

Perspectives

Afghanistan is Not the Balkans: Ethnicity and Its Political Consequences from a Central Eurasian Perspective

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The remarkable growth in membership of the Central Eurasian Studies Society since its inception illustrates the need it fills among students of the region. But how can an area that is so vast geographically and diverse culturally provide a useful construct for debate and study? There are certainly disagreements (and seemingly endless ones) over exactly where to draw the region's boundaries, which peoples to include in its purview and how to integrate the different national historical traditions found within it. But despite these difficulties, treating Central Eurasia as a region offers new and refreshing perspectives that make the problems of definition and integration well worth the challenge.

As long as the various parts of Central Eurasia were seen as the periphery for other core areas (Russia, the Islamic Middle East, China, or South Asia), the integration and interconnections within Central Eurasia itself were neglected. In particular the region was seen as a passive victim of outside forces but not a generator of innovations or power. This view may well reflect the stark historical trajectory of the last 200 to 300 years, when Chinese, Russian and British imperial expansion severed the long-standing cultural and economic ties that bound the region together. But for most of its history Central Eurasia was a positive force to be reckoned with, most notably when the Mongol Empire spanned most of Asia. It served as a vital and profitable route for overland trade and the diffusion of religions, and it had a lively urban as well as nomadic cultural tradition. The recent re-emergence of independent states in the region and changing world economics may mark a return to this older pattern, which Andre Gunder Frank labeled the "centrality of central Asia" (1992, 1998).

A Comparative Perspective: Ethnicity and Nationalism

An example of how the perspective from Central Eurasia can throw a different light on broader problems concerns the role of ethnicity and nationalism. Because there are so many different ethnic groups with very complex histories in the region, and because the Soviet Union used ethnic models to justify drawing the administrative boundaries that gave rise to independent states with its collapse, there has been a natural focus on these issues. Similarly, in the wake of the fall of the Taliban regime in neighboring Afghanistan in 2001, a debate arose among analysts and scholars of Afghanistan as to whether the country even had a future as a unified state (Kinzer 2001). Some argued that any attempt to maintain a unified Afghanistan was doomed to failure because ethnic groups there would naturally use their bases of regional power to break up any unitary state. They predicted that Afghanistan would soon divide as the various ethnic groups would either form a number of new independent mini-states or combine with existing transborder co-ethnic polities (Uzbekistan, Pakistan, etc.).

This argument had particular resonance because the disintegration of the former Yugoslavia and the genocidal ethnic strife in Central Africa were fresh on the minds of the international community. And in the former Yugoslavia there seemed no end to the chain of demands for ever smaller ethnic states or the willingness of small regional ethnic groups to sabotage any plans that called for multiethnic states. Since a large number of the expatriates arriving to assist in Afghanistan's reconstruction had experience in the Balkans, they were particularly attuned to such potential problems. There was also a general belief that ethnic divisions were more intractable than other divisions (political,

religious, class, geographic, etc.) that might impede the recreation of a centralized state.

No one, however, had informed the Afghans of this inevitability. It was true that the war against the Soviet Union (1978-1989) and the ensuing civil war (1989-2001) had empowered regional ethnic groups in Afghanistan to an extent not seen since Amir Abdur Rahman had crushed their autonomy at the end of the 19th century. It was also true that ethnic lines had become sharper during the 25 years of war. But it was striking that not a single Afghan political or military leader ever threatened to secede from Afghanistan to form an independent state or expressed any interest in joining with co-ethnic neighboring states, not even as a negotiating tactic. Instead, even the very powerful regional warlords cooperated in the *Loya Jirga*, the national assembly that created the provisional Afghan central government. These military leaders, and the more democratically selected delegates, all asserted that some kind of working central government was an absolute necessity for a country of which they all (regardless of ethnic divisions and old grudges) saw themselves a part. This process was reinforced with the adoption of a new constitution in January 2004, which established a formal framework for a unitary government without regional divisions, and a successful presidential election in October 2004.

What explained the lack of movement toward ethnic disintegration in a country where all the elements for such a division are present? The answer lies both in the nature of ethnicity in Central Eurasia and the pragmatic outlook of Afghan leaders who, like poker players at a card game, are more interested in dividing the pot than they are in dividing the table at which they sit.

