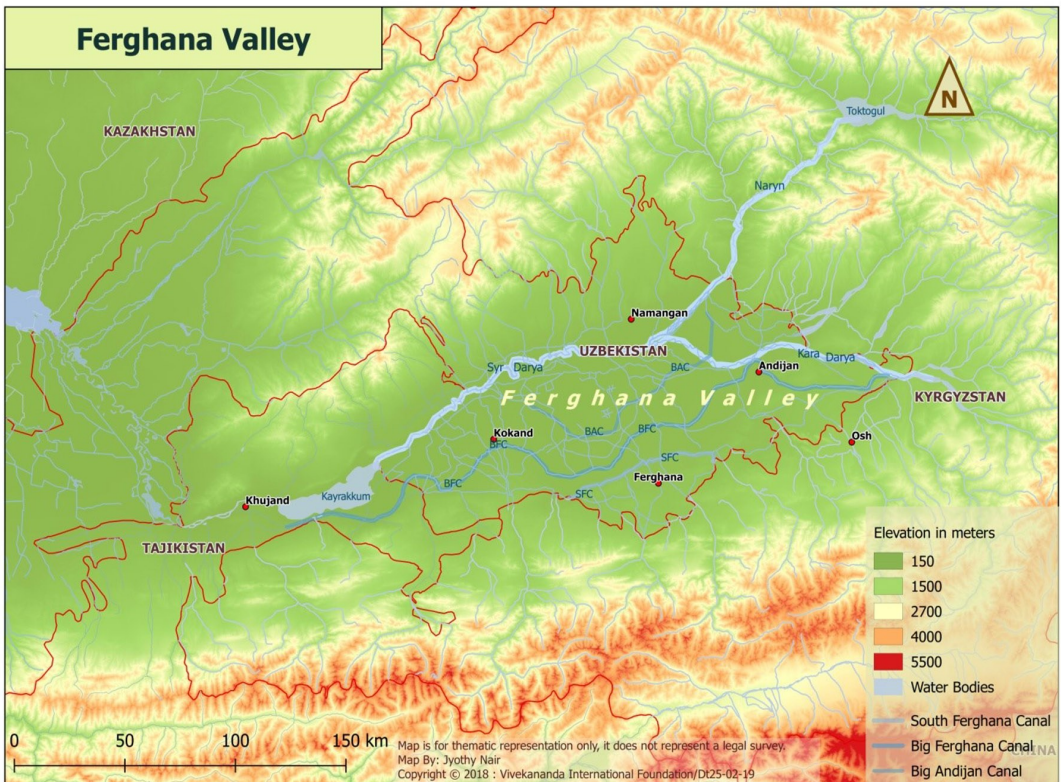


# Issues and Dynamics of the Fergana Valley: Regional Implications

Dr Rashmini Koparkar



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New Delhi



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## **Abbreviations**

ASSR	Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
CARs	Central Asian Republics
CASA 1000	Central Asia South Asia (transmission line)
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CIS	Commonwealth of Independent States
CPSU	Communist Party of the Soviet Union
CSTO	Collective Security Treaty Organization
EEU	Eurasian Economic Union
EU	European Union
FATA	Federally Administered Tribal Areas (of Pakistan)
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
HT	Hizb ut-Tahrir
ICCR	Indian Council of Cultural Relations
IMU	Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan
INSTC	International North South Transport Corridor
ISI	Inter-Services Intelligence
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
ITEK	Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation
OIC	Organisation of Islamic Cooperation
RATS	Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure
SCO	Shanghai Cooperation Organization
SREB	Silk Road Economic Belt
SSRs	Soviet Socialist Republics
US	The United States
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

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## Foreword



The Vivekananda International Foundation is delighted to publish Dr. Rashmini Koparkar's research monograph, *Issues, and Dynamics of the Fergana Valley: Regional Implications*. While there have been a number of studies in India on the Central Asian Region, relatively few of them focus on the Fergana Valley. The author points out the strategic significance of Fergana Valley in the context of India's historical and cultural links with the Central Asian region going back to several centuries.

Why study the Fergana Valley? With the population of nearly 14 million covering less than one percent of Central Asia's land area, the Fergana valley is shared by three Central Asian Republics namely, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan. Irrigated by the river Syr Darya, which is life-line to Central Asia, the Fergana Valley is currently witnessing a population explosion, ethnic conflicts, and the rise of fundamentalism. The ethnic conflict between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks in 2010 in the city of Osh hundreds of people displaced, and many killed. The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan formed in 1998 was born in the Uzbek part of the Fergana Valley.

The monograph studies and highlights the causes of ethnic tensions, causes of radicalization and terrorism. It traces the growth of extremism in the valley since the 90s and also looks at the external factors responsible for radicalization. Known as the cockpit of Central Asia, a holistic study of Fergana Valley is indispensable for the study of Central Asia in general. India has had a long-time engagement with Central Asia particularly the Fergana valley. The monograph lays down certain recommendations on how India can revive its historical links with the Fergana valley.

I hope that the monograph will be found useful for those interested in the study of Central Asia.

Arvind Gupta  
Director VIF



# Chapter 1

## Introduction

The Central Asian Region gained wider recognition in International Relations after the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991. The emergence of five independent nation-states in the heartland of Eurasia was, in fact, a matter of curiosity for the world community. At the same time, there were apprehensions about political stability, territorial integrity and economic viability of the Central Asian Republics (CARs) of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. In 1990s, considerable empirical research was conducted on the politics, history and society of the CARs. Strikingly, in most western literature, these states were referred to as the ‘five *Stans*’, without appreciating their peculiarities. Nevertheless, the strategic vitality of this region was acknowledged beyond doubt.

Central Asia is a landlocked region, surrounded by important countries like Russia, China, Iran and Afghanistan. Its strategic location makes it a potential land bridge between Asia and Europe, and between various regions of Asia. Therefore, the CARs are of great significance in inter-regional connectivity projects. They are also endowed with abundant natural resources, including oil, natural gas and uranium. However, in recent years the region has been subjected to security threats like ethnic clashes, militancy and radicalisation. The region’s close proximity with the unstable states of Afghanistan and Pakistan has further added to existing concerns.

The role played by the two major powers in the region has remarkably influenced the Central Asian geo-politics. Russia, which has had several years of colonial and Soviet contact with the CARs, continues to exercise political influence on the region. It has traditionally assumed

the role of ‘security provider’ for the CARs. At the same time, China has enhanced its economic presence through infrastructure projects, trade and investments. The CARs figure prominently in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). China’s heightened economic and strategic engagements have set alarm bells ringing. The two major powers have, by and large, endorsed each other’s multilateral regional initiatives, like the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) and the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU). They have also worked out a synergy to function together under the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). The two neighbouring powers have shown signs of cooperation as well as competition in Central Asia. The role of extra-regional powers like the United States (US), the European Union (EU), Japan, South Korea, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Iran and Pakistan has also determined the regional dynamics to an extent.

From the Indian point of view, the CARs are part of its ‘extended neighbourhood’ and are geopolitically significant. India has commercial, cultural, and civilisational links with this region that go back thousands of years. However, contemporary relations between India and CARs are much below potential; with fewer high-level visits, limited trade and lower people-to-people interaction. The reasons for this are multi-fold. Firstly, the geographical continuum that existed between the two regions for centuries was broken because of the Anglo-Russian rivalry in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, subsequent partition of India and emergence of an unfriendly state of Pakistan. This interrupted the age-old land connectivity that led to decline in the movement of men, material and ideas. Secondly, in its foreign policy, India has been preoccupied with its immediate and maritime neighbourhood; thus, did not find much opportunity to engage with the extended neighbours of Eurasia.

India established diplomatic relations with each of these republics in the immediate aftermath of the Soviet Disintegration. In recent years, it has enhanced its engagements with the CARs. In 2012, India announced its ‘Connect Central Asia’ policy. Prime Minister Narendra Modi paid an official visit to all five CARs in July 2015. In June 2017, India, along with Pakistan, became a full member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) that has Russia, China and the CARs (except Turkmenistan) as members. Membership of the SCO has provided India with a significant platform to engage with the CARs, multilaterally. The development of

India's connectivity projects in the region, namely the International North South Transport Corridor (INSTC) and the Chabahar Port and its recent accession to the Ashgabat Agreement will make these states more accessible for India. India is also trying to expand bilateral cooperation with the CARs in fields like defence and security, counter-terrorism, trade and economic cooperation, culture, education and science and technology.

India's increasing engagements in Central Asia underscores the need for an in-depth study and research of the region. In the aftermath of independence, each republic has taken its own course of transformation and development; at the same time, each has its own set of problems and challenges. Therefore, rather than looking at Central Asia as a unified geo-political entity, it is worthwhile to study each CAR and its regions, with their peculiarities, nuances and socio-political dynamics.

The Fergana Valley, which is currently divided between Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, has always interested experts and scholars of Central Asia, mainly for two reasons. Firstly, the region holds immense significance in terms of its location, geography, history, economy and demography. Secondly, in the recent past, the region has witnessed a multitude of socio-political problems. In the post-independence period, developments and events in this region have, directly or indirectly, influenced Central Asia in particular and Eurasian geo-politics in general. This makes the case of Fergana Valley worthy of study.

The strategic significance of the Fergana Valley makes it vital in India's engagements with the three CARs. India's historical and civilisational links with the region and its enduring cultural and spiritual influence on people in the valley, builds solid foundation for current cooperation in fields like education, agriculture, medicine and pharmaceuticals, and tourism. Common security concerns between India and the CARs are an added incentive for enhanced relations. As India expands its footprints in the region, it is going beyond the political capitals and engaging with various regions of these republics, especially those in the Fergana Valley.

This Monograph is an attempt at studying the Fergana Valley in the holistic manner. The initial chapters analyse the geographical, historical, political, economic and socio-cultural aspects of the Valley. The various

issues and concerns of the valley, including ethnic clashes, border and water conflicts, and terrorism and radicalisation are examined in detail. The study also tries to assess how the dynamics of the Valley influence the Central Asian region.

## **Research Problem**

The Fergana Valley is considered to be the cockpit of Central Asia, which influences region's political, social, economic and security scenario. Divided between three CARs, namely Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, the Fergana Valley is extremely important. It is a small, yet most densely populated part of the region; and so also the most complex and turbulent! A series of disturbing events over the last 25 years have put Fergana in the news. Be it border tensions, water disputes, ethnic clashes or militancy, such events have threatened the peace and stability of the region. An analysis of all these events together raises certain serious questions pertaining to the political and social structures of the valley.

Known as the historical and cultural epicentre of Central Asia, the Fergana Valley has mostly been part of a unified political space, until Soviet-crafted borders partitioned it in 1920s. Contemporary borders seldom subscribe to the geographical features of the region, nor do they reflect the ethno-linguistic realities. The Valley is ethnically diverse, and there are linguistic and cultural spillovers across borders. In the post-independence period, internal boundaries became international borders, which made the situation more complex.

Today, with a population of nearly 14 million, the Fergana Valley accounts for approximately one-fifth of the total population of five CARs; whereas, it covers less than one per cent of Central Asia's land. The valley is extremely fertile because of the river system of the *Syr Darya* and its tributaries, and is termed the agricultural heartland of the region. In fact, plentiful of natural resources and high agricultural productivity are the main reasons for high population density. Nevertheless, a population explosion in recent decades has put a strain on existing natural resources. Scarcity and competition for sharing of resources has led to ethnic cleavages and conflicts. The valley witnessed ethnic riots between the Kyrgyz and Uzbeks in 2010 in the Kyrgyz city of Osh, which left hundreds displaced, and disturbed the stability of the region.

There is a rising percentage of youth among the overall population. However, a scarcity of resources, limited opportunities of education, training and skill development, and a high degree of unemployment amongst the youth are the main causes of concern. The rate of unemployment in the region is directly proportional to the rising issues like radicalisation, militancy, drug trafficking, human trafficking, trans-border organised crime and so on. Therefore, the Fergana Valley, which is known for its natural beauty and abundance of natural and human resources, is now also associated with ethnic outbursts, militancy and radicalism. The *Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan* (IMU) was formed in 1998 in the Uzbek part of the Fergana Valley. Although its activists were subsequently ousted from the Uzbek territory, their activities continued from Afghanistan and Pakistan. The IMU's recent allegiance to the *Islamic State of Iraq and Syria* (ISIS) and the rising numbers of Central Asians fighters under the banner of the ISIS, pose a serious challenge to the peace and security of the region.

In the aftermath of independence, the situation in the Fergana Valley has influenced the relations between Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. It has also had wider implications for the security structures of the region. Therefore, studying the Fergana Valley in a holistic manner becomes vital.

### **Research Questions**

1. How has the division of the Fergana Valley between the three CARs influenced its socio-political dynamics?
2. What are the causes of the current security concerns in the valley, including ethnic tensions, radicalisation and terrorism?

### **Rationale and Scope of Study**

The Fergana Valley is a geo-strategically significant region, mainly for four reasons. Firstly, problematically divided between the three CARs, the Fergana Valley has been prone to border disputes. The process of delimitation is still underway, and has suffered serious blows in the past, mainly for the political reasons. Secondly, an abundance of natural resources, coupled with the population explosion, has fostered a sense of competition. Disputes over water sharing between the three CARs have

become a cause of worry in the recent past. Thirdly, the region is ethnically diverse and has experienced some of the worst ethnic riots in the recent past. The occurrence of yet another bout of ethnic violence, along with the water dispute, would be a threat to the regional security. And lastly, the region has recently emerged as the hotbed of extremist activities, posing the challenge of instability in the region. All these reasons justify a holistic study of the Fergana Valley region.

This Research Paper studies in detail socio-political dynamics and issues of the Fergana Valley region. It covers the internal situations in each of the three CARs, and then examines their relations with each other. Problems like border disputes, ethnic conflicts and radicalisation are elaborately discussed. Although the historical background is covered at considerable length in Chapter 2, the study mainly focuses on post-1991 developments in the Fergana Valley.

## **Methodology**

This study is based on the qualitative analysis and historical method. It uses both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources include the official websites of the governments of respective countries, speeches and quotes of leaders, news reports and the author's own observations and interviews, during her field visit. Secondary sources mainly include books, articles, and opinion pieces on various websites, by Central Asian, Indian as well as western authors.

The Field Visit to Uzbekistan's Fergana Valley region was undertaken in September 2017 for further enriching this study. Interviews with experts, teachers, students and ordinary dwellers of the valley proved extremely useful, along with the observations and personal notes made by the author during this, and previous visits.

## **Chapterisation**

Chapter 2 introduces the Fergana Valley region to the readers, by giving a detailed account of its geography and history. The history of border-crafting in Soviet times is also included in this chapter. Chapter 3 briefly reflects on contemporary politics and demographic trends in each of the three CARs which share the valley. It also has a section on contemporary socio-economic issues. Chapter 4 analyses existing border



issues, the problem of enclaves and water disputes within the Fergana valley. Chapter 5 discusses at length the ethnic entanglement, tensions and conflicts. Chapter 6 is dedicated to the problems of terrorism, militancy and radicalisation in the region with a special focus on events in the Fergana Valley. Chapter 7 describes the intra-CARs cooperation. It also includes a section on the role of major powers, namely, Russia and China. Chapter 8 includes India's engagements in Central Asia with special reference to the Fergana Valley. Chapter 9 summarises the study and tries to outline the way forward.

## Chapter 2

### The Fergana Valley: Geography and History

As described in Chapter 1, the Fergana Valley is a significant part of Central Asia. The region has witnessed the development of an advanced human civilisation since antiquity. Its specific geographical features and unique location at the crossroads of world's ancient cultures led to emergence of the Fergana Valley as the historical and cultural epicentre of Eurasia. This chapter discusses in detail the geography and history of the valley.

#### Geography of the Fergana Valley

The Fergana Valley is a triangular plain, surrounded by mountains on all sides. It is an oasis in Central Asia (CA), a region that is generally dominated either by deserts or mountains. In modern times, the valley is divided between the three CARs, namely Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. Uzbekistan has the largest portion of the Valley, roughly about 80 per cent; the remaining 20 per cent is with the other two republics. The region is home to important cities such as Andijan, Osh, Khujand, Kokand and Fergana.

Fergana valley roughly covers an area of 22,000 square kilometres.<sup>1</sup> It is about 300 kilometres long (east to west) and 100 kilometres wide (north to south). The elevation of the valley is about 3,300 feet in its eastern reach in Kyrgyzstan; from where it gently slopes to 1,050 feet at its western end, near the Tajik city of Khujand.<sup>2</sup> The climate of the valley is continental, with moderately cold winters and hot summers. Precipitation is generally low, but the valley is well-fed by the rivers from the surrounding mountains.

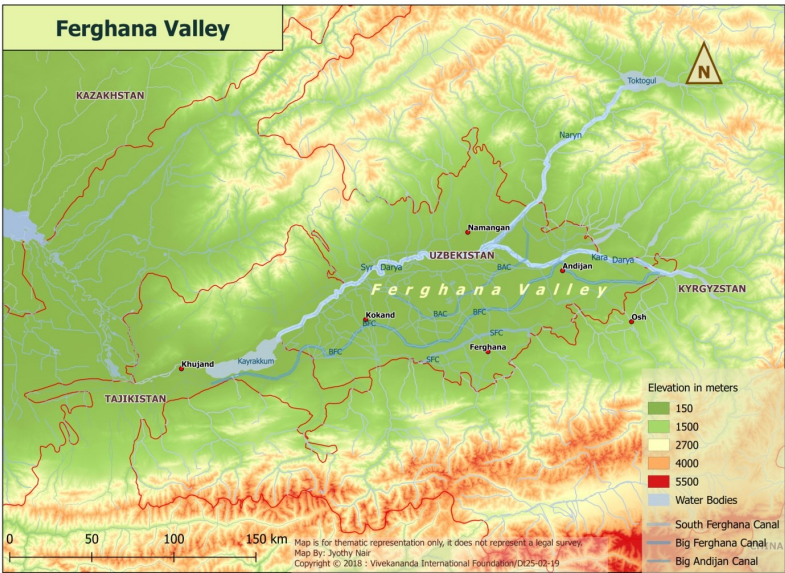
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<sup>1</sup> *Encyclopedia.com* 'Note on the Ferghana Valley', at [www.encyclopedia.com/places/commonwealth-independent-states-and-baltic-nations/cis-and-baltic-political-geography-118](http://www.encyclopedia.com/places/commonwealth-independent-states-and-baltic-nations/cis-and-baltic-political-geography-118), Accessed October 17, 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Fredrick Starr, "Introducing the Ferghana Valley", in Fredrick Starr (et al.) (ed.) *Ferghana Valley: The Heart of Central Asia*, New York, M. E. Sharpe, 2011, pp. IX- XIX.

The Fergana Valley is an inter-mountain depression lying between the mountain systems of *Tien-Shan* in the north in Kyrgyzstan and *Gissar-Alai* in the south in Tajikistan. However, Fergana is not a valley in the strict sense of the term, as it is not defined by any particular mountain or river system. It is rather, a large and triangular flatland with mountains on all sides. Five mountain ranges, *Kuramin* on the North West, *Chatkal* on the north, *Fergana* on the north east, and *Alai* and *Turkestan* on the south surround the Fergana valley.<sup>3</sup> These mountain ranges are clearly shown in Map 1. Owing to its topographical features, the valley is separated from rest of Central Asia.

As discussed, Fergana valley is not defined by a single river. Instead, it is endowed with plenty of water bodies. However, it roughly corresponds to the river basin of *Syr Darya*, which originates at the junction of rivers *Naryn* and *Kara Darya*, near the Uzbek city of *Namangan* (also situated in the Fergana Valley), from where, it flows towards the south west, separating the Fergana Valley into two uneven areas. In other words, the *Syr Darya* passes through the heart of the Fergana Valley, and through all three CARs that share the valley. Many run-off channels flow into the *Syr Darya* from the surrounding mountains, creating very favourable conditions for human habitation.



**Map 1- Topography and Hydrography of the Fergana Valley<sup>4</sup>**

3 N. I.

4 Map created by Ms Jyothy Nair, at Vivekananda International Foundation, February 2019.

The main river system of the *Syr Darya* is entirely used for irrigating the Valley. There are several major canals, including the Great, Southern and Northern Fergana Canals and the Great Andijan Canal. These canals were built during the Soviet period mainly to support cotton cultivation in the valley. They improved the irrigation infrastructure and regulated the *Syr Darya* river flow regime.<sup>5</sup> Map 1 shows rivers (in blue) and artificial canals (in dark blue), that are lifelines of the Fergana region. However, hyper irrigation in this area has led to drying up of the river flow. This has had devastating impact on the region, especially on the Aral Sea, which was fed by the rivers, *Syr Darya* and *Amu Darya*.

The *Syr Darya* River basin is very fertile, owing to the sediment deposits from the surrounding mountains. The highly developed canal system makes Fergana Valley the agricultural heartland of Central Asia. In fact, because of irrigation, this naturally dry zone supports heavy agricultural activity. The region is well-known for its cotton cultivation since the Tsarist period. Even today, cotton continues to be the major cash crop in Fergana Valley. It also produces *Devzira*, the widely popular long-grain rice, hot peppers, and *Husaini*, the tasty lady finger shaped grapes. Other agricultural products include wheat, rice, barley, fruits and vegetables. Besides, vineyards, walnut groves, and mulberry tree plantations (for producing silk) cover the region. Some parts of Fergana, especially around the ancient city of Margilan, are well-known for the production of world-class silk. Fruits produced in the valley are very tasty and juicy and are exported to far-away places.

Fergana Valley is also home to deposits of oil, natural gas, and iron ore. The region's natural resources contributed to the industrialisation of all of Soviet Central Asia. Cotton and silk production, mining, and manufacture of chemicals and cement are some of the important industries in this region. The region is also famous for its top class ceramic pottery. The unique location and specific geological features make Fergana Valley a distinct geographical zone. This distinctiveness is reflected in the evolution of a vibrant civilisation in this part of the world.

## History of the Fergana Valley

The Fergana Valley is one of those regions of the world that

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<sup>5</sup> Shavkat Kenjabayev and Hans-Georg Frede, "Irrigation Infrastructure in Fergana Today: Ecological Infrastructure- Economic Necessities", in Reinhard F. Hüttel (et al.) (ed.) *Society- Water- Technology: A Critical Appraisal of Major Water Irrigating Projects*, Berlin, Springer Open, 2015 , pp. 129-148.

through the centuries witnessed the emergence of human civilisation based on sedentary agriculture. Historically, it is river systems that have fostered the birth of great civilisations like Egypt, Mesopotamia, China and India. Likewise, the river system of mighty *Syr Darya* supported the development of the Central Asian civilisation.

