

The CAUCASIAN Equation

Gorbachev's problems escalated in January when 'near civil war' broke out in the Caucasus. The Soviet Union seemed to be breaking up. But Michael Humphrey argues that Moscow's not about to give up control of its Asian territories.

The flare-up of hostilities in December between Azeri and Armenian nationalists in the Caucasus is yet another incident in the growing tensions in Soviet Central Asia over rule from Moscow. In December 1986 there were nationalist riots in Alma-Ata (Kazakhstan), during February and March 1988 Azeris and Armenians clashed over territorial disputes which were tied to nationalist aspirations for greater autonomy in Stepanakert (Nagorno-Karabakh) and Sumagait (Azerbaijan) and, in December 1988 Azeris attacked Armenians in Baku (Azerbaijan), leading to 'near civil war' in the region.

The recurring themes of protest in the Central Asian republics have included anti-Islamic policies, russification, immigration into the republics and nationalist demands for greater political autonomy.

The Armenian-Azeri clashes have the added dimension of ethnic rivalry fuelled by territorial disputes over the regions of Nakhichevan and Nagorno-Karabakh. The disputes over these territories date back to the early 1920s when their political status and boundaries were deter-

mined by the newly established Soviet government. Nakhichevan, an Azeri majority region separated from Azerbaijan by the Republic of Armenia, passed from Azerbaijani to Armenian control and was finally included in the Republic of Azerbaijan in 1921. Nagorno-Karabakh was carved out of the newly formed Republic of Azerbaijan as a majority Armenian enclave. However, it continued to be administered from Baku, the Azerbaijani capital.

It is the question of administrative control over the enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh that has been the catalyst for the most recent Azeri-Armenian clashes. The Azeris have strongly opposed Armenian nationalist efforts to have Moscow award control over Nagorno-Karabakh to the Republic of Armenia. The clashes over the same issue in early 1988 saw a negotiated settlement and the appointment of a 'special representative' from Moscow in Nagorno-Karabakh. This action and the continuing flow of Armenian immigrants into Nagorno-Karabakh and other Azerbaijani cities have raised Azeris' fears about a gradual dismemberment of the Republic of Azerbaijan.

On top of this, Azeris feel that they have come off second best in dealings with Moscow because of the historical links of the Russian centre with the Christian Armenian minority. Formerly, the link was religion. Tsarist Russia



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was the protector of the Christian Armenians during the period of Ottoman Turkish rule. Today the link is no longer religion but the issue of political reliability and dependency in the face of growing nationalist aspirations in the Muslim republics. Recent change in the political geography of the region with the Islamic revolution in Iran and Mujaheddin resistance in Afghanistan simply reinforce Armenian ties with Moscow. The Armenians remain a minority in a Turkish/Muslim region.

The growth of nationalist sentiment in Soviet Central Asia has certainly alarmed Moscow. One response has been to try to rein in nationalist sentiment by replacing ethnic members of the Central Committee of the Communist Party with Russian appointments. But more generally the growth of nationalist sentiment represents the failure of its nationality policy which sought to incorporate traditional regions into the larger Soviet nation through socialist social engineering. The transformation of the Muslim regions proved particularly difficult, even though radical political and legal reform based on the liberation of women from the tribal Islamic culture of Central Asia was vigorously pursued. Social engineering still continues in the Muslim republics. Muslims are encouraged to have fewer children, marry non-Muslims and emigrate to underpopulated zones of the Soviet Union.

Azeri claims of favouritism towards Armenian nationalist interests misread Moscow's policy in the region, which is much more ambiguous. Moscow does not ultimately wish to support any ethnic nationalist expres-

sion. As some Azerbaijanis have already pointed out in the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute, the idea of creating ethnically homogeneous regions is against leninist principles. During his visit to Armenia after the earthquake in December 1988, Gorbachev made his position clear on the rise of nationalist sentiments. He warned Armenian nationalists against capitalising on the earthquake crisis and pushing their claims over Nagorno-Karabakh. Conservatives and reformers alike still favour strong central rule from Moscow. Gorbachev's use of Soviet forces in Baku in January 1990 to put down resistance by the Azerbaijani National Front and break the blockade of Baku harbour further underlines this view.