The Nature of Ethnicity in former Soviet Central Asia

Ethnicity is often assumed to be the natural partner of nationalism and the nation state. The 19th century unification of Germany and Italy both were rooted in the belief that people who share the same race, language and culture are natural political units. Such a political ideology undermined and then destroyed the old multiethnic Hapsburg Empire in Eastern Europe as Czechs, Slovaks, Hungarians, and Southern Slavs all argued for the right to self-determination; their claims were granted after the First World War. Similarly the multiethnic Ottoman Empire in the Middle East fell victim to a rising Arab and Turkish nationalism that had been growing

well before its formal dissolution into national states by the European powers. Even the new Marxist Soviet Union, which posited class as the only true divider of peoples, felt impelled to create ethnically based national and union republics within the Soviet state. The largest and most numerous of these were in Central Asia.

Ethnicity in Central Asia before the 20th century, however, had taken a different historical trajectory. In particular, the nationalist element was completely lacking. Here states had always been multiethnic and the belief that the rulers of the state must be drawn from its majority population was an alien idea. Indeed such multiethnic empires and khanates were normally ruled by dominant minorities who had established their right to rule by force. For close to a millennium rulers were mainly drawn from invading tribal and nomadic Turco-Mongol peoples. However, such rulers did not have a monopoly on high government positions because they depended on literate Persian-speaking administrators who had better command of the complex issues of governance like taxation and economic policy. Indeed, so closely integrated were the two that a proverb arose that "a Turk without a Persian is like a head without a hat." Similarly, regardless of historical origin or language spoken, the population of the irrigated river valleys and the cities tended to have no distinct ethnic identity. In Transoxiana, for example, Turkic- and Persian-speaking peasant and urban populations were rarely defined in ethnic terms but rather by the localities in which they lived or by such a term as *Sart*, which was devoid of specific ethnic content. These labels were descriptive rather than organizational and individuals saw themselves as filling multiple and cross-cutting roles. How they defined themselves to others (or to themselves) depended more on the context of the question than on any rule based system.

If there was a notion of self-rule and ethnic group consciousness, it was best developed among the tribal peoples of the region. But they were generally illiterate and inhabited the marginal mountain, desert and steppe regions and so had little political impact. In addition, while tribal identity might have been strongly developed, it was hamstrung by internal subdivisions that made overall unity difficult or impossible to achieve. For example, the famous 17th century Pashtun warrior and poet Khushal Khan Khattak revolted against the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb along today's Pakistan/Afghanistan border in defense of tribal

autonomy, but spent almost as much time (and devoted as many poems) to his blood feuds with rival Pashtun clans. When the Pashtun dynasty finally did come to power in Afghanistan in the mid-18th century it depended heavily on non-Pashtun Qizilbash soldiers and a Persian-speaking bureaucracy to maintain itself in power.

In Central Asia the concept of ethnic nationalism did not emerge from the bottom up but was imposed from the top down by the Soviet government in the areas under its control. This was done by dividing Central Asia's three geographically based and multiethnic khanates (Khiva, Bukhara and Kokand) into five arbitrary ethnic republics (Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan). The new ethnic republics were an attempt both to destroy the old khanate identities that had deep historical roots and to pre-empt the nascent political movements that had earlier proclaimed the unity of Central Asia either in terms of pan-Turkism or the greater Islamic community. After 1949 the People's Republic of China followed the same practice in its own territories of Xinjiang, Inner Mongolia and Tibet.