The Fergana Valley has always been a sedentary agricultural region, separate from the nomadic cultures that were prevalent in the surrounding mountains. However, geographical separation could not stop the influx of hundreds of communities who migrated and intermingled with the population, creating an interesting mix of races, ethnicities and cultures. This has also led to the enrichment of the culture, arts, cuisine and traditions, giving the local people a common identity, that defines the Fergana Valley as a whole.<sup>6</sup>

Archaeological studies date irrigated agriculture in the region to the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16th centuries B.C. The highly developed *Chust* culture defined the valley during the Bronze Age, which was marked by bronze tools and weapons and painted ceramic pots. The Iron Age witnessed the rise of small city-state like settlements, with fortified walled citadels built on higher platforms. Large irrigation canals were built to support agriculture; producing rice, wheat, wines. The era is known for marking the beginning of specialised horse breeding.<sup>7</sup> The region had commercial relations with various parts of West Asia and India.

The Fergana Valley has more than 3000 years of uninterrupted history. Nonetheless, the first written information about Fergana appeared in the second century B.C. in Chinese chronicles. The travel accounts of the famous Chinese diplomat, Chang Ch'ien in 138 B.C. described the Valley at length. As a matter of fact, till then, the Chinese were hardly aware of the world beyond their western frontiers. In the first century B.C., China under the *Haan* Dynasty took control of its western parts (today's Xinjiang region) and then, established trading contacts with the Fergana Valley.<sup>8</sup> This was the trigger that led to emergence of the *Great Silk Road* that established trade links between China on the one hand and West and Central Asia and Europe on the other.

6 Abdukakhor Saidov (et al.), 'The Fergana Valley: The Pre-Colonial Legacy', in Fredrick Starr (et al.) (ed.), *Fergana Valley: The Heart of Central Asia*, New York, M. E. Sharpe, 2011, pp. 3-28.

7 Edvard Rtveldze, *Civilizations, States, and Cultures of Central Asia*, Tashkent, University of World Economy and Diplomacy Publication, 2008, pp. 7.

8 Peter L. Roudik, *The History of the Central Asian Republics*, Connecticut, Greenwood Press, 2007, pp. 19.

The *Sogdian* people<sup>9</sup> of today's Central Asia played an important role in the Silk Road trade, as they sold their horses, perfumes, glass to the Chinese and bought silk. This silk was, in turn, sold by the Sogdians to Arabian, Assyrian or Jewish traders. Apart from silk, they also traded spices, precious stones, gold and silver jewellery, glass, horses, and various fruits.<sup>10</sup> The Sogdian language became the language of international trade and communication in the ancient times. They made enormous profits in this trade; and their cities also flourished.

The Silk Road did not only facilitate exchange of goods; it also transmitted ideas and philosophies.<sup>11</sup> Through Indian merchants, money lenders, monks and travellers, Buddhism travelled to Central Asia and further to China and East Asia, where it took much deeper roots, that are visible even today. It had become a significant religious and cultural factor in Central Asia in ancient times. Similarly, the Silk Road trade also led to spread of Indian medicine, mathematics, astronomy and statecraft in this part of the world, which eventually influenced the Central Asian renaissance in the medieval period.

The Fergana Valley has experienced a number of political invasions and change of rulers. In the second century B.C., Alexander conquered the region, but his rule did not last for long. In the first century A.D., it came under Kushan Rule, which encompassed a vast area between India and Central Asia. Following that, local municipalities belonging to the Persian stock ruled the region for considerable period. However, they could not resist the overwhelming migrations of the Turkic groups, mainly from the northern steppes and eastern mountains. Arabs conquered the region in the 8<sup>th</sup> century and introduced Islam, which spread quickly. The Samanids (9-10<sup>th</sup> century) were the last rulers of the region of the Iranian lineage.

The Mongols led by Chengiz Khan (1230s) destroyed most cities in the Fergana region and Central Asia. However, this conquest could not last long, especially after his death, as the empire was fragmented. Central Asia fell into the hands of one of his sons, names Chagatai Khan. Timur (also known as Tamerlane) capitalised on the deteriorating situation and

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<sup>9</sup> Sogdiana was the ancient Iranian civilisation that flourished in this region in ancient times. It extended from Samarkand in the West to Khujand and Osh in the East; and covered the whole of the Fergana Valley.

<sup>10</sup> Judy Bonavia, *Introduction to the Silk Road*, Hong Kong, Odyssey Publishers, 1992, pp. 13.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, p. 19.

conquered the Fergana region in 1371. This gave major impetus to the *Turkification* of the Fergana Valley.

The 16<sup>th</sup> century was another remarkable period for the Fergana Valley, as the local prince of the Fergana Valley, Zahiruddin Muhammad Babur, also a descendant of Timur, was driven out of the valley and eventually out of Central Asia, by Uzbek forces led by Shaibani Khan.<sup>12</sup> His ouster had two profound consequences. Firstly, Babur fled to Afghanistan and eventually attacked India several times. In 1526, he established the Mughal dynasty in India, and brought the political, linguistic and cultural influences from the Fergana Valley to India. Secondly, it led to the consolidation of the Uzbeks in the Fergana Valley, who today form the majority population there.

The Fergana Valley region has historically witnessed an influx of various ethnic groups. In ancient times, it was populated by the Persian speakers. The Turkic migrations, which had started as early as the first century, intensified in the 6<sup>th</sup> century. This process continued thereafter, and is evident even today, in some parts. In a way, the ‘ethnic’ history of Fergana is that of the intermingling as well as clashing of various groups, belonging to Persian, Turkic and Turko- Mongoloid stocks, who are currently represented by the Tajiks, Uzbeks and Kyrgyz respectively. The influence of sedentary and nomadic cultures is also remarkable, and is reflected in cultures of the Tajiks and Uzbeks on the one hand and Kyrgyz on the other. Nonetheless, the majority of the residents of the valley, belonging to all three nationalities, follow Islam. Also, traditionally, their religious identity has played a very important role in their socio-political lives. These elements are discussed in detail in the upcoming chapters.

### **Kokand Khanate and Russian Invasion**

A fresh chapter was opened in the history of the Fergana Valley in 1709, with the establishment of an independent Uzbek state, with its capital at Kokand. The Kokand Khanate, covered the whole of the Fergana Valley, and also parts of today’s eastern Uzbekistan, Southern Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan and northern Tajikistan, which is shown in Map 2. It conquered the city of Tashkent in 1799<sup>13</sup>, which subsequently became the gateway for the Russian conquest of Central Asia

12 Satish Chandra, *Medieval India: From Sultanate to the Mughals Part II (1526-1748)*, New Delhi, Har-Anand Publications, 1999, pp. 18.

13 No. 10, pp. 60.





**Map 2- Kokand Khanate of Central Asia in the early 19th Century<sup>14</sup>**

The Kokand Khanate, ruled by the Khans of the Ming<sup>15</sup> dynasty, flourished in and around the Fergana Valley and was responsible for emergence of Kokand style of art and architecture. The magnificent Palace of Khudoyar Khan, built in the heart of Kokand city, is an example of the splendour and grandeur of the erstwhile Khanate. This was the time, when the Fergana Valley emerged as the political epicentre of the region. However, this independence could not last long, as it soon fell in hands of Tsarist invaders.

The region was conquered and annexed by the Tsarist Empire of Russia in 1876. The Khanate of Kokand was dissolved, and the Governorate of Turkestan was created with Tashkent as the seat of Government, to administer the occupied regions of present-day Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan.<sup>16</sup> Fergana Oblast was created within Turkestan for administrative purposes.<sup>17</sup> A new city of ‘Fergana’ was created in the heart of the Valley, which then served as the fortress city for the Tsarist army. Map 3 shows the administrative divisions of Central Asia, under the Tsarist Russian rule.

<sup>14</sup> Map created by Ms Jyothy Nair, at Vivekananda International Foundation, February 2019.

<sup>15</sup> This *Ming Dynasty* was of Turkic stock, and should not be confused with the Han Chinese Ming Dynasty that ruled China from 14th to 17th century.

<sup>16</sup> Svat Soucek, *The History of Inner Asia*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002, p. 202.

<sup>17</sup> No. 10, p. 82.





**Map 3- Map of Central Asia under Tsarist Rule<sup>18</sup>**

The Tsarist colonial state superimposed the ‘Turkistani’ identity on the people of Central Asia, which emphasised the ‘Turkic’ lineage of Central Asians and underplayed the differences amongst various Turkic communities, including Uzbeks, Kyrgyz, Kazakhs, Uighurs and so on. It also marginalised the Tajiks, as they belonged to the Persian language group.<sup>19</sup> The Russians introduced forced cotton cultivation in Central Asia, mainly in the Fergana Valley. This led to the over-exhausting of water resources, the results of which became visible during Soviet times.

The Bolshevik Revolution in Russia (1917) was a landmark event that changed the course of the history of Eurasia in particular, and the world in general. This led to outbreak of Civil War between Red and White armies, for control of the erstwhile Tsarist Empire. During the Civil War, Central Asians challenged the Bolsheviks through the *Basmachi Movement*, which was born in Fergana Valley and spread rapidly to other parts of former Turkestan. The Basmachis were Muslim guerrillas who resisted the Bolshevik onslaughts in the early 1920s.<sup>20</sup> They were gradually defeated by the Red Army, which slowly consolidated its position in Central Asia.

<sup>18</sup> Turkestan 1900 A.D., at [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Turkestan\\_1900-en.svg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Turkestan_1900-en.svg), Accessed January 7, 2018.

<sup>19</sup> Anita Sengupta, *The Formation of the Uzbek Nation-state: A Study in Transition*, Lanham, Lexington Books, 2003, pp. 38-39.

<sup>20</sup> Basmachi Revolt, *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, at [www.britannica.com/event/Basmachi-Revolt](http://www.britannica.com/event/Basmachi-Revolt), Accessed December 7, 2017.

## Dividing the Valley: Analysis of Soviet Border-Crafting

In 1920, the Bolshevik government decided to divide the multinational Russian Empire, which they had inherited from their predecessor, the Tsar. Lenin established *People's Commissariat of Nationalities*, with Stalin as the Commissar, which commenced the creation of a federation based on '*Nationality-based Territorial Statehood*'. It led to emergence of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) in 1922. The process of creating new republics and the National Delimitation went on for almost two decades. Subsequently, the Soviet Union became a Federation of 15 Soviet Socialist Republics (SSR), which are shown in Map 4.



Map 4- Republics of the Soviet Union<sup>21</sup>

The Soviet Union was in itself a unique experiment in history. Stalin had envisioned the USSR as a 'Union of historically distinct territories differentiated by a special way of life, as well as their national composition'.<sup>22</sup> A federal model was adopted for achieving this goal. According to Pipes, the Soviet Union was the first modern state to apply the national principle as the basis for a federal structure.<sup>23</sup> Federalism served a dual purpose for the Soviets; firstly, it gave the nationalities a

21 U.S.S.R., Mapsland, at <http://www.mapsland.com/europe/ussr>, Accessed January 7, 2018.

22 E. H. Carr, *The Bolshevik Revolution: 1917-1923*, London: Macmillan Press, 1969, p 139.

23 Richard Pipes, *The Formation of the Soviet Union, Communism and Nationalism, 1917-1923*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1954, p 112.

degree of autonomy within their titular republics, and secondly, the republics remained intact within the Union.

The Soviet Constitution (Article 14) gave the USSR the right to form new territories or regions, to alter the republic boundaries and to allow the entry of the new republics. They also managed the international affairs, as well as took care of the economic and monetary policies, transport, infrastructure and communications. The republics enjoyed internal autonomy and had the right to preserve and promote their respective languages and cultures. They also had their own constitutions to administer their defined territories. Most strikingly, the republics within the USSR had the right to secede from the Union (Article 17).<sup>24</sup> In spite of these constitutional rights, the republics seldom enjoyed real autonomy, as much was now controlled from Moscow.

The creation of republics on the national lines, giving them autonomy within their territories, and the right to promote their native languages and cultures, in a way, led to emergence of ‘nationality’-based identities in each of the republics. On the other hand, the USSR also tried to strengthen the concept of ‘Soviet identity’, which was reflected in use of Russian as the language for inter-ethnic communication, the adoption of the Cyrillic alphabet, the creation of a unique art, architecture and literature, the building of transport and infrastructure networks, and the propagation of socialist values and thought. Instead of fusing together, these two processes contradicted each other, leading to clashes and tensions in the later years of the Soviet Union.

According to Harmstone:

“The national forms, instead of becoming vehicles of socialisation, increasingly became the symbol of each group’s distinct ethnic and cultural identity. Notwithstanding the Soviets insistence on ‘national in form and socialist in content’, in actual practice the society in Soviet Union was outwardly looking socialist in a formal way but was diversified on national lines”.<sup>25</sup>

To keep its control over Central Asia intact, the Soviet government came up with ‘National Territorial Delimitation’ plan, which created five republics in the region. In 1924, the Uzbek and Turkmen Soviet Socialist

24 Joseph V. Stalin, *Constitution of the USSR, December 5, 1936*, at <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/stalin/works/1936/12/05.htm>, Accessed 10 May 2018.

25 Teresa Rakowska Harmstone, “Minority Nationalism Today: An Overview” in Robert Conquest (eds.) *The Last Empire: Nationality and the Soviet Future*, Stanford: Hoover Press, 1986, pp 239-40.

Republics (SSR) were formed, as both the ethnic groups were numerous and they felt the need to bifurcate them. The Tajik Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (ASSR) was created in 1924 within the Uzbek SSR. It was given the status of Tajik SSR only in 1929. The Kazakh and the Kyrgyz ASSRs within the Russian Federal Republic were given the status of full republics, and thus became Kazakh SSR and the Kyrgyz SSR in 1936.

The situation was much more complex in the Fergana Valley region. The valley that had been a unified political space for thousands of years was divided into Uzbek, Kyrgyz and Tajik SSRs by the Soviets. This was based on national and economic principles. The demarcation of borders in the Fergana Valley was a very complicated procedure that went on for years. One of the main difficulties (which continues) was the presence of various ethnic groups living in close proximity. Defining a particular ethnic group was also a complex task, as overlapping ethnic identities were a common phenomenon during that period. Bilingualism was widespread, and many spoke different languages at home and in public.<sup>26</sup>

Moreover, nationality was not the only criteria that influenced the process of border demarcation. The economic principle was also taken into consideration, which included factors such as agriculture, industry, irrigation, transportation and communication.<sup>27</sup> According to the Bolshevik vision, the equitable distribution of resources would help the new republics to stand on their feet. For example, the Khujand region was transferred from Uzbekistan to Tajikistan in 1929, on grounds of economic viability. Similarly, the Uzbek-dominated Osh region was transferred to the Kyrgyz SSR for the same reason.<sup>28</sup>

Moreover, one cannot overlook the hidden political agenda in Stalin's design. The Fergana Valley had historically been an integrated socio-political space. And thus, it was believed that the region had the potential to rise up against the Soviet rule at some point of time. During the Civil War (1917-1920), the Bolsheviks had encountered *Basmachi* resistance, which originated in the Fergana Valley. The deeply religious and traditional nature of the society in this region was also a concern. In

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<sup>26</sup> No. 20, p. 45.

<sup>27</sup> Ajay Patnaik, Nations, Minorities and States in *Central Asia*, Kolkata, MAKAIAS, 2003, p. 29-30.

<sup>28</sup> Eden Naby, "Ethnicity and Islam in Central Asia", *Central Asian Survey*, vol. 12, no. 2, 1993, p. 151-167.

this backdrop, Stalin used the ‘nationalist’ cause to keep the Fergana Valley divided.

Although the valley was divided into three republics, their boundaries were fluid and kept changing throughout the Soviet period. During the Soviet years, large numbers of mountain peoples were relocated to the valley, mainly to work on the cotton farms or in various factories. As they were given employment opportunities and some basic facilities, this influx kept multiplying. This policy also changed demography of the valley. The Soviets kept revising the borders frequently, on the basis of changing demographic and economic conditions. Therefore, Soviet maps show different borders for the Fergana Valley in the 1920s, 1950s and 1980s. According to Anna Matveeva;

“Inherited Soviet boundaries were not drawn as impermeable borders of independent states but were in an ongoing process of adjustment to population movement and economic developments. First, the ethnic composition was changing throughout the Soviet history, as people from the mountains had been resettled onto plains populated by other ethnic groups. Second, the borders were redrawn to suit the evolving agricultural practices, which witnessed increases in both irrigation and the amount of cultivated area”.<sup>29</sup>

The Fergana Valley went through a degree of transformation, during Soviet rule. Cotton monoculture was introduced in the valley. Several canals were constructed for irrigation purposes, which further led to the environmental problems, discussed in next chapter. Cities were developed and were given a modern look, with Soviet-style buildings and infrastructure. However, the Republics’ borders did not matter as long as the Soviet Union remained intact. There was an easy flow of men and materials within these three republics and with other parts of the Union. Also, their transport and communication lines often ran through each other’s territories. The Fergana Valley also remained an integrated market throughout the Soviet years, as agricultural produce from the Tajik and Kyrgyz SSRs made its way to Uzbek markets for sale.

As a result of the Soviet Disintegration in 1991, the internal administrative borders of the Soviet Union overnight became international

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<sup>29</sup> Anna Matveeva, “Divided we fall ... or rise? Tajikistan–Kyrgyzstan border dilemma”, *Cambridge Journal of Eurasian Studies*, Vol. 1, February 13, 2017.

borders. Nevertheless, the process of delimitation, which started in Soviet times, is still in process. The CARs use different Soviet maps, preferring those that suit their respective positions.<sup>30</sup> This has impacted the internal dynamics of these three CARs as well as their relationships with each other.

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30 Anchita Borthakur, "An Analysis of the Conflict in the Ferghana Valley", *Asian Affairs*, vol. 48, no. 2, p. 334-350. .

## Chapter 3

### Contemporary Demographic Trends and Politics in the Fergana Valley

The Central Asian Republics (CARs), in their current territorial form, were created by the Soviet Union. As discussed in the previous chapter, the Soviet-crafted borders sowed the seeds of future disagreements and tensions. These borders seldom mattered till 1991, as these republics were part of the same political entity, and thus, there was free movement of people on either side. However, the situation worsened after the Soviet Disintegration, as the internal administrative boundaries overnight became international borders, restricting the movement of men and material.

The independence of the five republics of Central Asia, marked by un-delimited borders and ethno- cultural spillovers gave rise to several issues in the aftermath of independence. The division of Fergana Valley into three CARs has equally been a source of great concern, for the region at large, and particularly for the three CARs, sharing the valley. This has led to issues and challenges within each of these republics and also in their relations with each other.

Today, with a population of nearly 14 million,<sup>31</sup> the Fergana Valley accounts for approximately one-fifth of the total population of five CARs, which is about 70 million. On the other hand, it covers less than one per cent of Central Asia's land area. Its population density is very high compared to that of the rest of Central Asia. The exact density of the Fergana Valley is hard to calculate, as it varies across the republics. Overall, the residents of the valley comprise nearly one-third of the

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<sup>31</sup> This is an approximate figure. The exact population of the Fergana Valley is hard to establish as the Valley is divided between three CARs, that are further divided according to their own administrative structures that may or may not subscribe to the geographical borders of the Valley.



population of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, and close to a quarter of the population of Uzbekistan.

The Valley is ethnically diverse, and there are linguistic and cultural spillovers across the borders. Uzbeks, Kyrgyz and Tajiks are the major ethnic groups in the region. Each of the three republics is home to a significant minority of the other two groups. There are minority pockets in the bordering regions, where minorities are in majority. There is also a significant presence of other groups like Russians, Tatars, Jews, Kazakhs, Uighurs and so on. This has further complicated the scenario. The ethno-linguistic situation in the Fergana Valley was described by Fredrick Starr as follows:

“... (The Fergana Valley) is divided both linguistically and politically, with parts ruled by three states: Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and the Kyrgyz Republic. Yet, as if to emphasize the theme of complexity, the three national zones have as much or more in common with each other than they do with the rest of the states of which each is a part”.<sup>32</sup>

Because of these socio-cultural reasons, whatever happens in one part of the valley generally affects all three CARs, in their economic, political, and religious spheres. The following sections will try to separately analyse the situation in the Fergana Valley regions of each of the republics.

## **Uzbekistan**

The largest portion of the Fergana Valley, about 80 per cent, is located within the contemporary Republic of Uzbekistan. Of the valley's total land area of 22000 square kilometres, about 18000 square kilometres fall in Uzbekistan's territory. Moreover, of about 14 million valley dwellers, approximately 9 million live in the Uzbek part of the Valley. These figures establish the importance of the Fergana Valley for Uzbekistan and vice versa.

The Uzbek part of the Fergana Valley is divided into three regions, namely, Andijan, Fergana and Namangan. These regions are located in the rich and fertile basin of the *Syr-Darya*, and have almost all major irrigation canals in the region. They enjoy high productivity in terms of

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32 Fredrick Starr, “Introducing the Ferghana Valley”, in Fredrick Starr (et al.) (ed.) *Ferghana Valley: The Heart of Central Asia*, New York, M. E. Sharpe, 2011, p. IX- XIX.



agriculture and industry. These three regions have an extremely high density of population, especially compared to the rest of the country.



**Map 5- Administrative Map of Uzbekistan**  
(Fergana Valley Region is roughly encircled in Red)<sup>33</sup>

The following table depicts area and population of Uzbekistan in general and each of the regions in Uzbek Fergana Valley in particular.

Region	Area (in Thousand Sq. Km.)	Population (in Million)
Andijan Region	4.24	2.9
Fergana Region	6.76	3.6
Namangan Region	7.44	2.6
Three Regions of the Fergana Valley Combined	18.44	9.1
Uzbekistan	448.90	32.1

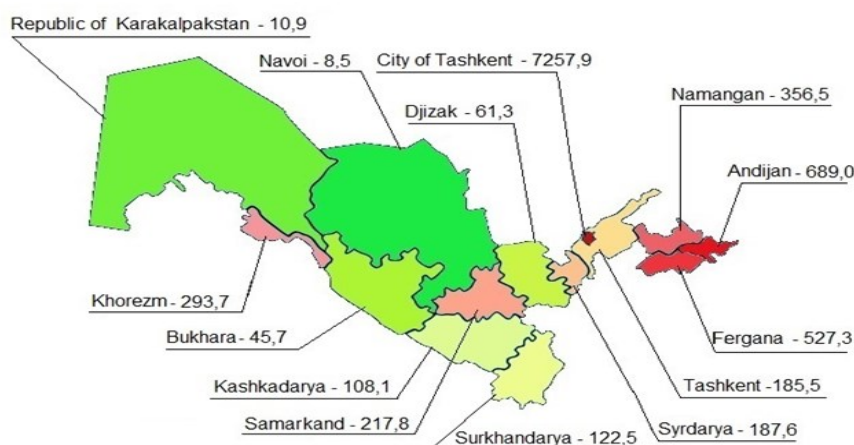
**Table 1- Population and Area of the Uzbek Part of the Fergana Valley**  
(Table prepared by the author; Data Source: The Government  
Portal of the Republic of Uzbekistan)<sup>34</sup>

33 Administrative Map of Uzbekistan, *Nations Online*, at [www.nationsonline.org/oneworld/map/uzbekistan-administrative-map.htm](http://www.nationsonline.org/oneworld/map/uzbekistan-administrative-map.htm), Accessed 09 December 2017.

