Great Game' period and in the West as a whole during the Cold War.

In 1899 Francis Skrine and Edward Ross wrote a book about their fact-finding mission to Central Asia. "We left home full of prejudices," they began, "the result of a course of Central Asian literature. The Cassandra notes of Vambéry were ringing in our ears, and the latent chauvinism of Lord Curzon of Kedleston had prejudiced the Russians in our eyes."⁽⁸⁾ They came to the conclusion that Britain and Russia could work together profitably and learn from each other in formulating Central Asian policy. How sad that exactly a century later that same prejudice is still pervasive, and in re-fighting old battles Russia is viewed more with suspicion than as a potential source of stability. Whilst Central Asia has sought some distance from Russia in order to assert its own sovereignty, there is still a more general trust of Russia and identification with a common post-Soviet culture in Central Asia than there is with Western ways. The "undisputed yearning of the Central Asian states to break free of Russian dominance" is a myth those still locked into a Cold War mentality would like to perpetuate.

Reference to the Cold War is pertinent: the last chapter of the West's victory will not be written until former Communist states have become like "us." Strobe Talbott is quoted as saying that Central Asians who "for so much of their history, have been subjected to foreign domination" at last have "the chance to put behind them forever the experience of being pawns on a chess board as big powers vie for wealth and influence at their expense" (p. 17). He continues by stating that he hopes 'reform' (that is, the adoption of Western ideology) in Kyrgyzstan will "encourage similar progress...in Rus-

sia." As the book has made clear all along, this includes American access to markets. Thus Central Asia becomes a pawn of America as it vies for wealth and influence, yet Talbott and the authors of the book do not seem to grasp this contradiction! Such remarkable ideological blindness on the part of a nation which frequently goes to war to enforce its influence and ideology around the world is frightening. It was only half in jest that an Uzbek writer, comparing recent Western military activity in the Balkans with the vision of US policy he saw presented in *Calming the Ferghana Valley*, told me he wondered whether the growth of conflict prevention studies in Central Asia was not a sly precursor to Western military expansionism.

This ideological blindness prevents the authors from engaging in any meaningful way with alternative political scenarios which might be co-opted to assist conflict prevention. Thus an increased political role for Islam -- a force more capable of appealing to the hearts of the Valley dwellers than alien American systems -- is given little consideration. Although the authors acknowledge the role of the clergy in promoting conflict resolution and justice in some instances, their fundamentalist advocacy of American ideology hinders them from considering a stronger role for Islam in government.

Similarly, the authors are also unsympathetic to the attempts of Uzbekistan to underwrite its sovereignty by strengthening its border controls -- four of the report's five main policy recommendations imply criticism of Uzbekistan's border policies. The report singles out for particular censure its refusal to join the failed United Nations Ferghana Valley Development Project. The authors clearly are not paying serious attention to the political concerns of the government of Uzbekistan, without whom in any case conflict prevention in the Valley would be impossible. Furthermore, by presenting conflict prevention as a tool of self-interested American foreign policy and then arguing, as they do, that international organizations such as the UN ought to work for conflict prevention in the way they suggest, they risk jeopardizing the work of such organizations by casting suspicion on them as tools of American economic policy. It is hardly surprising that Uzbekistan viewed the enterprise with some suspicion and decided not to participate.

As the book starts -- with a statement of American self interest in the area -- so it ends. Following a lengthy consideration of the perceived geopolitical concerns posed by Iran, Turkey, China, Afghanistan and Russia,

it reaches a grand climax -- the role of the United States. The overall message is one of the failure of America to enforce its ideological hegemony in Central Asia, leading to a paternalistic chastisement of Uzbekistan in particular and voicing "American displeasure with the serious backtracking from reform" (p. 136). In spite of this failure the authors try to end on an optimistic note, by saying that "senior Uzbek officials told us they still believe they enjoy a special relationship with the United States," and "Central Asian governments and peoples see their futures as engaged with Western economic powers" (p. 136). The theme of conflict prevention has been all but forgotten as the authors struggle to argue their case: unless Central Asia becomes like America it is doomed to conflict and disarray.