Any apparent support for one ethnic/national group or another must be understood as a continuation of Moscow's policy to undermine nationalist movements by the use of ethnic rivalry in order to divert attention from Moscow's overlordship. Divide and rule has long been used as a strategy of regional control with the aim of creating an internationalist (ie, pan-Soviet) culture and identity. The formation of the autonomous enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh itself is an example of this policy. The decision to create the enclave reflected the dominance of central power through the party apparatus over the local state apparatus.

The boundaries of the enclave were drawn in order to create a majority Armenian population in an ethnically mixed region of Azerbaijan in much the same way as Lebanon was created as a Christian majority state by the

French. This occurred despite the strong objections of Azerbaijanians whose republic was theoretically independent. The result was the creation of an unresolvable point of tension between Azeris and Armenians.

But why has the resurgence of hostilities between Azeris and Armenians at this time sparked so much more interest than previous clashes both inside and outside the Soviet Union? Obviously the political upheaval in Eastern Europe with the demise of regimes and communist parties in the face of popular movements has raised the real possibility of greater political autonomy for republics within the Soviet Union itself. Nationalist Fronts have become active in the Baltic states, Central Asia and Mongolia. This has made the 'nationalities' question a focus of contest between conservatives and reformists over the future of 'glasnost'. For the West, the emergence of nationalist fronts heralds the possibility of 'the disintegration of the Soviet empire', the triumph of capitalism over socialism.

There is a rather ironic convergence of interpretation of the events in Azerbaijan from Moscow and Western capitals. Both choose to interpret nationalist unrest in Central Asia as a product of the growing power of Islamic nationalism spilling over from the Islamic revolution in Iran and the Mujaheddin's resistance of the Soviet army's occupation in Afghanistan.

In fact, President Bush's comments acknowledging the Soviet military's right to restore order in Azerbaijan is in part based on the shared perception of the threat of radical Islam. Similar Soviet military action against National Fronts in the Baltic republics would certainly not be met with the same US support!

For the West this represents a remarkable slippage from cold war discourse, and resort to the cultural essentialism of ethnic primordialism, religious fanaticism and the view of Islam as a monolithic cultural entity. These are the same explanations offered for conflict in Middle Eastern states. Soviet criticism of religious revival and nationalism are discussed in similar language but from an ideologically different viewpoint. Religious revivalism for the Soviets is seen as an anachronism requiring greater diligence in the education of youth and closer monitoring of public opinion.

The shared perception of the conflict has become very obvious in the reporting of events. The Azeri-Armenian clash has been characterised as a Christian-Muslim conflict. The Armenian genocide has been invoked as an ominous precedent which threatens the Armenians once again. In the eternal search for a simplified dualistic view of events the media, Soviet and Western, have made the Azeri Turks the bad guys and the Armenians the good

guys. But has political Islam been such an important factor behind the emergence of national fronts in Azerbaijan and the other Central Asian republics? This is a difficult question to answer but there are some indicators we might consider: firstly, the character of contemporary Muslim culture and Islamic institutions in the Soviet Central Asian republics and, secondly, the influence of Islamic movements and institutions in Iran and Afghanistan across the border.

In the Soviet Union there are two kinds of Islamic culture, official and unofficial. Official Islam is organised by the state under four Muslim Spiritual Boards in Tashkent, Ufa, Makhach-Qala and Baku which control the appointment of the 1,500-2,500 clerics and the approximately 365 mosques for 50,000 Soviet Muslims.

Official Islam seeks, through diplomatic and cultural activities, to represent the Soviet Union as a significant Muslim country and part of the community of Islamic states. Unofficial Islam, or 'popular' Islam, is represented by the Sufi brotherhoods which operate as secret societies, and the growing practice of Islamic rites. The most popular rituals are the observance of the nikkah marriage ceremony, the payment of bridewealth and the burial of relatives in new Muslim cemeteries and, in some cases, tombs (mazars) on which are inscribed the clan and tribal origins of the deceased.