34 Territory, Government Portal of the Republic of Uzbekistan, at <https://www.gov.uz/en/pages/territory>, Accessed December 3, 2017.

From the above table, it can be seen that the three regions of the Uzbek Fergana Valley combined, constitute less than five per cent of the total Uzbek territory. On the other hand, they are home to more than a quarter of Uzbekistan's population. The population of the Uzbek Republic is slightly above 32 million, of which 9 million live in the Fergana Valley. The presence of a humongous population in a small area, invariably implies high density of population.

Population density in Uzbekistan is 71.5 (per square kilometre). But the density in the Fergana Valley regions is much above the average rate. It is highest in the region of Andijan at 689; followed by 527 in Fergana and 356 in Namangan.<sup>35</sup> The following map shows the region-wise density of population in Uzbekistan:



**Map 6- Population Density of the Regions of Uzbekistan<sup>36</sup>**

The high density of population has put pressure on the limited resources, leading to poverty and unemployment. In Uzbekistan, about 60 per cent population is in the working age group. Moreover, about 30 per cent are under the working age,<sup>37</sup> and they will enter the work force in near future. Job creation for such a vast population is certainly a difficult task. The state of higher education in Uzbekistan is seriously worrisome. A large number of high school graduates have to dropout, as there are few universities. The process becomes a vicious circle, as lack of higher education leads to lack of job opportunities. The high unemployment rate among the young has given rise to variety of other problems, like drug

<sup>35</sup> The State Committee of Republic Uzbekistan on Statistics, 2017 Data, at <https://stat.uz/en/official-statistics/gender-statistics/435-analiticheskie-materialy-en1/2075-demographic-situation-in-the-republic-of-uzbekistan>, Accessed December 8, 2017.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

trafficking, organised crime, and radicalisation and militancy.

In Uzbekistan, Uzbeks form the majority constituting almost 84 per cent of the total population. Other significant ethnic groups are Russians, Tajiks, Kazakhs, Karakalpaks, Kyrgyzs, Uighurs, Koreans and Tatars, along with many other smaller groups. The Kyrgyz and Tajik people are concentrated in the border areas of the Fergana Valley. Tajiks are also present in large numbers in the historic cities of Samarkand and Bukhara. Kyrgyz are in large numbers in the Namangan and Andijan regions, that border Kyrgyzstan.

In spite of its considerable multi-ethnic composition, the population of the Uzbek section of the Fergana valley is comparatively more homogenous than that in the other two republics. The numbers of ethnic-Uzbeks are much higher in the Fergana Valley sections of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, compared to combined numbers of Tajiks and Kyrgyz in the Uzbek section. Generally, the ethnic-Uzbeks overwhelmingly constitute all parts of the valley. Nevertheless, the exact number of ethnic-Tajiks or ethnic-Kyrgyz in the Uzbek Fergana valley cannot be established, because of bi-lingualism and the dual identities of people, in some cases. There are reports that some households describe themselves as Uzbeks in their official documents,<sup>38</sup> but speak Tajik at home. This practice has been prevalent since Soviet times, as the titular nationalities got better opportunities. Because of this phenomenon, it is likely that the government data on the ethnic composition of these regions might be misleading.

The Uzbek Fergana Valley is home to some important cities like Kokand, Andijan, Fergana, Margilan and Namangan, which (except Fergana which was created in 1867) have played an important role in shaping the history of the CA region. Most of these cities flourished as stopovers on the Silk Road. The area around the city of Margilan is famous for producing world-class silk. The town has preserved its unique style of silk-weaving through the centuries. Kokand was the seat of power in the erstwhile Kokand Khanate, which ruled the region for more than two centuries. Andijan was the hometown of Zahir-ud-din Muhammad Babur, the young prince who was ousted from his homeland and subsequently travelled to India and created the mighty Mughal Empire. These historical

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<sup>38</sup> Murat Sadykov, 'Uzbekistan: Tajik Language under Pressure in Ancient Samarkand', *Eurasianet*, November 5, 2013, At <https://eurasianet.org/node/67724>, Accessed May 11, 2018.

references occur frequently in the nationalist discourse of Uzbekistan, and are vital for the construction of an Uzbek identity.

The identity of the peoples of Central Asia has traditionally been shaped by supra-national factors, such as Islam or the Turkic or Persian language group, or sub-national factors like region or clan. For example, people in the Fergana valley identified themselves either as Muslims, or the Kokandis, as they belonged to the Kokand Khanate. The citizens of the khanate belonged to various ethnic groups like Uzbeks, Chagatais, Sarts, Tajiks and Kyrgyzs, and still associated themselves with the Kokandi identity. During that time, national or ethnic consciousness was close to negligible; it started to crystallise only after the creation of the SSRs and the subsequent division of the valley. The process gained momentum in the aftermath of independence.

The process of the re-construction of Uzbek national identity began as a top-down process in the post-independence period. The emerging nationalist discourse was based on the historical and ethno-cultural motifs of the Uzbeks, through the glorification of national heroes, revival of the historical ‘golden period’, restoration of religious monuments, re-naming of places, and so on. This process is still underway, and is slowly percolating down the common people of Uzbekistan.

The Fergana Valley has been the historical and cultural epicentre of Uzbekistan since ancient times. It continues to hold a unique place in culture and art, be it silk, ceramic, cuisine, clothing and dance. The contribution of the valley is immense in the economic, scientific and technological spheres. However, they still lag behind in political discourse, as it is mostly dominated by people from the Tashkent and Samarkand regions.

In the post-independence period, Uzbekistan has witnessed number of disturbing events in the Fergana valley region. In the 1990s, a chain of events triggered by terrorism and radicalisation, shook the country, starting with Namangan in 1999 to Andijan in 2005. In 1998, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) was formed in the Uzbek part of the Fergana Valley. The strong regime of the First President, Islam Karimov, dealt with these threats with a heavy hand. But these events made the Fergana Valley a permanent zone of concern.

For almost 25 years after independence, there was no direct rail link between the Fergana Valley and rest of Uzbekistan. The Soviet-era rail route passed through the territory of Tajikistan, and thus, was long, costly and cumbersome. However, in June 2016, Uzbekistan constructed the railway connecting Tashkent with the Fergana valley. This project was completed with the help of China, which built the 19.5 km long Kamchiq tunnel that cuts across the Kuramin mountains. This tunnel was inaugurated in 2016 by Xi Jinping and the then Uzbek President Islam Karimov.<sup>39</sup> This new railway that connects Fergana Valley with rest of Uzbekistan, has re-defined travel within the Valley, and has become a catalyst in development of the Valley, that has immense agricultural and industrial potential.

After the sudden death of President Islam Karimov, who ruled the country for 25 years after independence, the then Prime Minister Shavkat Mirziyoyev became the President of Uzbekistan. Under his leadership, the country is going through socio-political transition, which was introduced by Mirziyoyev in his reform program titled ‘Strategy of Actions in five priority areas’. He is also trying to improve relations with the neighbours. Some of his recent attempts include the border demarcation between Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan-Tajikistan; the opening of the border crossings, and increasing connectivity and trade. These changes have created a positive environment within the valley.

## **Tajikistan**

Tajikistan controls the second largest portion of the Fergana Valley after Uzbekistan. The Tajik part of the Fergana valley is located in the north of the country, which is part of the Sugdh region and has its capital at Khujand. The Sugdh region derives its name from the ancient Iranian civilization of *Sogdiana*, which flourished in this region in ancient times. During Soviet times, it was an administrative division of the Tajik SSR, and was called Leninabad. It was re-named Sughd in 2000.

Sughd is geographically diverse, with valleys as well as mountains. The Fergana Valley is in the northern part of Sughd, whereas the southern part has the east-west mountain range of Gissar and the Zerafshan river valley. The Sughd region has some important cities like Khujand,

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39 ‘Two Presidents Open Angren-Pap Railway’, *Railway Gazette*, July 2, 2016. At <http://www.railwaygazette.com/news/infrastructure/single-view/view/two-presidents-open-angren-pap-railway.html>, Accessed March 29, 2018.

Isfara, Shakhristan and Penjikent.<sup>40</sup>Map 7- Administrative Map of Tajikistan<sup>41</sup>

About 93 per cent of the territory of Tajikistan is mountainous, the Fergana Valley being the only part of the country that qualifies as a plain. The total population of the Republic of Tajikistan (as in 2017) is 8.7 million,<sup>42</sup> of which more than two million are estimated to be living in the Fergana Valley. However, the exact population of the Tajik Fergana Valley cannot be determined, as the geographical border of the valley does not subscribe to the administrative border of Sughd region. The population density of Tajikistan is 61.8 per square kilometre.<sup>43</sup> However, going by the density trends in the Uzbek Fergana Valley, the population density in the Tajik Fergana Valley is also estimated to be much higher than the national average. This gives rise to similar issues like poverty, unemployment, and conflicts over resources.

The problem of the Tajik Fergana Valley is more complex than that of Uzbekistan, as there is large Uzbek population in this region. In fact, as

40 Sughd, Regions of Tajikistan, at <http://travel.osimov.info/regions-2/>, Accessed January 3, 2018.

41 Administrative Map of Tajikistan, *Nations Online*, at <http://www.nationsonline.org/oneworld/map/tajikistan-administrative-map.htm/>, Accessed January 3, 2018.

42 Statistical Agency under President of the Republic of Tajikistan, at <http://www.stat.tj/english/home.htm>, Accessed January 3, 2018.

43 Ibid.



discussed in the previous chapter, economic considerations prevailed over the national principle at the time of the crafting of this border. Khujand was transferred to Tajikistan in 1929, in view of its economic potential. This was done despite an overwhelming Uzbek population. Likewise, the region makes a significant economic contribution to the Tajik national GDP.

Because of its favourable geographical location, the Sughd region is considered to be the northern gateway of Tajikistan. Most of the trade and transport of the Fergana Valley passes through Khujand. This includes railways, inter-CARs gas pipelines, high-voltage power lines and international roads. Moreover, most of the industrial and agricultural potential of the country is concentrated in this region. Its mining industry is also well developed, producing gold, silver, lead, zinc, coal, granite, marble, gypsum, etc.<sup>44</sup> The Sughd Free Economic Zone was established in 2009, to enhance economic activity and attract foreign companies.

Khujand is the largest industrial and cultural centre in the Sughd region. It is also the second-largest city in the republic with a population of about 1,75,400.<sup>45</sup> It is home to people of more than 20 nationalities. Since Soviet times, Khujand had been developed as a transport hub and is also the political, economic, cultural and scientific centre of the country. Khujand's economic contribution to Tajikistan is immense. However, it is geographically cut off from the rest of Tajikistan by the east-west spread of the Gissar Mountains. In fact, the natural route from Khujand to the Tajik capital, Dushanbe, passed through Samarkand (Uzbekistan) for most of history, including the Soviet times. It was only after independence, that a direct route cutting through Gissar range was constructed. Culturally also, Khujand is more akin to cities like Samarkand and Kokand (Uzbekistan), than Dushanbe.

The history of Tajikistan is marked by the anthropo-geographical dichotomy between mountains and the valley, and also by the cultural-linguistic dialectic between the Turkic and Persian civilisation, that the previous chapter discussed in detail. Since ancient times, people in the north have been part of a rich-urban based culture; whereas those from the mountains, who were isolated from the plains, developed their own unique

44 Sughd Region, *Sughd Free Economic Zone*, at <http://www.fezsughd.tj/index.php/en/creative-squad/sogdijskaya-oblast>, Accessed January 3, 2018.

45 *City Population- Tajikistan*, at <http://www.citypopulation.de/Tajikistan.html>, Accessed May 14, 2018.

cultures.<sup>46</sup> The Tajiks are the only ethnic group in Central Asia that are of Iranian stock. Nonetheless, the Tajiks have ethno-culturally intermingled with the Turkic groups in the region, especially the Uzbeks, so much so, that it is difficult to distinguish between them. However, the cleavages that developed in the Soviet times have been widening in the post-Soviet era.

In the immediate aftermath of independence, Tajikistan witnessed a Civil War (1992-1997) between supporters of different ideologies. On the one hand, there was the communist old guards that constituted the ruling class in the post-independence period. On the other hand were the liberals and Islamists, who were mostly from the southern and eastern mountains. The ruling side was dominated by the elites from the Sughd region. Therefore, throughout the Civil War, Khujand and the Fergana Valley remained comparatively peaceful, as they were mainly on the government's side. This side was also supported by Russia and other CARs. However, the outbreak of Civil War diminished the political domination of Sughd (then Leninabad) as for the first time in the history of modern Tajikistan, Emomali Rahmon, a non-leninabadi became the President.<sup>47</sup> This has led to their comparative political downfall, although their economic and cultural influence is still intact.

## **Kyrgyzstan**

Within CARs, Kyrgyzstan has seen the most political turbulence in the post-independence period. This includes two bloody revolutions, a violent ethnic clash and regime changes. There are political as well as geographical factors that played their part in fuelling the instability.

Like Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan is also overwhelmingly mountainous. The north-south range of the Tien Shan divides the country into two uneven parts, the North and the South. The Fergana Valley falls in southern Kyrgyzstan; and is a fertile plain. This region is defined by the highly developed ancient urban civilisation, in and around the city of Osh. Osh is considered to be the eastern-most city in the Fergana Valley, and was in a way, a gateway to the valley for those coming from the east. Other important cities of the Kyrgyz Fergana valley are Jalalabad and Batken.

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46 Shirin Akiner and Catherine Barnes, "The Tajik Civil War: Causes and Dynamics", at <http://www.c-r.org/accord-article/tajik-civil-war-causes-and-dynamics>, 2001, Accessed October 8, 2017.

47 Oliver Roy, "Inter-regional Dynamics of War", at <http://www.c-r.org/accord-article/inter-regional-dynamics-war>, 2001, Accessed October 8, 2017.



Being a mountainous country, Kyrgyzstan is the source of numerous rivers and streams, including the two important rivers, the Naryn and the Kara Darya, which together make up the mighty *Syr Darya* at their confluence near Namangan, in Uzbekistan. These rivers bring sediment down from the mountains and deposit it in the plains, making the Fergana Valley extremely fertile. Being an upstream country, Kyrgyzstan is at a more advantageous position than lower stream countries like Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan.

The Fergana Valley portion of Kyrgyzstan is divided into three administrative regions, namely Osh, Jalalabad and Batken. However, the administrative borders of these three regions are incongruent with the geographical borders of the Fergana valley, as these regions also consist of portions of adjacent mountains. Therefore, it is difficult to determine the exact area and population of the Kyrgyz Fergana Valley, which is estimated at around two million, of which more than one million live in the city of Osh. Osh is the second largest city of the Kyrgyz Republic and thus, is considered an independent administrative unit, which is constitutionally equivalent to the regions.



Map 8 Political Map of Kyrgyzstan<sup>48</sup>

The population of the Kyrgyz Republic is about 6.14 million,<sup>49</sup> and the average population density is about 30 people per square kilometre.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>48</sup> Kyrgyzstan Political Map, *Maps Open Source*, at [www.mapsofopen.com/images/kyrgyzstan-political-map.gif](http://www.mapsofopen.com/images/kyrgyzstan-political-map.gif), Accessed January 9, 2018.

<sup>49</sup> National Statistical Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic, at [www.stat.kg/en/statistics/naselenie/](http://www.stat.kg/en/statistics/naselenie/), Accessed January 9, 2018.

<sup>50</sup> 'Kyrgyzstan Population 2018', *World Population Review*, at [www.worldpopulationreview.com/countries/kyrgyzstan-population/](http://www.worldpopulationreview.com/countries/kyrgyzstan-population/), Accessed January 11, 2018.

Density is much higher near the capital, Bishkek, and around the second largest city, Osh. Like other CARs, Kyrgyzstan is also home to several nationalities, the majority being the Kyrgyz at 73 per cent; followed by the Uzbeks at 14.6 per cent; and the Russians at six per cent.<sup>51</sup> Russian and other Slavic minorities, mostly live in, and around Bishkek, whereas the Uzbeks are located in the Fergana Valley region. These people have been playing an important role in the regional economy of southern Kyrgyzstan. Almost half of Osh population belongs to Uzbek nationality, having strong links with Uzbeks on the other side of the border, in the Andijan region of Uzbekistan. Unlike the Russian and Slavic people, who migrated to this region during Soviet times, the Uzbeks have inhabited the Fergana Valley for centuries.

Like Tajikistan, the Kyrgyz Fergana valley is also geographically separated from the rest of Kyrgyzstan by the high mountain range of the Tien Shan. There is only a single road that connects north Kyrgyzstan with the Fergana Valley region. There is also cultural difference between the sedentary-nomadic cultures of South and North respectively. Traditionally, Uzbeks dominated the sedentary culture of south, which was marked by irrigated agriculture and highly developed urban settlements. On the other hand, the Kyrgyz dominated the mountains and have followed a nomadic lifestyle for centuries. Their presence in the Fergana Valley started to grow during Soviet times, as they migrated in search of work. Their relationship with the Uzbeks has mostly been contested. In the wake of the population explosion and scarcity of resources, both the communities developed feeling of resentment towards each other. This Uzbek-Kyrgyz dichotomy and the north-south dynamic have influenced Kyrgyz politics in the post-independence period.

In 1990, even before the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the city of Osh was hit by ethnic riots between Uzbeks and Kyrgyz. These tensions had their roots in the Soviet policy of industrialisation in Osh, which had led to the migration of the rural Kyrgyz population into the cities. In the wake of the *Glasnost* in late 1980s, both the nationalities underwent a political mobilisation. The Uzbek minority, which was concentrated in the Fergana Valley, demanded autonomous status for their region. On the other hand, the Kyrgyz wanted to take over the agricultural lands owned

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<sup>51</sup> 'Population by Nationality, National Statistical Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic', at [www.stat.kg/en/statistics/naselenie/](http://www.stat.kg/en/statistics/naselenie/), Accessed January 9, 2018.

by the Uzbeks.<sup>52</sup> One such move in 1990 triggered off a large-scale ethnic conflict between the two communities.

In Kyrgyzstan, the north-south divide is much more complex than mere geography and culture. According to Mite, "... (the) North is comparatively homogenous. The region in and around Bishkek is densely populated and economically developed (industrialised)".<sup>53</sup> The rest of the Kyrgyz territory consists of rough terrain and is, thus, sparsely populated. On the other hand, the southern economy is agrarian. Also, as the northern society followed Nomadism, it is more open; whereas, the south is more comparatively conservative and religious. In other words, the north is more Russified, while the south reflects the traditional values of Central Asia.<sup>54</sup>

The north-south disparity started widening when Aksar Akayev, a northerner, became the president in the immediate aftermath of independence. During his rule, there were claims that the southerners were being marginalised and denied power. It was believed that Akayev appointed the northerners on key-positions, of which many were from his own clan. The opponents of Akayev initially began by organising protests in the southern cities of Osh and Jalalabad. However, they soon took on the form of the so-called 'Tulip Revolution' in 2005, leading to his ouster from power and exile from the country. As a result of this revolution, Kumranbek Bakiyev from southern Kyrgyzstan became the president. However, the divide kept widening.<sup>55</sup>

Bakiyev became increasingly unpopular because of his style of functioning and the various corruption charges against him. He was ousted from presidential office in 2010 in another revolution, and Roza Otunbayeva became the president. However, in the wake of the revolution, the Uzbeks of the southern region rose in protest against Bakiyev. This eventually culminated in devastating ethnic riots between Kyrgyz and the Uzbeks in Osh, which are described in detail in the fifth chapter. During the crisis, it became clear that Uzbeks of Kyrgyzstan were overwhelmingly against the Kyrgyz of the south and closer to the Kyrgyz of the north.

<sup>52</sup> John Wilson, "Osh and the Fergana Valley: Diversity and Division", February 28, 2017, at [www.geohistory.today/osh-fergana-valley/](http://www.geohistory.today/osh-fergana-valley/), Accessed January 6, 2018.

<sup>53</sup> Valentinas Mite, "Kyrgyzstan: North South Divide is a Factor in Politics", March 24, 2005, at [www.rferl.org/a/1058107.html](http://www.rferl.org/a/1058107.html), Accessed January 6, 2018.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Andrew R. Bond and Natalie R. Koch, "Kyrgyzstan, Interethnic Tensions, and Relations with Uzbekistan: A Political Geographic Perspective", at [www.nataliekoch.com/docs/Bond\\_Koch\\_2010](http://www.nataliekoch.com/docs/Bond_Koch_2010), Accessed December 13, 2017.

Under the interim presidency of Rosa Otunbayeva, a new Constitution was adopted, which declared Kyrgyzstan a Parliamentary democracy, making it a standalone case in Central Asia. Some powers were transferred from the president to the Parliament; and the presidential tenure was restricted, to only one term. The constitution was ratified in a National Referendum, and fresh elections were held in 2011, making Almazbek Atambayev, a northerner, the fourth president. In 2011, Atambayev took over a country that was in chaos and confusion. It is to his credit that stability was successfully restored in Kyrgyzstan.

As the 2010 Constitution restricts the Kyrgyz President to a single term of six years and prohibits him from re-election, Atambayev became ineligible for contesting the next election. Thus he supported his prime minister, Sooronbay Jeenbekov as the president. Jeenbekov comes from the Osh region, situated in Fergana Valley in southern Kyrgyzstan. He received massive support from the southern regions in the election. On the other hand, his opponent Babanov was supported by the north.<sup>56</sup>

The 2017 presidential election further intensified the north-south divide. Now, it is a huge task for Jeenbekov to tackle the differences and maintain peace. The country is already going through a lot of political instability. A small and economically underdeveloped country like Kyrgyzstan cannot afford another political crisis. The pendulum of political power in Kyrgyzstan keeps swinging from north to south and vice versa. However, after overcoming the two violent revolutions and ethnic conflict of 2010, the country has witnessed a peaceful power transition for the first time, in its recent history. This is a welcome trend that can potentially consolidate democratic traditions within the country.

### **Contemporary Socio-Economic Conditions**

The Fergana valley is traditionally known as the agriculture heartland of Central Asia, because of its abundance of resources. During Soviet times, cotton monoculture was introduced in the valley, which led to excess production of cotton and over-use of water. Similarly many industries were also set up. In the post-independence period also, the valley continues to be the bread basket of the region with high agricultural productivity, especially in rice, wheat, cotton, fruits and vegetables. The

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<sup>56</sup> Rashmini Koparkar, "Presidential Elections in Kyrgyzstan: More Continuity than Change", November 13, 2017, at <http://www.vifindia.org/article/2017/november/13/presidential-elections-in-kyrgyzstan-more-continuity-than-change>, Accessed December 13, 2017.

regions belonging to the valley contribute immensely to the economies of their respective republics.