The Soviets attempted to create distinct ethnic identities in these new republics by having people choose a single ethnic identity by which they would be classified henceforth and by rewriting the history of the region in ethnic terms. This never really took root because such a redefinition did not excite the cultural or historical imagination of the region's peoples the way it did in Eastern Europe. It was particularly problematic in the most populous Central Asian state, Uzbekistan, where most of the population had previously identified itself non-ethnically by locality or clan and where the old urban centers of Bukhara and Samarqand were Persian-speaking. Kazakhstan too had problems because the titular ethnic group did not even constitute a majority, after the settlement there in the late 19th and early 20th centuries of so many Russians and Ukrainians. The Kokand Khanate's rich Ferghana Valley was distributed piecemeal among Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, dividing a population that had long had a geographical unity. There it was hard to convince similar people living in the western part of the valley in Uzbekistan that they were a completely different nationality from their neighbors upriver in the east in Tajikistan or Kyrgyzstan. But until the Soviet Union collapsed such divisions were almost completely theoretical, except as part of the state administration. They had little impact on the bulk of the population,

which remained organized around local solidarity groups based on a variety of criteria. As Fredrik Barth (1994) has noted, when ethnicity is created by a state administrative fiat, people may quickly move to fill niches that are to their advantage (or fall victim to persecution if such redefinition is negative), but such creations are nonetheless artificial and lack the cultural power to move people to action. While the older terms of identification such as Sart may have been replaced by Tajik or Uzbek, such new labels were still descriptive and local populations remained wedded to their local solidarity groups in terms of political organization. Thus it was striking that in both the Soviet and post-Soviet periods political rivalry was less between differently defined ethnic groups than between regional rivals within the same administrative categories (Roy 2000: 96-100, 109-115).

After independence, as national borders became barriers to movement, their arbitrary nature became all too clear. The new Central Asian states found it difficult to instill an ethnic national identity except among the Turkmen and Kyrgyz who already had a common identity and formed an overwhelming majority in their new states. Uzbekistan was able to define its diverse population as primarily "Uzbek" only by moving to geographical criteria in which all the peoples (past and present) who ever lived in Uzbekistan's territory are viewed as a single group. Thus the pre-Uzbek 15th century Turkic conqueror Timur became their national historical founder, relegating the founder of the original Shaybanid Uzbek state to the margins of their history. Similarly, the famous Persian-speaking poets and philosophers of Samarqand and Bukhara were grafted into the historic tree of Uzbek culture. The Kazakhs faced a dilemma of giving ethnicity priority in national identity in a state where Slavs constituted close to an equal proportion of the population. And while Tajikistan found it relatively easy to apply a common Tajik ethnicity among its majority Iranian language speakers, it has found it impossible to get them to think of themselves as a national unit, a situation that led to a vicious civil war in which regional interests trumped ethnic labels.

For these reasons Olivier Roy (2000) argued that using ethnicity as the key analytical category in Central Asia was misleading. In his detailed ethnographic study of politics and nationality in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, Roy found that broad scale ethnic labels merely created an administrative framework in which more locally rooted and flexibly defined solidarity groups (*qawms*) formed factions

that operated with much more cohesiveness. He admitted that his focus on *qawms* rather than on larger ethnic labels was derived in part from the legacy of his previous ethnographic experience in Afghanistan, where such groups have always been seen as key social actors in the public arena. While not all observers may accept his characterizations, his use of an Afghan framework throws a very different light on the structure of ethnicity and politics. It also may help to explain why ethnic division is not likely to break up the Afghan state.

Ethnicity and Pragmatism in Afghanistan

Although ethnicity was never a legal category in Afghanistan as it was in Soviet Central Asia, it did play a political role. The most important ethnic groups in Afghanistan are the Pashtuns, Tajiks, Uzbeks, Turkmens and Hazaras, although a number of smaller ethnic groups have regionally important roles (most notably the Nuristanis and Baluches). However, the range of diversity at the local level, where social organization is based on smaller kinship groups or regional communities, reduced the utility of the major national ethnic labels as clear units of political analysis. These therefore tended to be used more to explain the gross outlines of Afghan politics to the outside world rather than to mobilize Afghans themselves.