Conclusions

Calming the Ferghana Valley is a timely contribution towards raising the awareness of the interconnection of a range of social, environmental, economic and political processes with the ugly phenomenon of conflict in Central Asia. The significance of this report is that it stresses that conflict cannot easily be reduced to a single factor such as ethnicity. Rather, it is multi-faceted, and likewise conflict prevention too must be multi-faceted. This means a broad ranging approach involving such diverse factors as foreign aid distribution, education, refugee management, regional security issues and combatting the narcotics mafia. The report places conflict prevention squarely at the center of long term development policy and of the foreign policy of outside states.

Nonetheless, significant weaknesses render the work seriously flawed and of little use in the medium or short term prevention of the conflict which the report itself argues poses such a danger. This is due to the paucity of empirical research and the blinkering pro-U.S. ideology that fills that gap. This threatens not only to hinder the work of those involved with research into conflict prevention by inciting negative reactions and arousing mistrust amongst local intellectuals, but even to act as a factor fomenting conflict itself. It could well be that the approach taken -- of trying to promote conflict prevention as a means of furthering American ends in the area -- is simply a tactical move on the part of the authors to draw attention to what is clearly an important subject that they believe has been overlooked by American foreign policy planners, and in so doing attract more aid to

the area. This may work, but the drawbacks make it a very dangerous strategy.

August 2000 saw the publication of the initial report by the International Crisis Group (ICG) on Central Asia.⁽⁹⁾ Exploratory in nature, it is intended to precede the establishment of a base in Osh from which to conduct more detailed research on aspects of conflict and conflict prevention. It rejects the idea that the major powers have significant vital interests at stake in Central Asia and is positive about Western cooperation with Russia and China. It explicitly questions the use of a strategy which identifies issues at the level of the Ferghana Valley, and it does not exaggerate the significance of ethnonationalist rioting there a decade earlier. It places emphasis on detailed field research.

All these signs are positive, and it is to be hoped that the ICG will be able to both build on the strengths of reports such as *Calming the Ferghana Valley* and learn from their mistakes. No one can deny that many of the factors which have led to conflict elsewhere in the world are present in the Valley. The point of the criticisms in this review is not at all to reject the study of conflict, but rather to assist in the very important work of understanding and addressing it before it occurs. The ultimate test of the success of all these reports, however, is whether their authors can use them to galvanise governments, international organisations, NGOs and local communities to implement the changes necessary to prevent conflicts arising. To paraphrase Marx, the experts of the Ferghana Valley have described it in various ways: the point is to change it. May it be granted that the endeavours of all who care about the Valley will prevent conflict there in the future.

(1) This was part of a series of events in partnership with The Central Asian Media Support Project, whose main sponsor is the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation.

(2) The report written by Tabyshalieva for the US Institute of Peace in the same year is another example of this genre. The conceptual approach, methodology and conclusions are very similar to those in *Calming the Ferghana Valley*. Tabyshalieva, Anara. Peaceworks Number 28. The Challenge of Regional Cooperation in Central Asia: Preventing Ethnic Conflict in the Ferghana Valley. Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace, 1999.

(3) See also Zaharova, Antonina et al., "Osh Ten Years on: Positive Developments in Ethnic Relations." Euasianet, 19th September 2000. url: www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav091800.shtml

(4) The 1989 Uzbek-Turk riots, the 1990 Osh Tragedy, killing of policemen in Namangan in 1997 and a failed uprising in northern Tajikistan in 1998.

(5) Smith, Graham. The Post-Soviet States: Mapping the Politics of Transition. London: Arnold, 1999.

(6) Kyrgyzstandyn birimdigi: Maida uluttarga avtonomiya kerekpi? Aalam, 41 (9094), 24th April 1999.

(7) Uzbek academic Kadir Olimov argues that the superficial reporting of the alleged problems of non-nationals in Uzbekistan only aggravates discontent. An example might be the sensationalizing in the Russian press of the condition of Russians in Central Asia in the late 1980s and early 1990s, contributing to a panic in which many fled. Olimov, "The rediscovery of Uzbek history and its foreign policy implications." In *The Legacy of History in Russia and the New States of Eurasia*, edited by Frederick Starr. New York: Sharpe, 1994. p. 232.

(8) Skrine, Francis, and Edward Ross. *The Heart of Asia: A History of Russian Turkestan and the Central Asian Khanates from the Earliest Times*. London: Methuen and Co., 1899, p. 410

(9) International Crisis Group, Central Asia: Crisis Conditions in Three States. Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2000.