Agriculture accounts for a significant share of the national Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and employment. For example, in 2016, agriculture in Uzbekistan accounted for 17 per cent of the national GDP, 15 per cent of its export revenues, and over one-third of employment.<sup>57</sup> However, till date, the agricultural sector is heavily cotton-driven, especially in all parts of the Fergana Valley, which has led to a water crisis. The CARs, particularly Uzbekistan, have realised the need for diversification from cotton into higher value-added products, including fruits, vegetables and livestock, which can potentially result in better-paid jobs in rural areas, food security, and rise in exports. This can also potentially solve other social and ecological issues.<sup>58</sup>

In recent years, the region is being increasingly exposed to challenges such as environmental degradation, natural disasters, industrial pollution and climate change. The Fergana Valley region is also susceptible to earthquakes, landslides and avalanches. The irregularities of seasons and temperature extremes, due to climate change, are creating problems like concentrated rainfall and in some cases devastating flooding. Diminishing water resources and the deteriorating water and soil quality have adversely impacted agricultural productivity.<sup>59</sup>

The Fergana Valley region has also been suffering from the after effects of the Soviet radioactive waste buried in southern reaches of Tien Shan in south Kyrgyzstan. For example, Mailuu Suu, a former Soviet uranium mining town in the Jalalabad district of Kyrgyzstan, is one of region's most polluted places, owing to the radioactive waste dumps. The town produced about 1000 metric tons of radioactive uranium, between 1946 and 1967, providing fuel for Soviet Union's first nuclear and atomic energy plants.<sup>60</sup> During that era, millions of tons of waste was buried along the Mailuu Suu river, thus contaminating the river that caters to sizeable population in the Fergana Valley. Frequent mudslides in the surrounding area expose the buried radioactive wastes, the tailings from

57 "Farmers and Agribusinesses in Uzbekistan to Benefit from Additional Support to Horticulture Sector", *The World Bank*, January 30, 2018, at <http://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2018/01/30/additional-support-to-horticulture-sector-in-uzbekistan>, Accessed June 31, 2018.

58 *Ibid.*

59 "Ferghana Valley Five Year Humanitarian Trends Assessment", *Inter-Agency Regional Analysts Network*, IRIS, March-2017, at <http://www.iris-france.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Ferghana-Valley-Report.pdf>, Accessed May 15, 2018.

60 Mailuu-Suu, Kyrgyzstan, *Nuclear Risks*, at <http://www.nuclear-risks.org/en/hibakusha-worldwide/mailuu-suu.html>, Accessed May 30, 2018.

which further contaminate the river. This has led to thousands of people in the region being affected in terms of health.<sup>61</sup>

The demographic challenge is another cause for worry in this region. Almost 30 per cent of the population in the CARs, falls in the working age-group. However, the majority of the youth are unable to get higher education and find jobs; thus, ending up in the agricultural sector, which is already stagnating. Poverty, hunger and the high rate of unemployment among the youth are some of the reasons that encouraged labour migrations to Russia. Almost half of the economy of poor countries like Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, is dependent on remittances from Russia. Nevertheless, in the recent years, the flow of remittances from Russia has shrunk because of the Russian recession and the weakening of the Rouble. The year 2015 marked the lowest remittance growth rate since 2008. In the same year, the Central Bank of Russia reported a 15 per cent drop in remittances to Central Asia.<sup>62</sup> This was coupled with the stricter immigration policies that forced hundreds of workers to return home. This hit the Tajiks and Uzbeks more than the Kyrgyz, as the two states are not part of the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), which allows free movement of workers.<sup>63</sup>

The economic issues like poverty, hunger, unemployment, shrinking remittances, lack of opportunities for higher education, coupled with the environmental crises, have given rise to various other social problems in the valley, like ethnic clashes, drug trafficking, organised crime, militancy and radicalisation. These problems are dealt with in the following chapters.

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61 Ryskeldi Satke, "Soviet Uranium Mines still have Deadly Impact in Kyrgyzstan", *The Diplomat*, December 13, 2016, at <https://thediplomat.com/2016/12/soviet-uranium-mines-still-have-deadly-impact-in-kyrgyzstan/>, Accessed May 30, 2018.

62 No. 60.

63 Ibid.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Border Issues, Problem of Enclaves and Water Disputes**

The creation of five republics in Central Asia and the division of the Fergana Valley between three of them, did not pose much of a problem during the Soviet times. Borders within the Soviet Union were only for the namesake; and were neither fixed nor strict. They kept altering according to the changing socio-economic situations. There was free movement of men and material across all the borders. The railways and roads connecting the various cities of the Soviet CARs frequently passed across these territories. Trade and transit was simple in the absence of cumbersome formalities of border control.

However, the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the independence of the five CARs complicated the situation, as internal boundaries overnight became international borders. Most of these borders were not properly delimited, which added to the existing confusion. The creation of enclaves on either side of the borders, was also an alarming phenomenon.

This chapter highlights the existing border issues, the problems of enclaves and the water disputes between the three CARs, especially those relating to the Fergana Valley.

As discussed in the previous chapters, the Soviet pattern of territorial demarcation sowed the seeds for future border tensions. Although nationality was cited as the main criteria for creation of Soviet CARs, and economic factors like availability of natural resources, fertility of land, potential for industrial development, etc, were also taken into consideration. As a result, none of these republics were truly 'national' in character. The area around Khujand was made a part of Tajikistan for

economic reasons, while Osh went to Kyrgyzstan, despite the overwhelming Uzbek population in both.

In reality, all the CARs are home to people of several nationalities, with titular nationality holding a majority position. All Central Asian nationalities are present in all the CARs. This phenomenon is more visible on the borders, where there are overwhelming populations of the titular nationalities of neighbouring republics. Several ethnicities have co-habited in this region for ages. However, demographic changes, scarcity of resources and the emerging political dynamics in each of the three republics (discussed in last chapter) have resulted in an uneasy relationship between various nationalities.

Border issues along with the ethnic tangle are most complex in the Fergana Valley region. There is a significant presence of non-titular nationalities in all parts of the Fergana Valley. In certain areas, there are ‘pockets’ where minorities are in majority. This includes the southern parts of Uzbekistan, where there are number of Tajiks. The Andijan and Namangan provinces of Uzbekistan have a significant Kyrgyz minority. Similarly, the Osh province of Kyrgyzstan and the Khujand region of Tajikistan are inhabited overwhelmingly by the Uzbek-speaking people. Apart from these, there are several enclaves in the Fergana Valley.

## **Border Disputes**

An international border ensures nation’s sovereignty and territorial integrity. Therefore, in the modern nation-state system, borders have become sacrosanct. According to Matveeva, “a border (1) expresses a symbol of new nationhood and contributes to ethnic consolidation, (2) justifies a security regime to mark control over the territory, and (3) reflects divergent development trajectories of the new states that plan their own futures”.<sup>64</sup> This is why there is a strong link between the border, national identity and the people, which gives titular groups an advantageous position; but sometimes generates a sense of non-belonging in the ethnic minorities.<sup>65</sup>

Borders generally complicate relations between neighbouring states. If the borders are marked by ethno-cultural spillovers, the problem becomes much more complex. In such a scenario, issues pertaining even to

<sup>64</sup> Anna Matveeva, No. 30.

<sup>65</sup> Shahram Akbarzadeh, “A Note on Shifting Identities in the Fergana Valley”, *Central Asian Survey*, Vol. 16, No. 1, 1997, p. 65-68.



people's day-to-day lives can acquire ethnic overtones. Problems that originate as normal disputes amongst local dwellers soon assume an ethno-linguistic character, and end up in arguments such as 'this is our historical land!'.<sup>66</sup>

The three CARs sharing the Fergana Valley have un-delineated borders and over arching identities, that lead to unresolved border issues. In the aftermath of independence, the CARs became increasingly concerned about the trans-border threats like militancy and radicalisation, which led to the closing of many border checkpoints.

The Tajik Civil War (1992-1997) and the rising activities of terrorist organisations, especially the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), fuelled the already existing tensions. As a result, the first president of Uzbekistan, Islam Karimov, in order to curb insurgency, took stringent steps like closing the border crossing points between Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. There are reports suggesting that the Uzbek military had mined some sections of the border in 1999-2000,<sup>67</sup> which became a huge controversy. This led to the deterioration of the relationship between the two republics for two decades.

The inter-state border disputes create socio-cultural problems for the people living in the bordering regions. Firstly, many of them have relatives in the neighbouring countries. However, because of lack of cross-border connectivity and cumbersome visa regimes, it becomes difficult for these people to attend family gatherings, weddings and funerals across the border. Secondly, linguistic and ethno-cultural dynamics give rise to the feeling of non-belonging with regard to their residential states, and people get connected more with the neighbouring republics, where their population is in majority. For example, Uzbeks living in the Kyrgyz Fergana Valley have close ties with the Uzbeks in the Uzbek Fergana Valley, and have a sense of connectedness with the Republic of Uzbekistan. This further complicates the issue.

It is not possible to analyse the situation on all the three borders in the Fergana Valley, therefore, the Kyrgyz-Tajik border issue is discussed here, as a case study.

<sup>66</sup> Anna Matveeva, No. 30.

<sup>67</sup> Amrita Kyrgyzova, "Problems on Uzbek-Tajik Border: Landmines in Disputed Areas of the Sughd Region", October 4, 2006, at <http://news.tj/en/news/problems-uzbek-tajik-border-landmines-disputed-areas-sughd-region>, (Accessed February 24, 2018).

## The Case of Kyrgyz-Tajik Border

The Kyrgyzstan–Tajikistan border is one of the last undefined borders of the post-Soviet states. The primary reason for this has been the reluctance of the respective regimes to resolve the issue. For more than 25 years after independence, both republics seem to have opted for a status quo, as both are unable to act against the wishes of their border communities. The claims and counter claims are made about the exact length of the border, and both have been using different Soviet maps to support their claims. For example, Tajikistan has been insisting on the maps from the 1920s, which show many contested lands in Tajikistan. On the other hand, Kyrgyzstan uses the late 1950 map, which was drawn after waves of Kyrgyz resettlements (see Chapter 2).<sup>68</sup>

Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan share about 970 kilometres of border. Over the last couple of years, the two states have successfully delimited about 519 km of their border; while the rest still remains un-demarcated.<sup>69</sup> This border falls in the densely populated lowlands of the Fergana Valley and spans Tajikistan’s Sughd region and Kyrgyzstan’s Batken province. It includes as many as 58 separately contested sections,<sup>70</sup> which are difficult to settle.

Incidents of stone-pelting, sporadic clashes between the security personnel, exchange of gun fire, or killings of smugglers/ traffickers are very common along the Tajik-Kyrgyz border, giving rise to eternal tensions between the two countries. According to Putz, these incidences “highlight fragility of borders and its potential as a flashpoint”. However, she further argues that these issues are “confined to localities and have seldom precipitated into a wider conflict”.<sup>71</sup>

Fluid borders not only put pressure on state apparatus, they pose a potential security risk pertaining to movement of militants, trans-national criminal networks and drug trafficking, mainly from Afghanistan. During the Tajik Civil War, radicals made use of these un-defined borders to move from one republic to other. Same was the case with militants of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), who, after their ouster from the Uzbek territory, could escape to neighbouring states and take refuge in the surrounding mountains.

<sup>68</sup> Anna Matveeva, No. 30.

<sup>69</sup> Catherine Putz, “Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan’s Unresolved Borders”, November 23, 2015, at <https://thediplomat.com/2015/11/kyrgyzstan-and-tajikistans-unresolved-border/>, Accessed December 12, 2017.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

The delimitation of borders is extremely important, especially in the Fergana Valley region, because it will check militancy, drug trafficking and other related crimes. This can at least fix the problem- from the administrative and security perspective. However, the settling of the inter-ethnic tensions along the frontiers is a herculean task. This requires sustained political will on part of the top-level leadership, as well as the local state apparatus.

## Recent Development in Border Demarcation

Over the last one year, the three CARs have shown considerable political will for improving relations with each other, and with other republics of the region, including Afghanistan. The change of regime in Uzbekistan was an important step in this direction. Shavkat Mirziyoyev, who was elected to the office in 2016, after the death of the First President Islam Karimov, has come forward and established ongoing contacts with his counterparts in CARs. This has led to the creation of a positive environment of regional cooperation and enhanced trade and connectivity in the region. The improving relations between the CARs are discussed in detail in Chapter 7.

In the last one year, all the CARS have worked hard to settle border issues and to properly demarcate the border. During Mirziyoyev's visit to Tajikistan on March 9-10, 2018, he and Tajik President Rahmon signed an 'Agreement on Certain Sections of the Uzbek-Tajik State Border'.<sup>72</sup> The working groups from both sides engaged for more than a year, and held several meetings to settle the issue.<sup>73</sup> Although certain sections of the border still remain un-delimited, this agreement has given a fresh impetus to improving relations between the two republics.

Mirziyoyev has undertaken similar efforts for demarcating the Uzbek-Kyrgyz border. During his visit to Bishkek in September 2017, he and the then Kyrgyz President Almazbek Atambayev, signed an agreement on the Kyrgyz-Uzbek border. The agreement led to the demarcation of about 80 per cent of the border between the two republics.<sup>74</sup> Of the total border length of 1374 km, 324 km still remain un-delimited.<sup>75</sup> However,

72 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Uzbekistan, 'News Feed on President's visit to Tajikistan', at <https://mfa.uz/en/press/news/2018/03/14202/>, Accessed March 17, 2018.

73 "Delimitation Protocol signed by Tajikistan and Uzbekistan covered disputable sections of common state border", *Fergana news*, June 2, 2017, at <http://enews.fergananews.com/news.php?id=3365&mode=snews>, Accessed March 11, 2018.

74 Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan preferred to resolve border issue secretly, *Eurasianet*, September 8, 2017, at <http://eurasianews.info/en/important/uzbekistan-and-kyrgyzstan-preferred-to-resolve-border-issue-secretly.html>, Accessed March 11, 2018.

75 "Troublous borders of Kyrgyzstan: What has changed in 2017?", *24.kg*, December 25, 2017, At [https://24.kg/english/71976\\_Troublous\\_borders\\_of\\_Kyrgyzstan\\_What\\_has\\_changed\\_in\\_2017/](https://24.kg/english/71976_Troublous_borders_of_Kyrgyzstan_What_has_changed_in_2017/), Accessed March 22, 2018.

both sides have expressed the hope that this too shall be demarcated soon. In last one year, there have been reports that Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are also discussing border issues. However, they have not culminated in any agreement as yet.

## **Problem of Enclaves**

The problem of enclaves is very typical to the Fergana Valley. Problematic border-crafting by the Soviets and the typical ethnic composition of the valley led to the creation of a number of enclaves in this part of the world. The enclaves have their own administrative, social and political issues that are different from their mainland and host countries. Therefore, they are covered in this chapter under separate section.

It is extremely important to have conceptual clarity before analysing the Fergana exclaves. An ‘exclave’ is a territorial unit that belongs to one country, but is located in another. On the other hand, an ‘enclave’ is a piece of another state’s territory that is entirely located in the state’s own territory. In other words, an exclave of one country becomes an enclave of the other. The country to which an exclave belongs is called its ‘mainland’; whereas, the country in which it is situated is called the ‘host country’.<sup>76</sup>

Residents of enclaves face a variety of issues that go beyond the delimitation of territorial borders. They generally experience problems relating to travel and trade, and access to water and land resources. Most enclave dwellers have relatives in the mainland. But, because of cumbersome procedures, it is difficult for them to visit their relatives and attend family gatherings like weddings, funerals, etc. Many of these enclaves are totally cut off from their mainland, and there is no connectivity with the mainland. The mainland administration also finds it difficult to maintain law and order and security in their exclaves. Apart from the administrative issues, they also face a serious identity crisis, as they develop a feeling of non-belonging, in the host countries.

There are as many as eight exclaves in the Fergana Valley region, belonging to, or situated in, all three CARs sharing the valley. These include: four Uzbek exclaves in Kyrgyzstan (Sokh, Shahimardan, Jani-

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<sup>76</sup> Rashid Gabdulhakov, ‘The Highly Securitized Insecurities of State Borders in the Fergana Valley’. *Central Asia Program*, at <http://centralasiaprogram.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/04/CAF-papers-9-Rashid-Gabdulhakov.pdf>, Accessed December 8, 2017.

Ayil and Chon-Qora); two Tajik exclaves in Kyrgyzstan (Western Kalacha and Vorukh); one Tajik exclave in Uzbekistan (Sarvan); and one Kyrgyz enclave in Uzbekistan (Barak).<sup>77</sup> These enclaves are shown in Map 9.



Map 9 Enclaves of Fergana Valley<sup>78</sup>

Sokh is an enclave located within Kyrgyzstan. In administrative terms, it belongs to Uzbekistan. However, it is overwhelmingly populated by the Tajik speakers. It is the region's largest enclave with an area of 350 sq km and a population of approximately 60,000.<sup>79</sup> Uzbekistan, which is Sokh's mainland, has no direct land connection with its citizens. It makes things difficult also for Kyrgyzstan, especially in terms of connectivity. Travelling through the enclave is not possible for the Kyrgyz people and there is no alternate viable route. The short strip of Kyrgyz land in between Sokh and mainland Uzbekistan is a hilly area, and thus, cannot provide connectivity between the Kyrgyz villages on either sides of Sokh.

As part of Uzbekistan, the official language of Sokh enclave is Uzbek. However, as most of the dwellers speak Tajik, there are a number of Tajik schools. This ethnic tangle has complicated the situation not only for the enclave dwellers, but also for all three CARs. It has been a constant reason for tension and clashes between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan.<sup>80</sup> Sokh

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> "Concerns over Tension in Uzbek Enclave Border Areas", June 6, 2010, at [www.irinnews.org/report/89380/kyrgyzstan-uzbekistan-concerns-over-tension-uzbek-enclave-border-areas](http://www.irinnews.org/report/89380/kyrgyzstan-uzbekistan-concerns-over-tension-uzbek-enclave-border-areas), Accessed December 8, 2017.

<sup>79</sup> "Sokh Exclave: Two Decades of Simmering Tension", *RadioFreeEurope Radio Library*, January 7, 2013, at <https://www.rferl.org/a/sokh-exclave-two-decades-of-simmering-tension/24817411.html>, Accessed December 8, 2017.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

was also used by IMU militants in the 1990s as a transit corridor to enter Uzbekistan. Its strategic location makes it a security threat even today.

Like Sokh, Shahimardan is also an enclave in the Kyrgyz territory, that belongs to Uzbekistan. Nevertheless, unlike Sokh, the majority of the residents of Shahimardan are Uzbek speakers, which makes the issue less complicated. Because of its ethnic composition, Uzbekistan has always been more inclined towards Shahimardan than Sokh. In the past, Uzbekistan had tried to trade Sokh with Kyrgyzstan for a land corridor; this proposal was not accepted by the Kyrgyz as it would disconnect the Batken province from the rest of Kyrgyzstan.<sup>81</sup> However, Uzbekistan did not make any such attempts in the case of Shahimardan, as it is overwhelmingly Uzbek-speaking and also has a historical significance in Uzbek literature.

On the other hand, there is a very small Kyrgyz exclave called Barak in the Andijan province of Uzbekistan. It is a small enclave of about 600 people. These people have been demanding resettlement in the Kyrgyz Republic, because of the disadvantages and inconvenience of staying in a small enclave. It is an open secret that disputes over one enclave can directly or indirectly impact the other. For example, during the Uzbek-Kyrgyz crisis in Sokh in 2013, Uzbekistan tried to block access of Kyrgyzstan to Barak.

The enclaves in the Fergana Valley are not properly managed; and thus, are an inconvenience for both the ‘host’ and the ‘mainland’ states, and also for the dwellers. They are both the cause and effect of the troubled relationship between their host and mainland. Connectivity issues, visa regimes, blockades make even day-to-day functioning a difficult affair. Also, there is the larger issue relating to the security of enclaves and the adjacent areas. Therefore, there is a need for regular negotiations and dialogue and greater cooperation between hosts and mainland.<sup>82</sup>

## Water Disputes

Water disputes are an equally complex and critical phenomenon for the CARs; and they generally intensify other tensions amongst these countries. The CARs have abundant water resources; but, they are unevenly distributed. Almost all the water sources originate in the

<sup>81</sup> Rashid Gabbulhakov, ‘Geographical Enclaves of the Fergana Valley: Do Good Fences Make Good Neighbors?’, *Central Asia Security Policy Briefs Series*, No. 14, OSCE Academy, Bishkek, 2014.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

mountainous republics of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, and then come down to the other three republics. The downstream countries of Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan are totally dependent on upstream countries, especially for irrigated agriculture. On the other hand, the upstream countries depend on the downstream ones for energy, especially natural gas. This makes their mutual relationships complex.

The two main sources of water in Central Asia are the *Syr Darya* and *Amu Darya* rivers. The *Amu Darya* originates in Tajikistan and flows along the border between Afghanistan and Uzbekistan. In fact, *Amu Darya* makes the natural boundary between Afghanistan on the south and Uzbekistan and Tajikistan in the north. It further flows into Turkmenistan and then returns to Uzbekistan, discharging its water in the Aral Sea. As discussed in Chapter 2, *Syr Darya* is made up of two rivers, the Naryn and Kara Darya, both originating in Kyrgyzstan, and whose confluence is near the Uzbek town of Namangan. It further flows into Kazakhstan and discharges into the Aral Sea. Other major inter-state rivers include the Chu, the Talas, the Tarim, and the Irtysh.

The *Amu Darya* and the *Syr Darya* carry about 77 cubic kilometres of water, 96 per cent of which is used for irrigation.<sup>83</sup> In fact, these rivers have been used for irrigation for ages. However, because of the Soviet-imposed cotton monoculture and extensive irrigation through an artificially built canal system, the *Syr Darya* disappears into the desert and does not reach the Aral Sea. This has been reason for the shrinking of the Aral Sea, and creating an environmental and ecological catastrophe in that part of the world. To quote from a report prepared by the International Crisis group:

“In order to understand the region’s current water crisis it is necessary to survey past USSR policies toward the former Soviet Central Asian Republics. The Soviet era agricultural policies focused primarily on increased output of cotton and rice as a means to reduce reliance on imports of these commodities. These attempts of modernization and self-sufficiency resulted in the transformation of Central Asia’s geography, resources”.<sup>84</sup>

83 Abdullaev Iskandar, “Preventing Conflicts through Water Management in Central Asia,” *World Bank Group*, 2001, <http://www.worldbank.org/html/prddr/trans/JulAugSep01/pgs28-29.htm>, Accessed on December 11, 2017.