The country's Pashtuns, about 40 percent of the population, historically inhabit the area south of the Hindu Kush. Some were resettled (or deported) north to increase Pashtun representation in border areas. The imposition of the so-called "Durand Line" divided the Pashtuns between British India and Afghanistan in the late 19th century, and so an equal or larger number also reside in Pakistan. The Pashtuns are tribally organized, all claiming descent from a common ancestor, but they are divided into a large number of clans and lineages. In Afghanistan the largest division is between the Ghilzai Pashtuns, straddling the Pakistan border, and the Durrani Pashtuns based around Kandahar. Although the Ghilzais have historically been the larger group, the Durrani have been politically dominant since the country's founding in 1747. They maintained an exclusive hold on political leadership through a royal dynasty that was only displaced by the Communist coup of 1978. Even at that time, however, power remained in the hands of the Ghilzai Pashtun faction of the Afghan Communist Party until the Soviet invasion. No faction was able to achieve dominance from the fall of the old Communist regime led by Najibullah (a Pashtun) in

1992 to the Taliban's taking of power in 1995. In 2001 the choice of Hamid Karzai as the leader of the provisional government of Afghanistan and his formal election to the presidency in 2004 under the new constitution has returned the old Durrani elite to the level of influence that they had lost 25 years earlier.

With a few isolated exceptions, Pashtuns are exclusively Sunni Muslims. In rural areas, however, there is a melding of their tribal law (the *Pashtunwali*) with religious belief so that interpretations of religious law and tribal code are often seen as inseparable. Local charismatic religious leaders, known as *pirs*, played important roles in politics historically because they and their disciples crossed tribal lines and could act as counterweights to the landowning tribal khans. Under the Taliban (1995-2001), Pashtun religious leaders actually ruled the Afghan state for the only time in its history, but leadership was drawn from the ranks of local village mullahs rather than the better educated clerics or lineages of Sufi *pirs*.

The Tajiks, Persian-speaking Sunni Muslims, make up the second most important population, constituting around 30 percent of the population. They do not have a tribal organization, but identify themselves by locality. They make up the bulk of Kabul's urban population and dominate the mountainous regions of the northeast where their co-ethnics reside in Tajikistan and parts of Uzbekistan. Persian speakers also dominate western Afghanistan (where they are often called *Farsiwan* rather than Tajik), but they historically had closer cultural and economic links to Iran. The Afghan Tajiks were particularly important as a group because Persian was both the lingua franca of Afghanistan and the language of government. Pashtuns who settled in cities like Kabul usually became highly Persianized and succeeding generations often lost the ability to speak Pashto. (This was particularly true of the royal Durrani Muhammadzai lineage in the capital.) If the Pashtuns dominated most of the military and political leadership positions, it was the Tajiks who ran the bureaucracy. As a more urbanized and literate population, they were also more strongly represented in the ranks of the orthodox clergy, that is, those who received state stipends or held state positions. Beginning with the war against the Soviet Union's occupation and more decisively during the succeeding Afghan civil war, the Tajiks came to dominate the northeast and established their own local administration under the leadership of Ahmad Shah Masud in the Panjshir Valley. In the west,

Ismail Khan came to rule Herat and the northwest between 1992 and 1995, during the period between the fall of the Communists and the arrival of the Taliban. Despite the assassination of Masud, the Tajiks of the northeast were the most powerful faction in Kabul after the defeat of the Taliban, because of their close alliance with the United States under the banner of the Northern Alliance. Ismail Khan also returned to rule Herat after the Taliban's defeat, although he was removed from this position in 2004.

Uzbeks and Turkmen, Turkic groups who were extensions of ethnic groups that now dominate the adjacent Central Asian states of Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, predominate in northwestern Afghanistan. Together they probably constitute about ten percent of Afghanistan's population. The Turkmen, like the Pashtuns, are tribally organized and maintain elaborate genealogies that divide them into a series of named clans. The Uzbeks, by contrast, have a weaker tribal organization with less political significance. Both groups are Sunni Muslims but were influenced by the Sufi orders of Central Asia such as the Naqshbandiyah. Before the Soviet war these Turkic populations had little visibility nationally. But following the establishment of an Uzbek militia under the command of General Abdul Rashid Dostam in the 1980s, they became a major power in the northern areas around Mazar-i-Sharif. By artful side-switching Dostam retained that power under successive regimes, until he was betrayed by subordinates who made common cause with the Taliban; the latter took control of the northwest in 1998 (after a disastrous defeat there a year earlier). Dostam returned to power as an American ally in 2001 and remains in control of the region as its military commander.