Another recent development is the increase in pilgrimages to the tombs of Sufi Shaikhs or of martyrs (shahids) who died fighting the Tsarist Russians in the 19th century, or Soviets in the 20th century. Pilgrimages to the shrines of

saints are common throughout the region including Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan and in the Soviet Union, and also substitute for the impossible compulsory 'hajj', pilgrimage to Mecca.

Soviet concern is that the growth in the observance of personal and group rituals is becoming an important catalyst for the emergence of ethnic and nationalist sentiment. As one Tadhzik expert observes: "The deep penetration of Islam into the daily life of believers has a double consequence: on the one hand, it gives an ethnic colour to religious customs and rituals and, on the other, it gives a confessional colour to national traditions". Issues about Islamic culture and history are also concerning Soviet authorities because of their subversive role in stimulating Islamic and nationalist sentiment. Hence, from the Soviet perspective, Islam remains a tool of reactionary forces both inside and outside the Soviet Union.

The view that the growth of Islamic practice and ethnic nationalism has been actively stimulated from outside must not, however, be overstated. All the states on the southern Soviet border share a common feature in conflict between the state and ethnic/religious minorities. Each is

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as vulnerable to manipulation of ethnic nationalisms as the next. In fact, relations between all the neighbouring states in the region, including Turkey, Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan, have ethnic/religious minorities which can and have been manipulated. The issue of Kurdish nationalism in Turkey, Iraq and Iran is a case in point.

Another important point is that no particular ideology or identity can be assumed to be dominant in determining the allegiance of these minorities. In the course of the Iran-Iraq war there was the assumption that the Iraqi Shi'ites, who represent around 60% of the Iraqi population, would side with Iran. This did not happen. In the conflict in Afghanistan it was thought that the withdrawal of the Soviet military would be fatal to the Najiballah regime and bring victory to the Islamic alliance. However, a shift in allegiance of Hazaris, a stigmatised ethnic minority by the dominant Pakhtun group, from the 'Islamic forces' proved militarily crucial for the government in Kabul.

Iran, in the past keen to export Islamic revolution, has an ambivalent attitude towards the Azeri-Armenian conflict. President Rafsanjani's visit to the Soviet Union in July 1989 epitomises Iran's present policy. On the one hand, Rafsanjani paid a symbolic visit to Baku and gave a sermon in the Tazapir mosque but, on the other, he signed bilateral accords in Moscow worth \$6 billion for the joint development of dams, nuclear power plants and railways. Discussions were also held over the reactivation of building the pipeline to Baku to carry three billion cubic metres of natural gas, a deal negotiated with the Soviet Union at a

time when Iran had become economically isolated during the Iran-Iraq war. In addition, the Azeri Turks are regarded as a troublesome minority in Tehran. When the Soviet military recently moved to close the border with Soviet Azerbaijan the government in Tehran expressed relief, not anger.

At the heart of the Azeri-Armenian conflict is Moscow's concern about the growth of nationalist movements in Soviet Central Asia. It appears that the manipulation of ethnic conflict forms part of strategies for control of the demands for national independence. Whether the outcome of the negotiations in Azerbaijan is seen as a victory for Gorbachev's reforms or for the conservative elements in the party and state is yet to be seen. Both share the concern about the maintenance of central control though they perhaps differ in their strategies to achieve it.

On the issue of the growth of religious and nationalist sentiment in the region, perhaps we should take a broader view. It appears that the inequities of development in both capitalist and communist Central Asia and Iran have left the great majority of people disaffected. Islam may be the common cultural background of the region but perhaps the experience of US and Soviet political and economic imperialism is the more potent underlying force for the assertion of national autonomy in the region. The shared Soviet and US view of the threat of Islam is thus a product of politically similar enterprises in the region in the past. ♦

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