84 “Central Asia: Water and Conflict”, *International Crisis Group*, 2002, No. 34, p. 22



The report further stated:

“(Soviet) policy-making focused on expanding arable land for agriculture (and) building massive hydraulic projects, (which) resulted in the diversion of the Amu Darya and the Syr Darya, which fed the Aral Sea. Vast amounts of freshwater from glaciers in the Kyrgyz Republic and Tajikistan mountain ranges were diverted downstream to Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan”.<sup>85</sup>

The cotton fields of the Fergana Valley, mainly belonging to Uzbekistan, over-consume the waters coming from Tajikistan and mainly Kyrgyzstan. This has been a bone of contention between these republics, which got intensified in the aftermath of independence. An inadequate infrastructure, the crumbling economic conditions of these countries, the unequal distribution of natural resources, and climate change have played their part in aggravating conflicts, which are further compounded from inter-ethnic cleavages.

Various agreements of cooperation between the five post-Soviet states, mainly the 1992 Almaty Agreement, provided that the downstream countries would provide the upstream countries with gas and coal in the winter, to enable them to generate electricity.<sup>86</sup> However, there have been instances when the downstream countries have used their energy resources to bargain with the upstream countries. Because of their geographic location and natural resources, these countries also have diversified economies and have reached a certain level of development; whereas, the upstream countries, especially Tajikistan have few options for development other than exploiting water resources, through hydropower development. For this and other reasons, these two upstream countries are the poorest nations in the region.<sup>87</sup>

The CARs generally face either water shortages or power cuts, making people’s lives extremely miserable. The upstream countries face electricity shortage during the winter months, when it becomes impossible to survive in the freezing cold. The downstream countries, which were to supply energy to downstream countries, seem to have played politics by leveraging their advantageous positions. The logic was that it is more

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Lisa Marie Izquierdo (et.al), “Water Challenges in Central Asia: Key Challenges and Opportunities”, *Graduate Program in International Affairs*, New School University, December 2010.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.



profitable for these countries to sell gas and electricity to foreign buyers, rather than supplying it to their poor neighbours.<sup>88</sup>

As Uzbekistan pulled out of the ‘Central Asian Supply System’, and started selling electricity to Afghanistan in 2009, upstream CARs started thinking about their own options for generating electricity.<sup>89</sup> As Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan announced their plans to build hydropower dams, downstream countries like Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan opposed them vehemently, because the construction of such dams would mean less water for lowland agriculture. Uzbekistan’s opposition to the Kambarata- 1 hydropower project in Kyrgyzstan and to the proposed Rogun dam in Tajikistan, during President Islam Karimov’s tenure, was well known to the world. After coming to power, Mirziyoyev seems to have not only backtracked from this stand, but has shown open support for completion of these dams.<sup>90</sup> This move of Mirziyoyev has opened a new chapter of cooperation amongst the CARs.

Water issues in the CARs in general and in the Fergana Valley in particular require better management. There is a dire need of understanding and agreement at the highest political level, which can then culminate in cooperation at the ground level. Water has been a bone of contention amongst the CARs, and has also given impetus to inter-ethnic divisions. All these republics have declared that water is a strategic asset. And, thus, water issues are not merely economic or humanitarian crises; instead they also have a political, strategic and in some cases, even a security angle. If not managed carefully, water issues can lead to a wider conflict in the future.

The present Uzbek president’s efforts to improve bilateral relations with the other CARs, is a welcome move in an otherwise volatile region. Water is one issue that can trigger many disputes, yet has the potential to integrate the region. The CARs can potentially become the suppliers of clean energy to their extended neighbourhood, especially Afghanistan. The proposed Central Asia- South Asia (CASA-1000) project for bringing hydropower from Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to energy- scarce Afghanistan and Pakistan can be viewed from this angle.

<sup>88</sup> Rustam Qabil, “Will Central Asia Fight over Water”, October 25, 2016, at <http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-37755985>, Accessed March 17, 2018.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Umida Hashimova, “Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan undertake Resolving their Water Disputes, October 17, 2017, at <https://jamestown.org/program/uzbekistan-kyrgyzstan-undertake-resolving-water-disputes/>, Accessed March 9, 2018.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Ethnic Conflicts**

The previous chapters have discussed in detail the social and political dynamics of the Fergana Valley. The last chapter also highlighted some of the border and water disputes between the three Central Asian Republics (CARs), that share the Fergana Valley. As a matter of fact, all these disputes have their roots in the problematic border-crafting and ethnic-engineering undertaken during the Soviet period. These borders sowed the seeds of future clashes and conflict amongst the various ethnic groups within the valley.

All parts of the Fergana Valley are inhabited by multi-ethnic populations, with ethno-linguistic spillovers across the borders. The existence of some pockets in the border regions, where the minority forms the majority, has been a matter of concern. There are parts, where more than one ethnic communities live in close proximity. Border regions are home to minorities belonging to titular nationalities of neighbouring states. The nationalities like Uzbeks, Tajiks and Kyrgyz are present on all sides of borders. They are in majority in their own titular republics, but also have an overwhelming presence in the other two republics. Along with these, there are several other ethnic communities like the Russians, Uighurs, Kazakhs, and so on.

Various ethnic communities have traditionally coexisted in the Fergana Valley. The region was largely inhabited by the people of Persian stock in ancient times but this changed with the gradual migration of Turkic and Turko-Mongoloid peoples into the valley. Clashes between these peoples are certainly not a new phenomenon. However, local disputes took on an ethnic colour only after the crafting of modern borders in the Soviet era. They received further impetus because of Soviet policies

that gave preferential treatment to the titular communities, with affirmative action in education and jobs, creation of infrastructure like educational institutes, and promoting local languages through media and literature.<sup>91</sup> These programmes put the titular groups at an advantage and other minority ethnic groups at a disadvantage.

The trend was intensified after the CARs became independent in 1991. Overnight the regional political elites within the Soviet Union became the national leaders. They initiated the process of nation-building and constructing of a new national identity for their peoples. At the ideological level, the states sought to justify their post-Soviet existence through the discourse of nationalism, which obviously accorded a privileged position to the titular communities.<sup>92</sup> The new national identities are constructed mainly on the basis of the ethno-linguistic and historical motifs of the titular nationalities, including national heroes, historical golden periods, literature and cultural icons.<sup>93</sup> This has created a sense of alienation amongst the non-titular communities. The national consolidation within the respective CARs, also had an impact on the peoples of the Fergana Valley, where the situation was much more complex.

The nationalist leaders and community-based organisations were responsible for mobilising the people on ethnic lines. The discourse of ‘we’ versus ‘them’ is fanned by the leaders of all ethnic groups.<sup>94</sup> In such a scenario, small local issues also acquire an ethnic angle in no time, and the cries of ‘this is our historical homeland’ are raised against each other. Ethnic groups are constantly suspicious and fearful of the other groups living in the vicinity. The presence of cross-border lineages further complicates matters, as people have closed links with their titular republics rather than the republics to which they belong. Another reason for this is that there is no coherence between the ethnic composition of a particular region and its ‘formal political identity’.<sup>95</sup>

The ethnic tangle in the Fergana Valley has given rise to a number of issues, including border disputes, the sharing of water resources, and the problem of enclaves and exclaves, that were discussed in the previous chapter. These are further multiplied by challenges such as the high density of population, limited resources, corruption, inefficiency, poverty,

91 Ajay Patnaik, *Nations, Minorities and States in Central Asia*, MAKAIAS, Kolkata, 2003, p. 31-34.

92 Shahram Akbarzadeh, “Nation Building in Uzbekistan”, *Central Asian Survey*, 1996, 15(1), p. 23-24.

93 Ibid.

94 Ajay Patnaik, *Nations, Minorities and States in Central Asia*, Kolkata, MAKAIAS, 2003, p. 56.

95 Anchita Borthakur, “An Analysis of the Fergana Valley”, *Asian Affairs*, 2017, 48(2), p. 338.

and lack of employment, along with problems like radicalisation, militancy, drug trafficking, and expanding international criminal networks. These security threats not only affect the three republics sharing the valley, but also adjacent regions, including the northern regions of Afghanistan, Pakistan and China's western province of Xinjiang.

By and large, all the ethnic communities in Fergana Valley have been subjected to ethnic conflicts, even violence, at some point or other. Disputes over resources like water, get transformed into communal conflicts between two ethnic communities.<sup>96</sup> This leads to ethnic tensions in a particular area, for a period of time. However, the ethnic conflicts in this region have been, more or less, confined to the locality; and have seldom escalated into a full-fledged security threats or inter-state conflicts.<sup>97</sup> Nevertheless, the region has seen some of the worst ethnic conflicts in the world. This chapter discusses in detail the ethnic conflicts that have shaken the valley in the recent past.

### **Ethnic Conflicts before the Soviet Disintegration**

The Soviet system started showing the signs of decay in second half of the 1980s and finally collapsed in 1991. Both internal as well as external factors played a role in the Soviet collapse. In 1986, Mikhail Gorbachev, the General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), introduced the policy of *Glasnost*, which aimed at more openness and transparency in the political system. It granted the people a number of political rights and freedoms. However, the sudden openness and decrease in popularity of the CPSU created a vacuum in the political system, which was filled by nationalist ideology.<sup>98</sup> In several Soviet Republics, massive mobilisations involving millions of people took place, most of which unfurled the banner of nationalism. These movements gave rise to demands for more autonomy; and in certain cases, even secession from the Soviet Union. This finally resulted in a nationalist outburst in 1989-90, especially in the Baltic, European and Caucasian republics.<sup>99</sup>

Incidentally, the nationalist movement did not hit the CARs until 1991.

However, the region witnessed a wave of nationalism in the form of an ethnic upsurge. During the summer of 1989, a number of ethnic

<sup>96</sup> Ibid, p. 340.

<sup>97</sup> Fabio Belafatti, "Ethnic Tensions in Central Asia: autochthonous and Russian Minorities", *Geopolitika*, March 10, 2014, at <http://www.geopolitika.lt/?artc=6569>, Accessed April 19, 2018.

<sup>98</sup> Mark R. Beissinger, "Nationalism and the Collapse of Soviet Communism", *Contemporary European History*, 2009, 18(3), p. 331-334.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

conflicts broke out in the CARs of the USSR. However, these ethnic uprisings were different from those that erupted in the European parts of the USSR. The European uprisings were mostly anti-Russian, whereas the riots in Central Asia took place between various indigenous groups. Russians were not the target of the ethnic conflicts in Central Asia; because there was no threat of linguistic and cultural assimilation with the Russians.<sup>100</sup> With the exception of the 1986 anti-Russian riots in Kazakhstan,<sup>101</sup> all the riots in Central Asia took place between indigenous ethnic groups.

Within Central Asia, the Fergana Valley was most affected by the series of ethnic conflicts in 1989-90. The reason for this was clearly the problematic borders, the ethnic composition of the region, and the competition over scarce resources. Two of these deadly riots are described below.

**Conflict between Uzbeks and Meshkhetian Turks:** Meshkhetian Turks are a small ethnic community from the South Caucasus that was deported by Stalin in the 1940s, to the Fergana Valley part of Uzbekistan. They were considered outsiders and ‘parasites’ by the local people. They were also economically better off compared to the Uzbeks; and thus, were always the target of Uzbek anger.<sup>102</sup> The prolonged animosity between them resulted in the eruption of unprecedented violence in 1989. It started in the town of Kuwa, and eventually spread to the other parts. The openness brought by Glasnost, along with the wave of nationalism, can be seen as the factors responsible for this. More than 100 Meshkhetian Turks lost their lives in this violence. There were also reports of torching of homes, stone pelting and other violence. Following this, the USSR regime decided to evacuate the community from Uzbekistan, and resettled them in Russia and Azerbaijan.<sup>103</sup>

**Osh Riots 1990:** Another ethnic clash took place between the Uzbeks and the Kyrgyz in the Kyrgyz city of Osh in 1990. The two ethnic groups have been the traditional inhabitants of the Fergana valley. Nevertheless, the number of Kyrgyz in the region kept increasing because

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100 N 95, p. 100.

101 In 1986, violent anti-Russian riots erupted in Kazakhstan. The immediate cause of these was the appointment of a non-Kazakh (Russian) person as the first secretary of the republic.

102 Yasar Sari, “Identity-Conflict Relations: A Case-Study of the Ferghana Valley Conflicts”, *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, 2013, 14(4), p. 14.

103 Donald A. Renald, “Meshkhetian Turks: An Introduction to their History, Culture and Resettlement Experiences”, *Culture Profile Series*, New York, Cultural Orientation Resource Center, 2006.

of their migration from mountains to the valley. As they came in close contact with each other, both started to fear ethno-linguistic assimilation. The border drawn between the Uzbek and the Kyrgyz SSR was equally problematic, as it left strong minority pockets in the bordering areas. For example, the Andijan region in Uzbekistan has a substantial Kyrgyz population, whereas the Osh oblast of Kyrgyzstan has a substantial Uzbek population.

The 1990 conflict actually began with a controversy over land and ownership rights; the nationalist attitude of the regimes was equally responsible. Osh had always been an Uzbek majority area, and Uzbeks dominated economic life there. But the Kyrgyz government undertook a land-redistribution programme, whereby newly privatised land was handed over to the Kyrgyz.<sup>104</sup> This action of the regime ignited violence. Though the reason for the conflict was mainly distribution of land, but issues pertaining to employment, jobs, representation in local bodies also came up. Language also became a major bone of contention. Kyrgyz had been made official language due to which the Uzbeks felt alienated.<sup>105</sup> As a result of the conflict, about 170 people (120 Uzbeks and 50 Kyrgyz) were killed,<sup>106</sup> and thousands became the victims of violence, including rapes, stone-pelting, torching of houses, etc.

The tensions between the Tajiks and the Uzbeks have always been a burning issue. It reached the crisis point in 1992, as hundreds of ethnic-Uzbeks left Tajikistan and took refuge in Uzbekistan. This was the result of what was described, as a ‘pogrom’ in Uzbek-speaking villages.<sup>107</sup> The Uzbeks in Tajikistan fear cultural assimilation with the Tajiks and have been demanding cultural and linguistic rights within the state. This conflict was overshadowed by the outbreak of the Tajik Civil War (1992-97).

It is to the credit of the CAR leadership that in the aftermath of independence, they did not let the security concerns cross the threshold. Ethnic clashes remained a sporadic and local phenomenon, and did not escalate into a full-fledged ethnic war. Barring the Uzbek-Kyrgyz ethnic conflict of 2010, there was no major recurrence of an event of that sort.

104 *Global Security*, “Osh Conflict of 1990”, at <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/war/osh-conflict.htm>, Accessed April 27, 2018.

105 N 95, p. 58-59.

106 Vallery Tishkov, “The Culture of Ethnic Violence (the Osh Conflict)”, at [http://www.valerytishkov.ru/cntnt/publikacii3/knigi/the\\_mind\\_a1/the\\_cultur.html](http://www.valerytishkov.ru/cntnt/publikacii3/knigi/the_mind_a1/the_cultur.html), Accessed April 27, 2018.

107 N. 95, p. 59.

## Uzbek-Kyrgyz Ethnic Conflict of 2010

The Uzbek-Kyrgyz communities that survived the violence of 1990 remained relatively peaceful for two decades. However, the feelings of suspicion and hatred towards each other never faded away. Their respective ‘nationalist’ leaders kept the fears of assimilation alive, through their political propaganda. This got further impetus from the north-south divide within Kyrgyzstan, which is not only geographic, but also economic, social and cultural.

The ethnic explosion of 2010 had its roots in the political developments in Kyrgyzstan during that period. The ‘Tulip Revolution’ of 2005 had made Kumranbek Bakiyev, a southerner and ethnic-Kyrgyz, the president of Kyrgyzstan. This shifted the ‘balance of power’ in favour of the southern Kyrgyz community.<sup>108</sup> As a result, it worsened the position of Uzbeks, who mainly belonged to south, and the northern Kyrgyz. Bakiyev’s government was overwhelmingly criticised for its patronage, favouritism, corruption and ‘criminality’.<sup>109</sup> This led to a further deterioration of inter-ethnic relations. By 2006, the Uzbek leaders and community in the Kyrgyz Fergana Valley had started openly protesting against the discrimination.

In 2009, Bakiyev was elected again with overwhelming majority in the election. However, within six months, he had to face popular discontent fostered by the ‘united’ opposition. Violence broke out between the government and the opposition in Bishkek in April 2010, leading to gun battles that caused about 80 deaths.<sup>110</sup> Bakiyev was ousted from power, and had to leave Bishkek and return to Jalalabad, his hometown in the Fergana Valley.

An interim government was set up under the presidency of Rosa Otunbayeva. The new provisional regime sought the support of southern Uzbek leaders, to consolidate its position. On the other hand, the Uzbeks in the south backed the regime in the hope of bettering the situation of Uzbeks. Nevertheless, the socio-political situation in Kyrgyzstan became more chaotic after the ouster of Bakiyev, as he and his supporters took the fight to the streets and openly disregarded the interim government.<sup>111</sup>

108 Babak Rezvani, “Understanding and Explaining the Kyrgyz–Uzbek Interethnic Conflict in Southern Kyrgyzstan”, *Anthropology of the Middle East*, Vol. 8 no. 2, Winter 2013, p. 61-62.

109 Neil J Melvin, “Promoting a Stable and Multi-Ethnic Kyrgyzstan: Overcoming the Causes and Legacies of Violence”, *Central Eurasia Project*, New York, Open Society Foundations, 2011, p. 12.

110 Ibid, p. 15-16.

111 N. 109, p. 67.

Following this, the Kyrgyz and Uzbeks engaged in protests, marches and open confrontation mainly in the Fergana valley towns of Jalalabad and Osh.

The tense situation escalated into one of the deadliest ethnic conflicts in the region. The violent conflict lasted for five days from June 10-14, 2010, and had an unprecedented impact. According to a Human Rights Watch report, violence erupted on the evening of June 10, with a huge gathering of Uzbek people in the city centre of Osh, who indulged in beating and even killing some Kyrgyz. However, outraged by the violence, and fired up by rumours of Uzbek atrocities, a number of Kyrgyz came to the streets and descended on Uzbek neighbourhoods. This led to the looting, torching of shops, houses, beatings, rapes and killings of Uzbeks. The violence that had started in Osh, quickly spread to Fergana Valley towns like Jalalabad, Uzgen and Bazaar-kurgan.<sup>112</sup>

According to official Kyrgyz figures, the inter-ethnic conflict killed more than 400 people, and another 2000 were injured. A vast number of properties, mainly belonging to the Uzbeks, were destroyed and millions became homeless.<sup>113</sup> Some unofficial figures have also quoted the death toll as being as much as 900 people. The most affected were the Uzbeks living in the southern cities of Kyrgyzstan, who have still not forgotten the tragic events.

The role of the neighbouring state of Uzbekistan was also critical during the conflict. Large numbers of ethnic Uzbeks from the Kyrgyz part of the Fergana Valley flocked to the Uzbek-Kyrgyz border, and sought refuge in Uzbekistan, to escape the violence. However, the Uzbek regime sealed its borders and refused to meddle in the matter which it described as an ‘internal’ matter. This decision had a dual impact; firstly, it created a sense of dejection and alienation amongst the Uzbeks in Kyrgyzstan, as they thought that the Uzbek regime did not have sympathy for its ‘co-ethnics’ in the neighbouring republic. On the other hand, the decision prevented an ‘inter-state escalation’.<sup>114</sup>

Since 2010, Kyrgyzstan has been relatively peaceful. As mentioned in Chapter 3, President Almazbek Atambayev, a northerner, who ruled the

112 *Human Rights Watch*, “Where is the Justice?: Interethnic Violence in Southern Kyrgyzstan and its aftermath”, August 16, 2010, at <https://www.hrw.org/report/2010/08/16/where-justice/interethnic-violence-southern-kyrgyzstan-and-its-aftermath>, Accessed April 27, 2018.

113 Inga Sikorskaya, “A Brief History of Conflict in Kyrgyzstan”, September 9, 2015, at <https://www.peaceinsight.org/blog/2015/09/a-brief-history-of-conflict-in-kyrgyzstan/>, Accessed September 17, 2017.

114 Nick Magoran, “Averting Violence in Kyrgyzstan: Understanding and Responding to Nationalism”, *Russia and Eurasia Program Paper*, London, Newcastle University, 2012, p. 9.



country from 2011-2017, was successful in restoring peace and stability and did not let the security threats cross the threshold. In a peaceful transition of power in October 2017, Sooronbai Jeenbekov, a southerner, became the president. The north-south dynamic will surely continue to affect Kyrgyz politics in the years to come. Similarly, inter-ethnic relations between various communities in general and Uzbek-Kyrgyz in particular, are vulnerable because of socio-cultural, economic and political factors. In such a scenario, maintenance of stability is a huge task for the political leadership.

## Chapter 6

### Terrorism and Radicalisation

Geo-political analysts describe the Fergana Valley as one of the most volatile places in Central Asia.<sup>115</sup> This is because of the events that unfolded in the valley in the aftermath of the Soviet collapse. In last 25 years, the region has become the focal point of Islamic extremism and radicalisation. The root cause of this menace can be traced to geographical, socio-cultural, economic and political factors, that have been discussed in detail in previous chapters. The division of the valley into three separate republics, a problematic border crafting, the ethnic tangle, the population explosion, poverty, scarcity of resources, and unemployment provide a fertile ground for security threats like terrorism, extremism and militancy. However, the issue is very complex and needs closer examination.

#### Historical Review

Central Asian society has always been deeply religious. Islam was introduced to Central Asia in the 8<sup>th</sup> century by Arab invaders. Although, Arabic rule in the region was short-lived, the religion stayed on and eventually spread to all parts of Central Asia, diminishing the influence of other religions like Zoroastrianism or Buddhism. The later rulers of the region, be it the Samanids of Iranian stock or the Timurids of Turkic lineage or the Uzbek Khanates that ruled the region from the 17<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> century, espoused Islam. Furthermore, the region played an important role as the spiritual and cultural epicentre of Islamic traditions, and also witnessed a Central Asian Renaissance because of a scientific temperament. During the Timurid rule, cities like Samarkand and Bukhara were home to a number of madrassas, which imparted religious as well as secular education, and attracted young students from all over the world.

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<sup>115</sup> However, the security situation in the Fergana Valley is different in all three republics, depending on socio-economic and political factors.

Most of the Central Asians followed the *Hanafi* School of Islamic jurisprudence within Sunni Islam,<sup>116</sup> which was a comparatively softer and liberal version of Islam than the one followed in West Asia. The indigenous communities that practiced sedentary lifestyles were more religious and orthodox. Islam played a significant role in the day-to-day lives of the people, especially in three events in a person's life, namely, birth, marriage and death. It was also an important factor in determining the identity of the Central Asian peoples. However, orthodoxy seldom reflected extremist traits. Along with their practice of Islam, people continued to follow local customs and celebrated pre-Islamic festivals like *Navruz*. Central Asian religious thought was influenced by the *Naqshbandi* Sufi order, which was founded by Baha-ud-Din Naqshband in Bukhara in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, which eventually spread to the Indian subcontinent during Mughal rule.