The Hazaras are the major Shia population in Afghanistan, comprising about 15 percent of the population. They live in the mountains of central Afghanistan and in urban enclaves in major cities, particularly Kabul and Mazar-i-Sharif. Although Persian speakers, they claim descent from the Mongol armies that invaded the region in the 13th century. They traditionally had hostile relations with the Pashtuns and faced considerable discrimination from Pashtun dominated governments. Iran developed close ties to the Hazaras during the Soviet occupation and has retained considerable influence among some groups there. They formed their own powerful militia group and had regained complete autonomy in the Hazarajat (Hazara-dominated territory in central Afghanistan) until it was overrun

by the Taliban in 1998. As enemies of the Taliban they welcomed that movement's destruction by the United States and regained control of their region in 2001. The Hazaras are now equal players in the country's regional politics. The new constitution explicitly recognizes the validity of their Shia traditions of Islamic law.

The Soviet war broke down the old ethnic hierarchy in which Pashtuns were most favored, followed by Persian-speaking Tajiks, while Turks (Uzbeks and Turkmen) were ignored and Shia Hazaras were discriminated against. At the fall of the Communist regime in 1992, each controlled its own region, was well armed and capable of resisting other ethnic groups that attempted to encroach territorially. Because the old Communist stronghold of Kabul sat on the fault line among these ethnic groups, it suffered major destruction as each of these regional groups or their allies attempted to control the capital in the ensuing civil war. This led to a political and military stalemate. In 1995 the Taliban, a new movement that threatened this regional-ethnic status quo, arose in southern Afghanistan. Organized on the basis of a conservative religious ideology rather than by tribe or ethnic group, the Taliban quickly came to dominate the Pashtun southern and eastern regions of the country. One reason for their success was that although the movement was religious, its membership was overwhelmingly Pashtun and many Pashtuns saw it as a vehicle for restoring their dominance in the country as a whole. The movement was also aided militarily by Pakistan (whose government wanted to see the restoration of Pashtun domination as a way for Pakistan to control Afghanistan) and financially by the so-called Afghan Arabs, such as Osama bin Laden (who needed a cooperative regime to give them shelter). Over the course of three years they gained control of the entire country, with the exception of the northeast.

But the Taliban never won a decisive battle as they came to power. Instead, when their movement was on the rise, local power brokers decided to defect to them because they appeared to be winners or because they could provide better pay. But as they rose, so they fell. When the United States intervened against the Taliban for its support of Osama bin Laden in the wake of the 9/11 attacks, their support vanished in a matter of weeks, once the same local commanders deemed them losers. The whole of the non-Pashtun north and west fell within days of their loss of the city of Mazar-i-Sharif. And when the Taliban retreated from Kabul the Pashtun areas of the south and east also deserted them. Control of the

regions returned once again to the ethnic-based leadership of local commanders.

A Unitary Afghan State

Although the fall of the Taliban restored the power of regional leaders and left a vacuum at the national level, there was no move by any ethnic group to fight over the establishment of a new government or to break away from it. (And this in a country where ethnic and regional cleavages had become sharper through ten years of civil war that had pitted ethnic groups against one another.) The main reason for the absence of ethnic contest was that no central state structure existed in Afghanistan to fight over, so the occupation of the capital or seizing its empty offices could not give any group a decisive advantage. The post-Taliban negotiations therefore centered on recreating a national state, not controlling the assets or political strength of an existing one. That all parties agreed there should be a central government and a unitary state might at first seem surprising. In other parts of the world such disarray at the center would have been used as an opportunity for regions and ethnic groups to declare their independence (à la the former Yugoslavia) or propose some grand alliance with their co-ethnic neighbors to create some "Greater Tajikistan/Uzbekistan/Turkmenistan/Pashtunistan."

The first reason for the lack of interest in independence was rooted in the old Central Eurasian view that decoupled ethnicity and nationalism. The concept of ethnic nationalism that drove the dissolution of Yugoslavia did not have a cultural counterpart in Afghanistan. Afghans saw their multiethnic state as the norm and not some historic deviation that demanded redress. The question was who would be politically dominant in such a multiethnic system, not whether that system was legitimate. They also knew very well that gross ethnic labels like Pashtun or Tajik hid the myriad divisions within such groups that would make their formal unity difficult or impossible to achieve. In addition, such gross ethnic labels lacked the potential to mobilize people whose first loyalty was to their own qawm.