Central Asia came under Tsarist rule in the 1860s and under Soviet rule in 1920s. However, guerrilla fighters, under the banner of the *Basmachi* movement, opposed the Bolshevik Red Army during the Civil War (1917-1920) that broke after the Bolshevik Revolution. The Basmachi movement was born in the Fergana valley, and can be considered the first Islamic resistance to the Soviets. During Soviet times, religion was kept behind closed doors; public officials were not allowed to display their religious identity; and most mosques, mausoleums and madrassas were closed down. Nevertheless, religious networks in the Fergana Valley did not wither away, but kept operating underground.<sup>117</sup> Also, the importance of the religion in people's day-to-day lives remained more or less intact. In the 1980s, in the wake of *Glasnost*, religion started to surface again in public discourse.

Several external elements also played their part in fuelling religious extremism amongst Central Asians. As the Soviets banned religious education and put restrictions on Islamic practices, a number of Central Asians fled the Soviet Union and took refuge in Afghanistan. Some of them even travelled to Pakistan and received training in various Madrassas and institutes inspired by the *Deobandi* thought.<sup>118</sup> Some Islamic

116 Mariya Omelicheva, "Terrorism in Central Asia: Dynamics, Dimensions and Sources", *Education about Central Asia*, 18(3), 2013, p. 1.

117 Igor Rotar, "Will the Fergana Valley Become a Hotbed of Destabilization in Central Asia?", *The Jamestown Foundation*, October 3, 2012, at <https://jamestown.org/program/will-the-fergana-valley-become-a-hotbed-of-destabilization-in-central-asia/>, Accessed February 24, 2018.

118 Syed Saleem Shahzad, *Inside Al-Qaeda and the Taliban: Beyond Bin Laden and 9/11*, London, Pluto Press, 2011, p. 203-204.

seminaries in Pakistan provided free education, board and food; which led to the influx of large number of Uzbek, Turkmen and Tajik children. These became major recruiting ground to pitch Central Asian youth into proxy wars against the Soviet Union.<sup>119</sup> The process received further impetus during the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan during the 1980s. The Central Asians who took part in the Afghan Jihad returned home, after the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan. Subsequently, Soviet Union collapsed and CARs became independent in 1991.

Soviet Disintegration created an ideological vacuum in this region, which was, by and large, filled by the nationalist agenda. However, in some parts of Central Asia, religious ideas also dominated the discourse. Though the national leaders accepted Islam as one aspect of national identity, their adherence to it remained symbolic. The nature of post-independence rule remained mostly secular. In fact, these post-Communist leaders imposed control on religious activities, and introduced curbs even on spiritual or cultural movements. This created resentment in certain sections of society, who wanted to bring back the Islamic order. This Islamic vs secular dichotomy dominates Central Asian discourse even today.

On the other hand, independence gave rise to a flood of religious activity in parts of Central Asia. In the 1980s, thousands of copies of the *Quran* were smuggled into the CARs from Pakistan via Afghanistan.<sup>120</sup> Many of the mosques and madrassas that were closed down during the Soviet times were reopened after independence, and Friday sermons were reinstated. Hundreds of new mosques also sprung up in various parts of the CARs. The number of *Hajj* pilgrims also dramatically increased in the initial years of independence, which also included some leaders of the CARs. Many Islamic missionaries from countries like Saudi Arabia, Iran, Turkey and Pakistan have been pouring into the CARs, and distributing a lot of religious literature.

Independence unleashed, along with the moderate forms of religious practices, radical Islam in some parts of the region. This era also witnessed the expansion of organisations like the Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT), which espoused fundamentalist and extremist views, but did not propagate militancy. The Fergana Valley went through problems like the breakdown

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<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

of the socio-political system in the region, the decline of the state, economic collapse, poverty and scarcity of resources. These problems, coupled with an explosion of religiosity, led to the rising influence of radical Islam in the valley.<sup>121</sup>

## Challenge of Extremism in the Fergana Valley

### Developments in the 1990s

In the immediate aftermath of independence, Uzbekistan was rocked by disturbing events. In 1991, the *Adolat* (meaning justice) Party was formed in Namangan, a city in the Uzbek part of the Fergana Valley. This organisation, which was said to have been formed on the lines of the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guards,<sup>122</sup> put forward an ‘Islamist’ resistance to the Karimov regime. Their leaders were Tahir Yuldashev and Juma Namangani, who formed bands of armed young men.<sup>123</sup> *Adolat* took control of the Namangan city in 1992. Its aim was to establish Islamic *Sharia* law within Uzbekistan. The Karimov government cracked down aggressively against this movement, and arrested and sentenced many *Adolat* militants. Yuldashev and some of his aides were successful in escaping the country and took temporary refuge in Tajikistan, from where they continued to launch cross-border insurgent attacks on Uzbekistan.

These radicals played an active role in the Tajik Civil War (1992-97). The underground Islamic militant cells in various parts of CARs and northern Afghanistan were part of the ‘United Tajik Opposition’ that fought against the old- Communist guards. In 1997, a Peace Accord was signed between the Tajik government and the Islamists, which disillusioned many activists. They were also alarmed by the Uzbek state’s crackdown on other like-minded Islamists. This led to Yuldashev and Namangani re-uniting in 1998 and renewing their struggle under the new banner of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU).<sup>124</sup> They declared jihad on the Uzbek regime and focused on expelling Islam Karimov, in order to establish *Sharia* law within Uzbekistan.<sup>125</sup>

121 Jozef Lang, “The Radical Islamic Militants of Central Asia”, *OSW Report*, Warsaw, November 2013, p 7.

122 N. 118.

123 ‘Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan’, *Project on Violent Conflicts*, March 2015, at <http://www.start.umd.edu/baad/narratives/islamic-movement-uzbekistan-imu>, Accessed March 17, 2018.

124 Thomas A. Sanderson (et al.), “From the Fergana Valley to South Waziristan: The Evolving Threat of Central Asian Jihadists”, *A Report of the CSIS Transnational Threats Project*, March 2010, at [https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy\\_files/files/publication/100324\\_Sanderson\\_FerghanaValley\\_WEB\\_0.pdf](https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy_files/files/publication/100324_Sanderson_FerghanaValley_WEB_0.pdf), Accessed June 6, 2018.

125 Kenneth Katzman, “Terrorism: Near Eastern Groups and State Sponsors”, *CRS Report for Congress RL311119*, Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2002, at <http://fas.org/irp/crs/RL311119.pdf>, Accessed March 17, 2018.

Since 1998, most of the problems relating religious extremism and terrorism in Central Asia have been associated with activities of the IMU. Although there are other extremist organisations like the *Hizb ut-Tahrir*, *Akramiya* and *Tablighi Jamaat*, the IMU has been the deadliest and continues to be the most prominent. Although it was initially established to topple the secular regime of Karimov, it eventually expanded its goal to create a Caliphate in the whole of Central Asia.<sup>126</sup>

In February 1999, a series of bombs exploded in the centre of Tashkent, the capital of Uzbekistan. Around the same time, the border regions of Fergana Valley witnessed the rise of militant activities. The IMU insurgents conducted several raids in the mountainous areas of Kyrgyzstan in 1999- 2000, in their effort to infiltrate into Uzbekistan. They were also responsible for a series of explosions in 2002-2004 in the Kyrgyz cities of Bishkek and Osh. Uzbekistan also experienced another bombing in the spring of 2004.<sup>127</sup> The geo-political situation in the Fergana Valley allowed the militants- to pass from one republic to the other, through porous borders, while using the enclaves as hideouts.

The government of Tajikistan was also challenged by the Islamic militants. In 1999, a Tajik army colonel, Mahmud Khudoiberdiev, tried to take control of certain areas in the Tajik Fergana Valley, with the purpose of ousting President Rahmon. In the same year, bands of extremists invaded the Kyrgyz province of Batken, with the intent of establishing a single rule in the valley based on Sharia.<sup>128</sup> The IMU's attempt to destabilise the region by conducting raids in the border regions of Fergana Valley, met with stiff resistance from the security personnel. The outnumbered IMU fighters were attacked by Kyrgyz forces. In 2000, the IMU repeated the raid with a much larger force, but this one also ended in failure. This resulted in the IMU's complete withdrawal from CARs into Afghanistan.

In Afghanistan, IMU's ethnic composition underwent a significant change. Apart from Uzbeks, it also recruited Afghans, Kyrgys, Tajiks and Uighurs as members. It established ties with the Taliban and is also said to have helped them in their struggle against the *Northern Alliance*.<sup>129</sup>

126 Mariya Y. Omelicheva, "The Ethnic Dimension of Religious Extremism and Terrorism in Central Asia", *International Political Science Review*, 31(2), 2010, p. 169.

127 Mariya Omelicheva, "Terrorism in Central Asia: Dynamics, Dimensions and Sources", *Education about Central Asia*, 18(3), 2013, p. 7-8.

128 Fredrick S. Starr, "Fergana Valley: the Heart of Central Asia", London, New York, Routledge, 2011, p. XIII.

129 The *Northern Alliance* was a United Military Front, formed in 1996, to challenge the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan. It consisted of various non-Pashtun ethnic groups, and was led by President Burhanuddin Rabbani, an ethnic-Tajik, Commander Ahmed Shad Massoud and an ethnic-Uzbek chief Rashid Dostum. During its struggle against the Taliban, the Northern Alliance also received external support from countries like Russia, Tajikistan, Iran and India.

Because of its alliance with the Taliban, it was given a safe haven and allowed ease of mobility within Afghanistan. However, the ideological and logistical support (money and training) needed by the IMU was provided by the Al Qaeda.<sup>130</sup>

During the American-led Operation *Enduring Freedom* against the Al-Qaeda and the Taliban, the IMU became the vanguard of the Taliban forces in North Afghanistan. Its leader Juma Namangani acted as a commander of the Taliban forces in north.<sup>131</sup> Nevertheless, the movement suffered heavy losses during the War on Terror. According to Fitz, “IMU, which had an estimated 2,000 members before the war, diminished to a size of less than 1,000 members”.<sup>132</sup> Namangani was killed in the battle in 2001. Many IMU militants were forced to escape Afghanistan and take refuge in the tribal territories in Pakistan.<sup>133</sup>

### **Andijan Unrest and Aftermath**

In 2005, the Fergana Valley was once again rocked by disturbances. Firstly, there were demonstrations and protests in the Kyrgyz town of Jalalabad in southern Kyrgyzstan, which subsequently led to, what was called the Tulip Revolution, and the ouster of President Askar Akaev. Secondly, the same year witnessed the Andijan uprising in Uzbekistan, which shook Central Asian geo-politics to the core.

In May 2005, activists of the local extremist group *Akromiya* were arrested in Andijan, which led to violent protests. The movement turned into a violent uprising, in which protestors took control of the city and broke into the prisons, where detainees were being held. On May 13, the Uzbek government deployed troops, who opened fire on the protesters, killing hundreds of people. The Uzbek government claimed that 173 people died in the firing. However, various sources have put the number closer to 500.<sup>134</sup> As a result of this government action, many residents of Andijan were forced to flee to neighbouring Kyrgyzstan, which had established refugee camps.<sup>135</sup> According to Azimov, “The shock waves of

130 Syed Saleem Shahzad, *Inside Al-Qaeda and the Taliban: Beyond Bin Laden and 9/11*, London, Pluto Press, 2011, p. 207.

131 N. 122.

132 Duncan Fitz (et al.), ‘Central Asian Militancy: A Primary Source Examination’, *CSIS Transnational Threats Project*, Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2014, at [https://csis.org/files/publication/140509\\_Fitz\\_CentralAsianMilitancy\\_WEB.pdf](https://csis.org/files/publication/140509_Fitz_CentralAsianMilitancy_WEB.pdf), Accessed April 30, 2018.

133 N. 122.

134 Catherine Putz, “What Happened 10 Years ago in Andijan?”, *The Diplomat*, May 13, 2015, at <https://thediplomat.com/2015/05/what-happened-10-years-ago-in-andijan/>, Accessed April 30, 2018.

135 Ibid.

Andijan, coupled with the undercurrent of tension in Kyrgyzstan, created an environment in which militancy could thrive”.<sup>136</sup>

Since the Andijan crisis, Uzbekistan has not witnessed any such uprising or terrorist attack over last 13 years. According to Amb Skand Tayal, former Indian Ambassador to Uzbekistan:

“In May 2005, unrest engineered by Islamic militants in Andijan city was ruthlessly crushed leading to hundreds of casualties. By adopting these harsh measures the Uzbek Government was able to protect the country from descending into conflict and chaos”.<sup>137</sup>

The government continues to take harsh steps to counter radicalisation and extremism, which includes arresting religious clerics who spread pernicious propaganda, suspected IMU supporters, alleged members of organisations like *Hizb ut-Tahrir* and *Akramiya*. Their strict actions have kept the situation, more or less, under control.<sup>138</sup> Some analysts have opined that the Uzbek policy has been counter-productive, generating hostility towards the regime. However, this argument is not entirely true, as the actions of the regime seem to have the support of common citizens, especially in Uzbekistan.<sup>139</sup>

## The Kyrgyz Situation

The situation is slightly different in Kyrgyzstan, the country that has seen a lot of political instability and chaos in the last 15 years. The Kyrgyz Fergana Valley was shaken by deadly ethnic riots between the Kyrgyz and Uzbeks in 2010, which have been discussed in detail in the previous chapter. Some analysts say that in the aftermath of Kyrgyz-Uzbek conflict, ethnic-Uzbeks from south Kyrgyzstan were averted to extremism and some even joined the IMU ranks.

Ethnic-Uzbeks are present in overwhelming numbers in south Kyrgyzstan, and traditionally dominate the economic life. However, they have been politically marginalised. Their relationship with the Kyrgyz population in the Fergana Valley has however been contested. The ethnic conflict of 2010 left with them sad memories of the killings of their co-

136 Dodjan Azimov, “Are Islamic Militants Regrouping in the Fergana Valley?”, *Institute for War and Peace Reporting*, January 4, 2007, at <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/are-islamic-militants-regrouping-fergana-valley>, Accessed January 24, 2018.

137 Amb Skand Ranjan Tayal, “Uzbek President’s Roadmap to Check Radicalization”, *Vivekananda International Foundation*, August 17, 2017, at <http://www.vifindia.org/article/2017/august/16/uzbek-president-s-roadmap-to-check-radicalization>, Accessed 30 April 2018.

138 N. 137.

139 Based on author’s interactions with the common Uzbek citizens from Tashkent, Namangan, Fergana and Andijan, during her field visit.



ethnics, and other crimes such as rapes, the torching of houses which made thousands homeless. These riots are covered in detail in the previous chapter. The response of the Kyrgyz State as well as the Uzbek government left many Uzbeks in Kyrgyzstan disillusioned and alienated. The extremist groups exploited the country's socio-political instability to spread their ideology of hatred. According to Jacob Zenn:

“Disaffected youth, particularly ethnic Uzbeks, who suffered during the unrest in 2010, have become more likely to join religious extremist groups. The discrimination... resulted in many young Uzbek men and women in southern Kyrgyzstan believing that they were disfranchised, left with no room for their Uzbek identity and language”.<sup>140</sup>

In other words, along with various other factors, the ethnic and socio-political factors drove ethnic Uzbeks to militancy. The young Uzbeks from Kyrgyzstan have been framing the narrative of their differences with the Kyrgyz in religious terms. They generally question the ‘Islamic credentials’ of the Kyrgyz and claim that many Kyrgyz do not follow Islam in the true sense. They also refer to the Kyrgyz as the ‘mountain people’, implying that they do not belong to the Fergana Valley.<sup>141</sup> In a nutshell, the Uzbek-Kyrgyz divide has led to the rising number of terrorist recruits from Kyrgyzstan.

### **Factors Responsible for Terrorism and Radicalization**

Various factors are responsible for the proliferation of terrorism and radicalisation amongst the Central Asians. These include external as well as internal factors. As discussed in the previous chapters, deteriorating social and economic conditions create a degree of dissatisfaction amongst the masses. Problems like poverty, hunger and population explosion lead to competition for sharing of resources. The lack of opportunities in higher education and the high level of unemployment amongst the youth is also an important cause. These disenchanted people easily get influenced by the pernicious propaganda of the Islamist radicals.

Many analysts argue that the primary reason for the rise of fundamentalism within CARs is the ‘autocratic’ or ‘regressive’ policies of the governments. These regimes are also criticised, mainly by the western

140 Jacob Zenn and Kathleen Kuehnast, “Preventing Violent Extremism in Kyrgyzstan, *USIP Special Report* 355, October 2014, p. 3-4.

141 Ibid.

scholars, for the absence of democratic institutions, and lack of religious and political freedoms. Nonetheless, the debate over democracy and human rights is generally lopsided. The CARs adopted the democratic system in the aftermath of independence, in the absence of democratic traditions, experience or expertise. The development of democratic institutions is an evolutionary process, that might take years. Today, each CAR is at different stage of democratisation; and it is best that each republic develops its own unique system, as democratic institutions and values cannot be superimposed. All the CARs have been holding national elections at regular intervals, which is one of the early signs of democracy. The later stages of institution-building, independence of judiciary, human rights and freedom of the press, are also underway, but at a different pace in each CAR. Recently, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan have gone through peaceful power transitions, which also signal at the next level of democratic transition.

Another argument is that the governments in CARs have established firm control over the religious institutions. For example, in Uzbekistan, clergymen are appointed by a government agency, as well as their sermons are also monitored by the State. It is generally argued that such policies have led to a degree of resentment among certain sections of population.<sup>142</sup> However, this argument too does not reflect the complete reality. The regimes seem to have adopted strict laws in some cases. Also, there have been instances where the governments of the CARs had to take stringent actions like arrests, surveillance and so on. But such actions are taken with the purpose of maintaining the security and stability of the country as the region is geo-strategically volatile and socio-politically unstable.

However, it cannot be disregarded that political reasons have led to a degree of disenchantment among certain sections of population. This includes factors like problematic boundary crafting, porous borders, ethno-cultural divisions, water disputes, clan politics, and so on. Each of the three CARs have experienced levels of instability in their political systems, which culminated in a Civil War in Tajikistan, militancy in Uzbekistan, and the two revolutions and ethnic riots in Kyrgyzstan. Such conflicts and disturbing events have left scars in the minds of the people, which are exploited by the 'radicals' to fulfil their agenda.

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<sup>142</sup> Marlene Laruelle, "The Paradox of Uzbek Terror: Peace at Home, Violence Abroad", *Foreign Affairs*, at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/uzbekistan/2017-11-01/paradox-uzbek-terror>, Accessed May 15, 2018.

The geo-strategic location of the Fergana valley, its physical features, and its close proximity to the troubled states of Afghanistan and Pakistan, facilitates easy access to these territories by the radicals. Undelimited, porous borders and the existence of enclaves make their job easier, as they can escape without hassle from one country to another. Nevertheless, the tight security apparatus of all three sides has been successful in keeping a majority of security threats out of this region.

Poor economic conditions in the Fergana Valley give a fillip to the ongoing process of radicalisation. The population explosion has put a strain on existing resources, leading to competition and conflict. Over-dependence on agriculture is also a cause of concern. The Fergana Valley, that was once considered the bread basket of the region is now struggling with agricultural problems, problem of irrigation, and environmental degradation. Apart from population growth, the over-emphasis on the cash crops like cotton is also one of the reasons for this menace. This has forced many Central Asians to migrate in search of employment.

Migration is also another factor responsible for the radicalisation in the CARs. There is a tendency that the working age population from the Fergana Valley migrates to foreign lands, especially Russia in search of jobs. Migrants face different sets of problems in the countries they have migrated to, such as lack of white-collar jobs, low pay scales, harsh living conditions and new socio-cultural conditions, leading to an identity crisis. Migrants are prone to radicalisation, as the feeling of marginalisation is very high amongst them. It has been observed that a large number of Central Asian migrant workers in Russia have joined the *Islamic State of Iraq and Syria* (ISIS). The ISIS spreads its pernicious *Jihadi* propaganda in the Russian language also, which is easily understood by the Muslims of Central Asia. The trend of 'self-radicalisation' is very common amongst Central Asian terrorists. A number of these fighters have chosen this path on their own, after falling prey to social media propaganda.

The Islamist radical ideologies of the organisations like the IMU or *Hizb-ur-Tahrir* have penetrated deep into the Fergana Valley since the 1990s. Both these organisations are banned in the CARs. In a sustained drive against the radicals, the CARs were successful in wiping out most of their militants. Nevertheless, their ideas are not completely washed out.

Their followers spread these ideologies through various means like distributing literature. Because of strict vigilance, radicalisation in the Fergana Valley region generally takes place within small and closed groups of friends, relatives and acquaintances. These Jihadists get impetus from international terrorist organisations like Al Qaida, and more recently the ISIS.

## Role of External Factors

External factors responsible for the problem of radicalisation in Central Asia, cannot be overlooked. In fact, these factors have exploited the political situation in the CARs for decades to spread their radical ideology. The process of radicalising Central Asian youth started during the Soviet years, mainly from the Pakistani soil, as discussed earlier in this chapter. After the independence of the CARs, Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) played a vital role in incubating connections between the Central Asian Islamists on the one hand and the Taliban- Al Qaida on the other. Moreover, it was under the ISI's influence that the Central Asian Jihadists received safe haven in Pakistani soil. These militants operate in a geographically contiguous inter-linked environment, which stretches from Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) up through the Fergana Valley.<sup>143</sup>

The ideological influence of political Islam from Saudi Arabia has also played a role in the radicalisation of Central Asian militants, especially in the Fergana Valley. Saudi radicalism, influenced by *Wahhabism*, was responsible for spreading pernicious propaganda through funding Islamic education, building new mosques, and disseminating radical literature among the local Imams. Some Central Asian militants, who had received training in Saudi Arabia, led the Central Asian militias in their struggle in the CARs as well as Afghanistan. It is believed that the IMU chief Tahir Yuldashev's views were shaped by his extensive travels in Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, and his thought was influenced by *Deobandism* and *Wahhabism*.<sup>144</sup>

It is observed that some of the Central Asian militants are also involved in drug trafficking and trans-national organised criminal

143 Thomas A. Sanderson (et al.), "From the Fergana Valley to South Waziristan: The Evolving Threat of Central Asian Jihadists", *A Report of the CSIS Transnational Threats Project*, March 2010, at [https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy\\_files/files/publication/100324\\_Sanderson\\_FerganaValley\\_WEB\\_0.pdf](https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy_files/files/publication/100324_Sanderson_FerganaValley_WEB_0.pdf), Accessed June 6, 2018.

144 Zanyo Baran (et al.), "Islamic Radicalism in Central Asia and the Caucasus: Implications for the EU", *Silk Road Paper July 2006*, Central Asia- Caucasus Studies Institute- Silk Road Studies Program, p 25.

networks. In the late 1990s, the IMU had emerged as a drug dealing enterprise, the business which they used to fund their terrorist activities.<sup>145</sup> The drugs that originate in the poppy fields of Afghanistan go to Europe through the CARs. It is not a coincidence that all major terror and militant activities recorded in CARs, have been on the established drug route.

## Contemporary Situation

The threat of terrorism and radicalisation within Central Asia has transformed over time. According to Jozef Lang:

“Radical Islamic militants from Central Asia have undergone a long evolution, from groups operating on a local scale in the region during the 1990s to international terrorist organizations conducting operations on a global scale in cooperation with other Islamic terrorist groups”.<sup>146</sup>

The Central Asian region has witnessed number of minor incidents of militancy in the last couple of years. Nevertheless, the leadership and security apparatus have been successful in not letting the threats cross their threshold. Countries like Uzbekistan have adopted stern measures to deal with the menace, which have invited some resentment, but at the same time have saved the country from terrorists and militants. Most of the terrorist activities in the region seem to have been concentrated in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.<sup>147</sup> Incidentally, both these countries are the poorest in the region. As discussed earlier, the political situation in Kyrgyzstan has been volatile, leading to more instability.

The Fergana Valley region has experienced a wave of radicalisation in the post-independence period. Apart from major terrorist incidents that have been described earlier, sporadic armed clashes between security personnel and suspected militants take place on a regular basis, especially in the border regions. In recent years, the leaders of the three CARs have been trying to resolve their bilateral issues and also to complete the process of border demarcation. This may lead to better administration of the border regions in the future.

The face of global terrorism has changed in recent years, because of the emergence of the ISIS. After Europe and West Asia, Russia and the CARs are the third largest source of foreign recruits to the ISIS. The

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<sup>145</sup> Ibid.

<sup>146</sup> Jozef Lang, “The Radical Islamic Militants of Central Asia”, *OSW Report*, Warsaw, November 2013, p. 7.

<sup>147</sup> N. 118.

Soufan Center claims that the number of Central Asian fighters is about 5000, of which 1500 are from Uzbekistan, 1300 from Tajikistan and 500 from Kyrgyzstan.<sup>148</sup> Though there is a slight chance that these numbers are exaggerated, but the threat cannot be underestimated.

As the US-led coalition's war against ISIS in Syria is marching ahead, many fighters are fleeing Syria and Iraq. The threat of their return to their respective countries is another cause for concern. In the last one year, radicals of Central Asian origin have carried out attacks in New York, Istanbul, Stockholm and St Petersburg. These militants pose a serious challenge to the peace and security of Central Asia and the world.

In 2015, the IMU declared its allegiance to the ISIS's Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, and has since been an important recruiter in the region. Their shift from the Taliban to the ISIS was justified by its criticism of the Taliban leader Mullah Omar, who had not been seen in public since 2001.<sup>149</sup> This also reflected their increasing ideological and operational differences with the Taliban, and the increasing spread of ISIS ideology in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The IMU has not conducted any major attack in the CARs since the 2009 Fergana Valley attack. It had claimed responsibility for some terror attacks in Pakistan, including the Karachi Airport attack in 2014.<sup>150</sup> Nevertheless, IMU militants are also taking heavy blows in the FATA region, in terms of ethnic violence, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) drone strikes, and Pakistan Army operations. This has led to their increasing desire to return home. Their potential return poses a serious security threat to the CARs.

The various counter-radicalisation programmes adopted by the CARs are worth noting. For example, President Mirziyoyev of Uzbekistan has recently introduced a unique 'preventive' programme to check radicalisation amongst the youth. It is called *Education against Ignorance*, and is designed to propagate the 'truly humanistic essence' of Islam. They have established the institutes like the Center for Islamic Civilisation, International Islamic Academy, and the International Research Centres of

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148 Richard Barrett, "Beyond the Caliphate: Foreign Fighters and the Threat of Returnees", *The Soufan Center*, October 2017, at <http://thesoufancenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Beyond-the-Caliphate-Foreign-Fighters-and-the-Threat-of-Returnees-TSC-Report-October-2017-v3.pdf>, Accessed November 23, 2017,

149 Edvard Lemon, "IMU Pledges Allegiance to the Islamic State", *Eurasianet*, August 1, 2015, At <https://eurasianet.org/s/imu-pledges-allegiance-to-islamic-state>, Accessed June 7, 2018.

150 Damon Mehl, "The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan Opens a Door to the Islamic State", *Combating Terrorism Center*, June 2015, at <https://ctc.usma.edu/the-islamic-movement-of-uzbekistan-opens-a-door-to-the-islamic-state/>, Accessed June 7, 2017.

Imam Bukhari and Imam Termizi.<sup>151</sup> Through education, the young minds of Uzbekistan are to be taught values of peace, tolerance and coexistence, to inoculate them against future radicalisation. This is where Sufi traditions, which offer a powerful antidote against radicalisation, become important. All these measures have to be secular in nature, and should not hurt the religious feelings of the people, as Islam continues to be an important facet of the Central Asian society.

Likewise, in the first consultative meeting of Central Asian Heads of States in Astana, in March 2018, the CARs agreed to cooperate in the fields of law enforcement and intelligence sharing.<sup>152</sup> This will help to tackle the threat of cross-border terrorism. Also, four CARs except Turkmenistan also cooperate within the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation framework. Such attempts coupled with strong security measures can, in a long run, tackle the menace of terrorism.

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151 Statement by the Delegation of Uzbekistan at the Open Briefing of the Counter-Terrorism Committee, July 2, 2018, New York, At <https://www.un.org/sc/ctc/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Statement-by-the-delegation-of-the-Republic-of-Uzbekistan.pdf>, Accessed August 12, 2018.

152 Ibid.

## **Chapter 7**

### **Intra-CAR Cooperation and Role of Major Powers**

In the immediate aftermath of the Soviet Disintegration, experts from all over the world were apprehensive about the stability and security of the Central Asian region. Some scholars went to the extent of saying that the CARs might crumble or disintegrate. However, in spite of all such apprehensions, the CARs have survived for more than a quarter of a century since their independence. Moreover, the leadership has shown a degree of maturity in handling security concerns; and has not let threats cross their threshold.

The emergence of five sovereign republics in the heart of Eurasia was in itself a geopolitical challenge. These countries lacked democratic institutions, administrative experience and expertise in carrying out foreign relations. While adopting new political and economic structures domestically, these states also had to protect their sovereignty and territorial integrity. Challenges like internal differences (which culminated in a Civil War in Tajikistan), militancy and Islamic radicalisation, ethnic cleavages and environmental disasters like the Aral Sea, put pressures on the leadership. However, the CARs seem to have passed the phase of transition with considerable success.

For leaders of the five CARs, it was certainly not an easy task to built relations with their neighbours, especially in the backdrop of artificially crafted boundaries that are still un-demarcated, ethnic tangles, ethno-cultural spillovers, and problems such as terrorism, militancy, and drug trafficking. In the immediate aftermath of independence, leaders were nervous, and preferred to maintain the status quo in their relations with other republics of the region. Trade, economic cooperation and connectivity were also minimal in the initial years. There was almost no



progress in resolving the border issues. Mutual resentment between the post-communist leaders was also one of the reasons for the fractured relationships, which was evident in deterioration of Uzbek-Tajik relations during the tenure of First President Islam Karimov of Uzbekistan.

However, in recent years, the CARs have shown a greater willingness for resolving their problems and improving relations. Uzbekistan's new president, Shavkat Mirziyoyev has taken up the task of strengthening regional cooperation, and has made Central Asia a priority of his foreign policy. His increasing engagement with the other CARs has created a positive environment and enhanced trade, connectivity, and people-to-people relations. Other Central Asian leaders have positively reciprocated to his plea for greater cooperation.

Relations between the three countries sharing the Fergana Valley are discussed briefly below:

### **Uzbek-Tajik Relations**

Uzbek-Tajik relations go back hundreds of years, much before the crafting of modern borders. They reflect the Turko-Persian dichotomy that has traditionally shaped Central Asian history, society and politics. Incidentally, Uzbeks are the most populous and dominant Turkic group in the region; whereas Tajiks are the only community belonging to the Persian stock. As a matter of fact, these two communities have more commonalities than differences, in terms of culture, cuisine, arts, and folklore. The two have been fluid populations; and bilingualism was, and still is, very common among them. Moreover, there is a presence of a large number of Tajiks in Uzbekistan and also vice versa.<sup>153</sup>

Geopolitical compulsions have also determined the relationship between Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. Both these countries share a long border with Afghanistan. The two also share, along with Kyrgyzstan, the Fergana Valley which is the most populous, but most volatile part of Central Asia. Un-delimited borders and ethno-linguistic spill-overs make the matter worse, leading to issues like ethnic clashes, drug trafficking, and radicalisation. These factors have inversely impacted Uzbekistan's relations with Tajikistan.

Moreover, Tajikistan is an overwhelmingly mountainous country,

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<sup>153</sup> Rashmini Koparkar, "Uzbekistan and Tajikistan Press the Reset Button", *Vivekananda International Foundation*, March 28, 2018, At <http://www.vifindia.org/article/2018/march/28/uzbekistan-and-tajikistan-press-the-reset-button>, Accessed March 29, 2018.

and thus is the source of some important rivers of the region. Upstream Tajikistan and downstream Uzbekistan have always been divided on the water issues, which have been discussed in Chapter 4. Agriculture in Uzbekistan is dependent on the rivers coming from neighbouring Tajikistan (also Kyrgyzstan). On the other hand, the latter depends on the former for its energy needs. This became the reason for Uzbekistan's stern opposition to Tajikistan's proposed Rogun Hydropower project. It was thought that the dam would affect the cotton industry in the Fergana valley. Moreover, Uzbekistan, which has been the sole energy supplier of Tajikistan, believed that Rogun would potentially make Tajikistan self-sufficient in energy.<sup>154</sup>

Tensions between the two countries reached a crisis point in 1992, when Civil War broke in Tajikistan. As a result, hundreds of Uzbeks living in Tajikistan took refuge in Uzbekistan. This raised fears among the Uzbek ruling elite, about an ever increasing exodus. The relations gradually deteriorated because of the allegations and counter-allegations from both sides. President Karimov unilaterally seized the border, closed the checkpoints and also stopped direct flights between the two capitals.<sup>155</sup> There were reports that some sections of the border were also 'mined',<sup>156</sup> to prevent an influx of militants allegedly belonging to the IMU.

The relationship remained strained partially because of the uneasy equation between Karimov and Rahmon. The last state visit by the Uzbek President to Tajikistan was in 2000 when the *Treaty of Eternal Friendship* was signed.<sup>157</sup> There had been no bilateral visits in the previous 18 years, although the leaders visited each other's countries a couple of times to attend the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) summits. Rahmon visited Uzbekistan in September 2016 to attend Karimov's funeral.

After coming to power, President Shavkat Mirziyoyev pressed the reset button in Uzbek-Tajik relations, leading to a qualitative jump in bilateral cooperation. Major developments took place in the arena of

154 "Uzbekistan 'Cuts off Gas' from Tajikistan", *Gazette of Central Asia*, At <http://gca.satrapia.com/+uzbekistan-cuts-off-gas-to-tajikistan>, Accessed March 12, 2018.

155 Bruce Pannier, "Uzbek President's Tajik Visit Aims to Improve Tortured Relationship", *Radiofreeeurope Radio Library*, March 8, 2018, at <https://www.rferl.org/a/qishloq-ovozi-uzbek-president-mirziyoev-tajik-visit-rahmon-relations/29086973.html>, Accessed March 17, 2018.

156 George Voloshin, "The Uzbek-Tajik Détente: can it last?", *The Central Asia Caucasus Analyst*, July 8, 2015, at <https://cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13247-uzbek-tajik-detente-can-it-last.html>, Accessed March 17, 2018.

157 Bruce Pannier, "Central Asia: Analysis- Explaining the Uzbek-Tajik 'Eternal Friendship' Treaty", *Radiofreeeurope Radio Library*, June 6, 2000, at <https://www.rferl.org/a/1094179.html>, Accessed March 11, 2018.

connectivity. In April 2017, the Tashkent-Dushanbe direct flight was resumed after a gap of 25 years. Recently, nine border crossing points have also been opened, some of which are in the Fergana Valley sector. The trade turnover between the two increased by 20 per cent in 2017.<sup>158</sup> In the last one year, working groups of both countries have also started negotiations on border delimitation (also discussed in Chapter 4).

During Mirziyoyev's historic visit to Tajikistan on March 9-10, 2018, he and his counterpart President Rahmon signed several path-breaking agreements, including an agreement on 'Demarcation of certain sections of the Uzbek-Tajik Border' and signed a deal to establish a 30-day visa-free regime. Backtracking from years of opposition to the construction of Rogun Dam, Uzbek President stated that his government would consider providing support for the project. The two leaders inaugurated the Galaba- Amuzang- Hoshady rail route, connecting the southern Khatlon region of Tajikistan and the Surkhandarya region of Uzbekistan.<sup>159</sup> Mirziyoyev's successful visit has undoubtedly opened a new chapter in the Uzbek-Tajik relationship, which is now marked by healthy political relations, increased trade and economic cooperation, and enhanced connectivity.<sup>160</sup> In a nutshell, developments like border demarcation, visa-free regimes, opening of border cross points and rise in trade will improve overall conditions in the Fergana Valley.

### **Uzbek- Kyrgyz Relations**

Relations between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan are equally strained, although the issues are different from those between Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. This relationship has survived the scars of the Uzbek-Kyrgyz ethnic riots in Osh city in 1990 and 2010 (explained in detail in Chapter 5), when hundreds of Uzbeks were displaced. As discussed in Chapter 3, the Uzbek people have an overwhelming presence in southern Kyrgyzstan, especially in the Fergana Valley. They also dominate the economic life of this region. Tensions between the two ethnic groups started to escalate after the rounds of re-settlement of the nomadic Kyrgyz from the surrounding mountains to the valleys. This led to increased pressure on scarce resources, which in turn culminated in ethnic clashes.

<sup>158</sup> Uzbekistan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "The Visit was Fruitful", March 10, 2018, at <https://mfa.uz/en/press/news/2018/03/14202/>, Accessed March 11, 2018.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid.

<sup>160</sup> Rashmini Koparkar, "Uzbekistan and Tajikistan Press the Reset Button", March 28, 2018, at <http://www.vifindia.org/article/2018/march/28/uzbekistan-and-tajikistan-press-the-reset-button>, Accessed March 29, 2018.

The most contested issue between the two republics continues to be the border issue. In 1990s, Uzbekistan tried to fence the border, because of the influx of IMU militants. The border has been witnessing heavy security deployment, stone-pelting, shootings and sometimes even killings. The disputed sections of the un-delimited border, that include the exclaves of Sokh, Shahimardan and Barak, the Andijan Reservoir, have constantly been a cause of conflict and even armed confrontation.<sup>161</sup>

Like Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan is also an upper riparian state, and is the source of two great rivers, Naryn and Kara Darya, which at their confluence near Namangan make up the mighty Syr Darya. The cotton fields of the Fergana Valley are overwhelmingly dependent on the drainage system of Syr Darya and its canals. Like Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan also receives most of its energy from Uzbekistan. Uzbekistan's opposition to the Kambarata- 1 hydropower project on the river Naryn in Kyrgyzstan is well known.

Nevertheless, in the last one year, Mirziyoyev and the then Kyrgyz President Almazbek Atambayev, tried to improve bilateral relations. Mirziyoyev's visit to Bishkek in September 2017 resulted in an agreement to delineate 85 per cent of the two nations' shared 1,170-kilometre border. The Uzbek President also announced his country's likely involvement in Kyrgyz hydropower project at Kambarata-1.<sup>162</sup> Trade and connectivity between the two republics is also improving at an impressive rate.

### **Kyrgyz-Tajik Relations**

Both Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are poor, underdeveloped and geo-strategically vulnerable states. More than 90 per cent of their territory is mountainous and marked by rough terrain. They have scarce natural resources and heavily depend on the other CARs for their energy needs. They have one more thing in common- they are both the upstream countries, with abundant water from melting glaciers. In simple words, the two countries are more or less similar in terms of what they have and what they do not have; and thus, have little to offer to each other.

The two countries have experienced a great deal of conflict in last couple of decades. Border and water disputes are two sides of the same coin in this conflict. The un-delimited border has seen number of violent

<sup>161</sup> "Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan Preferred to Resolve the Border Issue Secretly", *Eurasianews*, September 8, 2018, at: <http://eurasianews.info/en/important/uzbekistan-and-kyrgyzstan-preferred-to-resolve-border-issue-secretly.html>, Accessed March 27, 2018.

<sup>162</sup> "Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan Open New Chapter in Relations", *Eurasianet.org*, September 8, 2018, at <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/85051>, Accessed March 27, 2018.

incidents in the recent past. The small local conflicts generally acquire ethnic overtones and escalate to the level of armed violence, sometimes also between the two states.<sup>163</sup> The problem is much more complex for people living in the contested territories or the enclaves. So far, both the governments have not shown much willingness for resolving their border dispute, or delineating the border.<sup>164</sup> In order to win the goodwill of their respective border communities, both states have preferred the status quo.<sup>165</sup>

The Tajik exclave of Vorukh, which is currently located in Kyrgyzstan, has been a matter of dispute between the two republics. The exclave is 20 km inside the Kyrgyz territory, which makes it difficult to build connectivity. The enclave dwellers speak Tajik language; however, they are surrounded by the Kyrgyz people. Conflict over land and water bodies is a common phenomenon; and often ends in clashes between the security personnel.<sup>166</sup> The inability of the two countries to solve the problem of Vorukh, is a classic instance of the lingering border dispute between them.

Unresolved border issues have given militants a free-hand in contested territories, as they move fearlessly across borders. This has increased the security risk in the Fergana Valley region. The three CARs should work out a plan to demarcate the existing border. There is need for greater maturity and understanding in dealing with such a sensitive issue of Central Asia. Once the borders are delimited, it will be much easier for the republics to properly administer them. It is also likely to reduce local conflicts, especially those over land and water bodies, which have made Fergana Valley a constant zone of instability.

## Role of Major Powers

Central Asia is situated at the crossroads of world civilisations, and is a land bridge for connecting various regions and continents. Historically, it has been dominated by various external powers, like Russia, China, United States (US), European Union (EU), Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, and India. However, in recent years, the role of the US or EU has been limited.

163 Svetlana, Valiyeva, "Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan: Water and Border Conflicts", January 16, 2014, at <https://climateandsecurity.org/2014/01/16/kyrgyzstan-tajikistan-land-and-water-conflicts/>, Accessed January 17, 2018.

164 Paul Goble, "Kyrgyz-Tajik Territorial Disputes Threaten Regional Stability", *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, November 30, 2017, at <https://jamestown.org/program/kyrgyz-tajik-territorial-disputes-threaten-regional-stability/>, Accessed January 17, 2018.

165 Ibid.

166 Torokul Doorov (et al.), "Small Enclave Spells big Problems of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan", January 16, 2014, *Radiofreeeurope Radio Library*, at <https://www.rferl.org/a/kyrgyzstan-tajikistan-exclaves-vorukh-tensions/25232311.html>, Accessed February 18, 2018.

During the War on Terror, US considered the CARs as frontline states and established military bases in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. These bases were closed down in 2005 and 2010 respectively. Both these closures were influenced by the political developments in the Fergana Valley. The exit of western powers from the region created a space, which was filled by China. This section describes the role of Russia and China, the most influential powers of the region.

## **Russia**

All the three CARs, sharing the Fergana valley, have a Russian (Tsarist/Pre-Soviet) past and Soviet legacy. The whole region was colonised by Tsarist Russia in the 1860s; and then came under the Soviet rule from 1920s to 1991. Therefore, the CARs have long association with Russia. As a matter of fact, the CARs in their present form are the creation of the Soviet national territorial policy. Moreover, much of their initial development in agriculture, industry, and infrastructure can be attributed to the Soviet Union. However, along with development, Soviet rule also saddled the CARs with many problems, including artificially created borders, ethnic tangles, population explosion, cotton monoculture, excessive irrigation and environmental disasters, including the drying up of the Aral Sea. After the Soviet disintegration, Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) was created to connect all the post-Soviet republics. All the CARs are till date, part of the CIS.

In the aftermath of independence, the CARs accepted, in principle, the Soviet-crafted borders. They embarked upon the process of state-consolidation and nation-building, and re-constructed their national identities. Most of the CARs tried to erase their Soviet/Russian legacy by changing of names, re-writing history, eliminating Soviet symbols and introducing new national symbols by drawing on their ancient/ medieval history. For example, the name of Leninabad province in Tajikistan was changed to Sughd. Also, Uzbekistan changed its script from Cyrillic to Latin. This process is generally described as ‘de-Russification’ or ‘de-Sovietisation’. In spite of this process, Russia still is an important player in the region. Most Central Asians still speak the Russian language and understand the Cyrillic script. Russian is the language for their inter-ethnic communication.

In the Fergana valley, which is a mosaic of various ethnicities, the Russian language plays significant role. Cities like Fergana, Andijan, Osh and Khujand are considerably Russified in their outlook, architecture and development. They have Soviet-era administrative buildings, theatres, stadiums, parks, etc. However, people in the valley are more traditional and take pride in their Islamic past, rather than in the Soviet legacy.

There is a considerable Russian population in each of the CARs, but they are mainly concentrated in the capitals. The number of Russians in the Fergana Valley is miniscule. On the other hand, huge numbers of workers from the CARs work in Russia and send remittances to their homes. These remittances have a significant share in the national GDPs of countries like Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan.

Central Asia is considered to be the soft underbelly of Russia, and any threat to its security and stability, is perceived by Russia as threat to its own security. Russia has traditionally played the role of security provider in the CARs, especially in the small, landlocked and poor countries like Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Currently, both these countries are members of the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO). Kyrgyzstan is also member of the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), which facilitates free movement of goods, services and labour amongst the member states. Uzbekistan is member of neither, but it engages with Russia through the framework of CIS.

There are Russian military facilities and bases in the CARs, except for Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan also have military and security ties with Russia for the purchase of weapons. Russia's military bases and facilities in Kyrgyzstan are- the Kant airbase, the testing station of anti-submarine weapons in Karakol, 338<sup>th</sup> naval communication station, and a seismic station. Tajikistan has the 201<sup>st</sup> Russian military base near Dushanbe and the optical-electronic centre of the space control system "window" near Nurek town. The presence of military bases in these countries is necessary not only for Russia but also for the Central Asian countries,<sup>167</sup> as they are facing multiple threats like terrorism, radicalisation and drug trafficking. The spillover effect from neighbouring Afghanistan is also their largest concern.

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167 Arman Mussen, "Russia's Military Bases in Central Asia", January 11, 2017, at <https://nupsreview.wordpress.com/2017/01/11/russias-military-bases-in-central-asia/>, Accessed January 14, 2018.



Although Russia continues to hold its influence in the security domain, its economic presence is diminishing. Its efforts to create a common customs union through the EEU were hampered by its own recession and western sanctions. Russia's decreasing economic investment and falling remittances have allowed other actors, especially China, to enter the CARs.<sup>168</sup>

## China

China is comparatively a newcomer on the Central Asian stage; it entered the region only after its boundary settlement with the CARs in late 1990s. China shares the border with three out of five CARs, namely Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. The latter two are poor, landlocked, mountainous republics, that rely on external support to develop their own infrastructure. China, being their larger immediate neighbour, is seen as having the potential to render that support. However, the implications of the rising Chinese engagement are a matter of concern, for both these republics. China's interests in the CARs are twofold, viz. energy and connectivity.