The second reason was that each ethnic group felt secure, if not happy. The pre-1978 ethnic hierarchy that gave Pashtuns an almost monopolistic control of the Afghan state had been destroyed. During the anti-Soviet war and subsequent civil war all of the country's other ethnic groups, formerly subordinate to the Pashtuns, became armed and

militarized. The Pashtuns themselves began to realize that they could not restore the status quo ante even if they wanted to. All the factions engaged in the negotiations now control their own region so firmly at the local level that they do not fear being displaced by a new central government that would need their cooperation to function.

The third reason was geopolitical. Afghan regional leaders recognized that if they broke apart they could be much more easily dominated or even attacked by their neighbors. But as a country the size of France, they could hold their own. This would allow a region such as Herat to have very close ties to Iran, but know that it could rely on a central government to keep Iran's influence limited. The same would apply for relations with Uzbekistan and most importantly with Pakistan, the country that Afghans most suspect as a troublemaker. That no region proposed amalgamation with a neighboring state is equally practical. The last thing any neighboring country wants is a piece of unruly Afghanistan and its troublesome people. The last thing any Afghans want is to be a subordinate part of someone else's state. Besides, you cannot smuggle if there is no border and Afghans have done very well moving goods across international boundaries for which they have no respect.

Finally, for the Afghan regional leaders, joining in the creation of the new central government was an arranged marriage, not a love match. Ethnic nationalism is fundamentally a romantic concept that attempts to give people a common conception of themselves as a single group with common dreams, histories and aspirations. Most nationalists view ethnicity as primordial, something that one is born with and cannot change. Afghan ethnicity, by contrast, is explicitly circumstantialist. There is no immutable history or commonality that cannot be jettisoned for self-interest. Afghan ethnic groups often cooperate with other groups whom they do not like and even against whom they have previously fought. They also divide against their own co-ethnics when their interests diverge. People are well aware that in the long history of Afghanistan no enemies (or friends) are ever permanent. Although the 2004 constitution steps around the question of regional autonomy, it is notable that representatives from all regions and ethnic groups unanimously approved it because it created a platform they can live with. And Afghan factions well understand that the resources of the international community can only be effectively tapped if there is a national government to deal with the outside world, even if only to cash

the checks and redistribute the money. This cannot be done effectively at the local level, and ethnic mini-states are likely to get only mini-grants or nothing at all.

A Central Eurasian Model

Ethnicity in Afghanistan is a pre-nationalist type in which ethnic groups have economic and political interests but no ideology. The ethnic groups in Afghanistan do not believe that sovereignty alone will solve their problems; thus, conflict at the national state level is easier to resolve, in part because no party seeks to break up the national state. Beliefs that Afghanistan would devolve into ethnic warfare missed the point: armies may be mobilized in Afghanistan to fight as ethnic groups, but they do not fight for the ethnic group. They fight for themselves as much smaller regional and kin groups whose scope for alliance and compromise is much greater. At the local level much fighting appears ethnic because this is how the factions are organized, but they are fighting over control of resources (political, economic, military), not an ethnic ideology. Because a unitary Afghan state serves a greater national interest for all the country's regions without having the power to demand much of them, it is a popular idea. And after 25 years of warfare there is also the hope that by giving more power to the central government future civil wars can be prevented.

Such a view of ethnicity and politics is quite different from that found in the Balkans, yet it is the Balkan model that still pervades most analyses of the region. I would argue that this is an obstacle to understanding the politics of Central Eurasia. In particular, it has led us to look to ethnicity as the major source of conflict in an area where the

struggle for political power and material resources are much more salient than any ethno-nationalist ideology. This is true even in the states that were created by Soviet ethnic policies. Rather than apply exogenous models of ethnicity to the region, it is time for scholars to use empirical cases and historical examples that better capture current developments there. Such "Central Eurasian models" will better reflect the dynamics of the situation in the region and provide a broader perspective on societies that have historically been multilingual and multiethnic.

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