In recent years, China has gradually expanded its footprint in the CARs. Chinese companies are involved in infrastructure activities, like building roads, tunnels and bridges. While its engagements have been largely economic till date, China can potentially start imposing its strategic goals on the increasingly dependent CARs. China and Russia seem to have currently worked out a system of mutually-beneficial multi-polarity in the region. Nonetheless, competition between the two for exercising influence over CARs cannot be ruled out. Russia continues to exert political and military influence. China, which entered the region as an economic player, is already spreading its wings in the strategic realm, which was reflected by its joint military exercise with Tajikistan in 2016, and arms sale to Uzbekistan in 2015.

China has played a significant role in developing connectivity in the region, particularly in the Fergana Valley. Because of the artificially crafted borders that don't subscribe to the geographical boundaries, transport in the Valley was fractured. The old Soviet-constructed roads and railways passed through the territories of the other CARs, which became

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<sup>168</sup> Fergana Valley Five Year Humanitarian Trends Assessment", *Inter-Agency Regional Analysis Network*, March 2017, at <http://www.iris-france.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Ferghana-Valley-Report.pdf>, Accessed January 14, 2018.



problematic in the post-independence period. For example, the railway connecting the Uzbek part of the Fergana Valley with Tashkent passed through Khujand. However, recently, Uzbekistan has constructed a railway that connects Tashkent with the Fergana valley. This project was completed with the help of the Chinese, who built the 19.5 km long *Kamchiq* tunnel that cuts across the Kuramin mountains. This tunnel was built by the ‘China Railway Tunnel Group’ at a cost of \$455 million. It was inaugurated in 2016 by Xi Jinping and the then Uzbek President Islam Karimov.<sup>169</sup> The China-built Kamchiq pass is part of its larger project of the China- Kyrgyzstan- Uzbekistan railway, envisaged under the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB). Similarly, China has helped Tajikistan by constructing tunnels and bridges along the road that connects Fergana Valley with Dushanbe.

This new railway connecting Fergana Valley with rest of Uzbekistan has re-defined travel within the valley and within Uzbekistan. Lack of connectivity was the main obstacle in the development of the valley that has immense agricultural and industrial potential. The connectivity projects, especially railways, will help the valley to break territorial barriers and to integrate with regional economies. The valley has tremendous potential post the development of several free economic zones, as for example, Angren, Sughd and Osh and the consequent increase in productivity and trade.

However, the larger Chinese designs behind such large-scale construction activities cannot be overlooked. Along with building roads and railways, China is also constructing energy pipelines to extract oil and gas from CARs. In Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, Chinese companies are investing in hydropower projects. Markets in the Fergana Valley are already flooded with Chinese goods. Their influx is going to increase in the coming years. Both these countries are amongst the top eight, with regard to the Chinese debt-distress.<sup>170</sup> In 2011, Tajikistan had to cede 1000 sq km of its land to China, in order to settle more than a century-old land dispute.<sup>171</sup> However, a hidden motive behind the writing off an

169 “Two Presidents Open Angren-Pap Railway”, *Railway Gazette*, July 2, 2016, At <http://www.railwaygazette.com/news/infrastructure/single-view/view/two-presidents-open-angren-pap-railway.html>, Accessed March 29, 2018.

170 John Hurley (et al.), “Examining the Debt Implications of the Belt and Road Initiative from a Policy Perspective”, *Center for Global Development*, March 2018, at <https://www.cgdev.org/sites/default/files/examining-debt-implications-belt-and-road-initiative-policy-perspective.pdf>, Accessed August 13, 2018.

171 “Tajikistan Cedes 1000 sq.km. to China”, *The Hindu*, January 13, 2011, at <https://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-international/Tajikistan-cedes-1000-sq-km-to-China/article15517690.ece>, Accessed 27 August, 2018.

undisclosed debt amount, cannot be ruled out. Similarly, there was a report that Tajikistan granted China the rights to a gold mine, in April this year, as remuneration for the \$300 million funding for build a power plant.<sup>172</sup> These investments can actually push poor countries towards the economic collapse.

As of now, Russia and China have found synergy in the Central Asian region through the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), which was established in 2001 by China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. The key objectives of this organisation include: maintaining regional security, peace and stability, and fighting against the ‘three evil’ forces of terrorism, extremism and separatism. The member-states have set up the Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) at Tashkent for information sharing and for jointly fighting terrorism. They also hold ‘anti-terrorism joint military exercises’ from time to time. The organisation expanded in 2017 to include India and Pakistan as member-states, although domination of China is still intact.

The geo-strategic location, economic potential and security vulnerabilities of the Fergana Valley give it great significance in international relations as well. Its proximity to states like Afghanistan, Pakistan and the Chinese province of Xinjiang is a cause for ongoing concern. The role of major powers like Russia and China is extremely important for the security, stability and development of the region. However, their role should be confined to that of external players, and should not lead to creating dependencies within Central Asia.

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172 Eiji Furukawa, “Belt and Road Debt Trap Spreads to Central Asia”, *Nikkei Asian Review*, August 29, 2018, at <https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Belt-and-Road/Belt-and-Road-debt-trap-spreads-to-Central-Asia>, Accessed September 17, 2018.

## **Chapter 8**

### **India's engagements in Central Asia with Special Reference to the Fergana Valley**

Central Asia is part of India's extended neighbourhood, and is of immense strategic significance. The Indian subcontinent had commercial, cultural, and civilisational links with the Central Asian region since times immemorial. India has had considerable geo-cultural and philosophical influence on Central Asian history and thought. During ancient times, Buddhism was transmitted from India to Central Asia and further to China. These historical links provide the basis for India's contemporary engagements in the region.

After the Soviet Disintegration, India developed diplomatic relations with each of the CARs; and has fostered cooperation in fields of defence, Information Technology, education, health and counter-terrorism. India has signed the Agreement of Strategic Partnership with three of the five CARs namely Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. Besides this, all the CARs, except Turkmenistan, are founder members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), which India has recently joined. This gives India an added advantage in enhancing its engagement in the region, which is mainly driven by 'Connect Central Asia' Policy launched in 2012.

Prime Minister Modi became the first Indian leader to visit all the five CARs. President Ramnath Kovind recently visited Tajikistan. In August 2018, External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj visited Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. In last four years, the presidents of three CARs, namely Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan have reciprocated by making state visits to New Delhi. In January 2019, India-Central Asia foreign ministerial dialogue was organized in Samarkand,

which was also attended by the foreign minister of Afghanistan. The heightened political dialogue has been converted into strengthening of cooperation in various sectors.

Since India and the CARs face similar security threats, the two sides have developed defence and security cooperation. India has started holding an annual joint military exercise- *Khanjar*- with Kyrgyzstan. It also refurbished the Aini Airbase in Tajikistan and carried out its first overseas military operations in Tajikistan in 2003. It has also built a 50-bed military hospital in Tajikistan. Indian defence academies have trained a large number of cadets from the CARs. There is potential for even more engagements like military training in the CARs, or joint defence production. Mutual exchanges can also take place in field of conflict management and resolution.

Economic cooperation and trade between India and CARs has been minimal till date. The total import bill of the CARs is \$67 billion, of which India's share is \$362.5 million, i.e. 0.54 per cent. On the other hand, the CARs figure only marginally in India's trade. In 2017, India's exports to five CARs were \$260 million, accounting for 0.12 per cent of India's total exports.<sup>173</sup> The reason for this low trade is the lack of proper connectivity between the two regions. India's access to the resource-rich CARs is blocked by Pakistan. India is therefore, trying to develop connectivity through Iran. Its connectivity initiatives in the region include the International North South Transport Corridor (INSTC), the Chabahar Port and its recent accession to the Ashgabat Agreement.<sup>174</sup>

For all these years, Indian engagements in Central Asia, be it government or private players, were mostly concentrated in the national capitals. Nevertheless, the stakeholders have now realized the unique opportunities offered by the regions of CARs in terms of business, tourism, and people-to-people connect. This has led to the expansion of Indian engagements in various parts of Central Asia. Furthermore, under Prime Minister Modi, various ministries of the Union government as well as state governments are also engaged in the process, leading to the expansion and diversification of our relations.

<sup>173</sup> Ministry of Commerce Statistics, System on Foreign Trade Performance Analysis, URL: <http://commerce.nic.in/ftp/rgncnt.asp>, Accessed February 6, 2018.

<sup>174</sup> "India Joins the Ashgabat Agreement", *MEA Press Release*, February 1, 2018, at: [http://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/29406/India\\_Joins\\_the\\_Ashgabat\\_Agreement](http://www.mea.gov.in/press-releases.htm?dtl/29406/India_Joins_the_Ashgabat_Agreement), Accessed February 4, 2018.

## India in the Fergana Valley Region

Like other parts of Central Asia, the Fergana Valley and India were also connected by commercial and cultural relations since the time of the Silk Route. The residents of the Fergana Valley take pride in the fact that Babur, a young prince from their region, travelled to India and established the mighty Mughal Empire, which ruled over most of the Indian subcontinent for a considerable period. In the modern period, India is one of the most popular countries in the Valley. However, their contemporary interest in India goes beyond history, and is entrenched in India's soft power. This is apparent from the fact that many girls in the region are named *Indira* or *Nargiza*.

During Soviet times, Indian movies starring Raj Kapoor and Nargis were extremely popular, and were dubbed in Russian and shown in movie theatres all over the Fergana Valley. The songs from those films are still sung and played at gatherings and family functions. Even today, most of the residents of the Valley are aware of Indian cinema, soap operas, music, dance, clothing, cuisine and Yoga. Indian movies and TV serials are shown on national television after being translated into their respective languages. Interestingly, the TV soaps on various Indian channels have become a part of the day-to-day lives of these people, more so of women.<sup>175</sup>

The Fergana valley people look at Indians with respect and affection. Nonetheless, their perception about India is influenced solely by movies and serials, which may or may not be depicting the picture of real India. The Indian government can make better use of this soft power to reach out to the peoples of the valley. Based on the popularity of film and TV actors, they can be hired to spread a positive message about India, through films, short-films or even live concerts. The ministries of external affairs, culture and tourism can be involved in such initiatives.

Tourism, people-to-people contacts, academic exchanges and linguistic studies can also play a significant role in spreading Indian influence. Osh University has a Centre for Indology Studies, which was opened in 1997 with the help of the Indian Embassy.<sup>176</sup> Such centres can be opened in other universities as well. A large number of Indian students

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<sup>175</sup> Information gathered from Author's interactions with the people of the Fergana Valley, during her Field Visit.

<sup>176</sup> Indian Centre, Official site of Osh State University, At <https://oshmed.com/osh-state-university/international-relations/indian-center/>, Accessed May 20, 2018.

go to the region for medical education, especially to Osh. On the other hand, a number of students from the Fergana Valley come to India to pursue various degrees, many as part of the Indian Technical and Economic Cooperation (ITEC) and Indian Council of Cultural Relations (ICCR) fellowships. But this number is limited and needs a boost, especially in the field of Indology. These students can be the unofficial ambassadors of India in their respective countries.

India has a place in the heart of every Central Asian; however, this presence is largely through the satellite link. If India is looking to expand its footprint in the region, it has to create a ‘real’ presence through multiple channels, like business, trade, investments and tourism. A few Indian enterprises are coming up in the Fergana Valley, most of which are in the pharmaceuticals and food processing sectors.<sup>177</sup>

In February 2018, India signed an agreement with the Andijan Region in Uzbekistan for the production of pharmaceutical products and medical equipment in Andijan.<sup>178</sup> Accordingly, during President Mirziyoyev’s visit to New Delhi in October 2018, a memorandum was signed between the Indian Ministry of Health and the Andijan region of Uzbekistan, for establishing the Uzbek-Indian Free Pharmaceutical Zone in Andijan.<sup>179</sup>

During the same visit, a Memorandum of Understanding was signed between the *Khokimiyat* (Governorate) of Andijan and the government of Gujarat for mutual cooperation and partnership.<sup>180</sup> Such initiatives have expanded India’s footprint in the Fergana Valley. However, there is still much scope in sectors like energy, agriculture, skill development, IT, entertainment, medicine and tourism.

In the 1990s and 2000s, the Fergana Valley was shaken by violent incidents, discussed in the previous chapters. However, it has now left the period of violence behind, and is emerging as a zone of prosperity. Revolution in transport and connectivity within the valley has opened a fresh chapter of economic development. The governments in CARs have

<sup>177</sup> Information gathered from Author’s interactions with the people of the Fergana Valley, during her Field Visit.

<sup>178</sup> “India and Andijan Region of Uzbekistan agree to cooperate for production of pharma & medical device”, *Pharmabiz.com*, February 26, 2018, At <http://www.pharmabiz.com/NewsDetails.aspx?aid=107505&sid=2>, Accessed May 20, 2018.

<sup>179</sup> List of Documents signed between India and the Republic of Uzbekistan during the State Visit of President of Uzbekistan to India, Official Website of *Ministry of External Affairs Government of India*, 01 October 2018, At <https://www.mea.gov.in/incoming-visit-detail.htm?30452/>

List+of+Documents+signed+between+India+and+the+Republic+of+Uzbekistan+during+the+State+Visit+of+President+of+Uzbekistan+to+India, Accessed December 24, 2018.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid.

created number of free economic zones in their respective Fergana Valley regions and are inviting stakeholders from around the globe to engage in sectors like transport, infrastructure, energy, science and technology, agriculture and industry. India can potentially benefit from this opportunity to make inroads into the CARs.

The CARs look up to India and seek more engagements from the Indian side. India should now try to capitalise on this goodwill and cultural influence to enhance its relations with this geo-strategically important region.

### **Recommendations**

1. As India is trying to expand its engagements beyond the capitals, air connectivity should be extended to cities like Osh and Khujand, which are the second largest cities of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan respectively.
2. The establishment of centres of Indology and Indian languages, on the lines of the Centre for Indology Studies at Osh University, can be a catalyst in strengthening our historical, cultural and academic ties.
3. Indian Cultural Centres can promote Indian classical music, dance and Yoga in the cities of the Fergana Valley. Given the popularity of Indian culture in cities like Andijan and Osh, such initiatives will surely receive massive response.
4. Central Asia in general and the Fergana Valley in particular, have immense potential in the field of tourism. However, Indian tourism companies have not yet explored this region. The historical places in the Fergana Valley, like Kokand, Andijan and Osh, have the potential to become attractions for Indian tourists. This can be achieved through measures like direct air connectivity, simple visa procedures, investments in hospitality industry, promotions and advertising.
5. Considering the popularity of film and TV actors, they can be hired by various ministries, to spread a positive message about India, through films, short-films or even live concerts.

6. As the Fergana Valley is mainly an agriculture based economy, regular interactions should be arranged between Indian and Central Asian bio-technologists. This can lead to sharing of technology and experience. India and the CARs can learn from each other's expertise in the production and processing, mainly of cotton, fruits and vegetables.
7. The CARs are trying to amicably solve the border issues. In this regard, the recently signed 'India-Bangladesh Land Boundary Agreement' can be a good model for the CARs, as it had similar issues like a dense population, ethno-cultural spillovers and the existence of enclaves.
8. Expansion of the joint military exercises and training of personnel from CARs shall lead to better cooperation in fields of border management and counter-terrorism.



## **Chapter 9**

### **Conclusion**

Fergana Valley has been a focal point of Central Asia since ages. However, in the aftermath of Soviet dissolution, the region attracted the attention of the world for all the wrong reasons, like border disputes, ethnic conflicts, militancy and radicalisation. Therefore, a holistic study of this vital region was necessary to discover the factors underlying the current problems. In view of that, this study is an attempt at understanding the Fergana Valley through its geographical, historical, social, political and cultural dynamics.

The root causes of its contemporary problems can be traced to the ethno-linguistic fault lines created the unnatural division of the Fergana Valley into three republics during the Soviet rule. The subsequent disintegration of the Soviet Union and independence of the CARs complicated matters further, as the internal administrative boundaries were transformed into international borders restricting the free flow of men, materials and ideas.

The Fergana Valley is geographically secluded from the rest of Central Asia, as it is surrounded by mountains on all sides. Moreover, it is a mosaic of various ethno-linguistic groups. The modern division of the valley neither subscribes to its physical features; nor is it in keeping with the historical or civilisational frontiers. The valley is physically as well as culturally, closer to Tashkent than to the Kyrgyz and Tajik capitals of Bishkek and Dushanbe. The historical routes, and even the rail and roads built during the Soviet period, crisscrossed current international borders, leading to a problem of connectivity.

For the purpose of protecting their sovereignty and integrity, independent CARs fenced certain sections of borders, deployed security machinery, and introduced visa regimes. The outbreak of Civil War in Tajikistan, the rise of militancy in Uzbek Fergana Valley, the north-south divide and the ethno-political cleavages in Kyrgyzstan led to further tightening of security regimes, closing of border crossing points, and breakdown of transport facilities, giving serious blow to cross-border connectivity.

In the changed scenario, it became more and more difficult for residents of the valley to visit their relatives on the other side of the border. The CARs had to find out new ways to connect their respective sections of the valley; as the old routes, passing through each other's territories were no longer feasible. Un-delimited borders created more issues such as water disputes, conflict over land, drug and human trafficking, organised crime and militancy.

Because of its arable land and plenty of water bodies, the population of the valley grew rapidly. This led to problems like poverty, unemployment, scarcity of resources and crime. This was coupled with over-irrigation and the shrinking of rivers and canals. The valley that was once the agricultural heartland of Central Asia, eventually started to develop its own problems that inversely affected production. Competition over the scarce resources, coupled with the ethnic tangle, resulted in all conflicts acquiring inter-ethnic overtones.

In the post-independence period, the Fergana Valley came to be known as the knot of all problems that included: disputed borders, enclaves, connectivity issues, high population density, scarcity of resources, water disputes, inter-ethnic tensions and radicalisation. Because of the physical and cultural proximity, conflicts in one part of the valley developed a tendency to spill over to parts belonging to other republics. Thus, it was soon established that security and stability in Central Asia was directly linked to the stability of the Fergana Valley. The problems of the Valley, which were multi-dimensional, complex and inter-linked, could not be solved without inter-CARs cooperation.

Almost for two decades after independence, the three CARs were comparatively reluctant to cooperate with each other for addressing the issues. The reasons for this were manifold, ranging from domestic political

compulsions to inter-personal dynamics among the leaders. However, in recent years, the leaders have shown greater maturity and understanding in solving the intra-CARs tensions. The election of Shavkat Mirziyoyev as the Uzbek President in December 2016, has altered the regional scenario in many ways. He has embarked upon the process of Central Asian cooperation with new vigour. Leaders of other CARs have also positively reciprocated to his initiatives.

In last two years, the three CARs have taken positive steps towards border demarcation, especially in the Fergana Valley. The process is complex, cumbersome and difficult, as the bordering regions are marked by the existence of multi-national populations, and the claims and counterclaims of all stakeholders. Nevertheless, the initiative from all three sides reflects their determination and political will to solve the issue. The demarcation shall bring in better border management, and eventually reduce cross-border crime.

Connectivity in the region has also undergone a sea change in the recent past. Today the Fergana Valley regions of each republic are suitably linked with their respective capitals. Many border-crossing points have been opened in the last one year to facilitate mobility of people as well as goods. The trade between the three CARs has also seen the upward swing in recent months. Mirziyoyev and Rahmon's recent steps to remove the visa regime (for the duration of one month) between Uzbekistan and Tajikistan shall definitely lead to an increase in people to people exchanges. Because of visa-free regimes, better transport facilities and opening of border-crossing points, people in the Fergana Valley can easily visit their relatives staying on the other side of the border.

In recent years, China has played a significant role in improving national and intra-CAR connectivity. The construction of tunnels with Chinese help has become catalyst in connecting Fergana Valley regions with their respective national capitals, in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. The China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway and road is an upcoming project under the BRI. Through these initiatives, China has also multiplied its trade and investments in the region. Although, the economic repercussions of these projects on the CARs, especially poor and mountainous Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, can prove to be economically disastrous. China is

currently the largest trading partner and largest source of investment in the CARs. However, it buys raw materials and natural resources, for example gas from Uzbekistan, and sells manufactured goods. This might have an inverse effect on these developing economies. Because of this, the CARs are looking for credible and sustainable partners to diversify their trade and investments. New players like Japan, South Korea and European Union have already started penetrating in this region. India, which enjoys tremendous goodwill and respect amongst CARs, can also take this opportunity to expand its footprint in the region.

There is considerable economic potential in the Fergana Valley, owing to its natural resources. The setting up of free economic zones in recent years has enhanced the potential for investment from foreign countries in various sectors. Improved connectivity and trade can further lead to the development of the region. This can also potentially create job opportunities for the youth. The CARs look to their dense populations as a 'demographic dividend' that can contribute to economic development. The 60 per cent population, belonging to the working age, can become a viable factor in the process of nation-building, if their energies and skills are channelised properly. India has already established itself in the CARs as a player in education and skill development. However, there is much more scope in this regard.

It is generally believed that the renewed emphasis on regional cooperation and economic development can tackle issues like radicalisation and ethnic tensions. However, economic advancement and better standards of life cannot be the only way to check radicalisation, at least in the short term, as there are more push and pull factors leading to the disenchantment of youth. Thus, governments will have to take stern 'counter-radicalisation' measures, individually as well as collectively. President Mirziyoyev's programme of *Education against Ignorance* and his emphasis on educating young minds about values like peace, tolerance and coexistence, can be an antidote to radicalisation. Such measures should be replicated in all CARs. Intra-CAR cooperation in counter-terrorism and intelligence sharing is need of the hour.

The transformation of the CARs, from five post-Soviet *Stans* to independent players in the regional and global geopolitical dynamics, has

been a fascinating story. These countries are aspiring to rise as vibrant economies and peaceful societies, and also wanting to play a constructive role in world affairs. Their improving relations with each other are a welcome development, as these landlocked nations depend on each other for connectivity and trade. Their engagements with the major powers like Russia, China, US, EU, Japan and India, have also seen an upward trajectory in last two years. Gradually, external actors are also increasing their presence in regions like the Fergana Valley, which has immense economic potential. This shall, hopefully, lead to the establishment of eternal peace in the valley. This process can definitely transform the erstwhile ‘zone of conflict’ into a ‘zone of prosperity’.

## About the Author



Dr Rashmini Koparkar is a researcher of Central Asia. Her research interests include geopolitics of Eurasia, Politics and Foreign Policies of the Central Asian Republics, and issues of Cultural Identity and Nation-Building. She formerly worked at the Vivekananda International Foundation as a Research Associate, where she looked into India's engagements in the Central Asian region.

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