**Interethnic and International Conflicts**

**in Central Asia**

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**Introduction**

Central Asia had been an important path in the past that connected Asia and Europe and through which personal and material exchanges were fulfilled. The region, however, was a strictly closed society under the communist system of the former Soviet Union and was gradually unveiled after the fall of the Soviet Russia. The countries in this region can be accounted to be in a transitional period shifting from communist system to democratic governance, although they had a relatively late start in such a transition among the Asian countries. All the countries in this region claim to support a democratic republic. Yet, it is hard to judge that they have all achieved complete freedom and open system in terms of politics or economy, even if differences exist between each country to some extent. Moreover, issues that are surfacing with the system change might not have been a problem under a single powerful unified system of the former Soviet Union but they are affecting many republics as huge obstacles in their respective progress to a new system. Many difficult problems remain to be solved such as the territorial and ethnic problems as well as conflicts involving water resources among the indigenous peoples due to the artificial division of geographical boundaries of each republic in the former Soviet Union, the multiethnic circumstances surrounding scads of non-indigenous people due to deportation, the rise of nationalism among the indigenous people, and international and interethnic conflicts due to the formation of economic rights of respective independent nation under the unified economy system.

This paper aims to analyze the conflicts and those main causes taking place among ethnic groups and states since the independence of republics in Central Asia and the historical context in which this region came to possess its diversity and uniqueness.

**Overview of Central Asia**

1. **The Idea of Central Asia**

The geographical concept of Central Asia was first established in 1843 by A. von Humboldt, who described the region as a vast territory expanding from the Caspian Sea on the eastside to the Hisao Hsingan Ling Mountains on the Westside and from the Altai Mountains up north to the Himalaya Mountains down south (Choi, 1992:8). In a broad sense, Central Asia covers the Western Turkestan region which was under the system of Soviet Russia, the Chinese Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region (Eastern Turkestan) and the Tibet Autonomous Region, the Inner Mongolian Autonomy Region, along with Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Mongolia. In general, however, Central Asia refers to Turkestan, which means ‘Land of the Turks’ in Persian. It is divided into the Eastern and the Western Turkestan and does not include Tibet and Mongolia which are considered alien for their strong Buddhist influence. In a narrow sense, Central Asia refers to the five countries in the western Turkestan region: Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan.

1. **Natural Environment and Lifestyle**

The natural environment of Central Asia features vast desert, high mountains, and extremely dry climate. Hence, the region is basically too dry and barren for humans to live in. Despite such an environment, human beings have lived around oases along rivers and the steppe area adapting to the environment in respectively different lifestyle. In order words, the region was divided into two worlds: the world of the nomads and the world of the settled people. In the fertile land around oases, commerce developed revolving around farming and city civilization bloomed as the population expanded. With the increase of business activities, land traffic routes connecting one oasis to another developed. This was the Silk Road that connected the civilization of the east and the west. The world of the nomads was located in the vast grassy plains and the wide valleys of the mountain regions in the northern part of Central Asia that had relatively more rainfall compared to the southern part of Central Asia. The main assets of the nomads were herbivorous animals such as sheep and horses. The nomads migrated annually searching for different pastureland for summer and winter, and lived in movable *gers* that could be assembled and disassembled. Today, the lifestyle of nomadic people has almost disappeared owing to modernization and policies of resettling the nomads at the beginning of the modern era.

1. **The Origin of Ethnic Groups and Languages**

Today, the languages used in Central Asia include the language of each indigenous people such as the Uzbek, Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Turkmen, and Tajik languages, and Russian, the first language of the former Soviet Union. Among the languages of the indigenous people used in this region, all of them belong to the Turkic language group of the Altaic family of languages, except for the Tajik language, which originates from Persian language of the Indo-European languages. The use of two families of languages by the indigenous people in this region stem from their racial origin and the history of language. At first, the region was inhabited by Caucasoid who used Aryan language (Indo-European language). From the 9th and 10th centuries, the Mongoloid who spoke the Altaic family of languages occupied the region. In terms of race, racial mixture continued over many years. In modern times, the region has become a display hall of race with Turks, Russians and numerous non-indigenous people.

1. **The rise and fall of the nomadic empires**

There are no records found about the heroes who had traveled the vast stage of Central Asia until letters were invented by the Kök Türk Empire in the 8th century. Therefore, the history of these people had to be partially traced relying mainly on the records by neighboring settlers. The historical records left by the settlers, who have had to suffer the threats of the nomads equipped with mobility can only be biased. Fortunately, attempts are being made these days to shed new light on the nomads and nomadic empires of Central Asia with an objective view and adopting various methods such as excavation of materials and archaeological research.

The nomads mainly practiced hunting and herding. They had outstanding ability in conducting wars for being skilled in archery and horseback riding and were equipped with mobility from using horses. From the time before the Qin Dynasty, China erected the Great Wall to defend the country from the northern mounted nomads, but was not very successful. Although numerous tribes had their own independent political and military organizations, they sometimes conquered or united with other tribes to build a nomadic empire, and in such case, the name of an empire naturally followed the name of the strongest tribe. Characteristically, long-term retention of power was impossible for nomadic empires and a great number of them emerged in history. This was because new empires were established from going through division and disorder when a leader passed away even if he had exerted powerful charisma upon his followers (Choi, 1992:44-46).

Before the Common Era, the Huns, a tribal alliance in the steppe, gained prosperity as a nomadic empire. However, it eventually collapsed in the 2nd century A.D. due to the alliance of Mongolian Xianbei and Eastern Han. After a period of vacuum in power for about two and half centuries followed by the reign of Juan-juan, the Kök Türk Empire, the first Turkic people to have left behind record of letters, emerged in the 6th century. In the 8th century, the allied forces with the Tang Dynasty and the Uyghur Khaganate suffered a great defeat in the war with the allied power of the Kök Türk, Tibet, and the Islamic Arab, which accelerated the Islamization of the Uyghur people. The Kök Türk Empire eventually collapsed when its ruling class fell under the power of the Uyghur Khaganate, which was another Turkic confederation. Hence, the Uyghur Empire was born. In 840, the Uyghur Empire was overrun by the Kyrgyz. During the 11th century, the Selcuk Empire of the Turkic people completely ruled over Persia, but was incorporated into the Mongolian Empire by the 13th century. The Timurid Empire of the Turks attempted to succeed the Mongolian Empire, but was eventually incorporated into the Russian Empire after suffering from the emergence and expansion of the Russian Empire and the Qing Dynasty.

The domination of the Russian Empire and the Qing Dynasty in Central Asia succeed to Russia and China in the 20th century and was incorporated into a new ideological system called socialism. The collapse of the Soviet Union in the 1990s resulted in the independence of many countries in Central Asia, which are searching for new ways to settle the legacy of control by other ethnic people in the past. After the independence of these countries, there was even a movement calling for a return to the pan-Turkic Islamic world because Islam had withered due to banning and oppression of religion under the rule of Soviet Russia. However, the disintegration into separate republic from a massive integrated system by a dominant immigrant rather brought out nationalism of the indigenous people in each republic and resulted in conflict between the republics. On the other hand, the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region in China, which is called the Eastern Turkestan and where the Turkic Uyghur people reside, is undergoing Han-proliferation due to the Chinese government’s policy of bringing in the Han people who have different religion and ethnicity from the Turks.

**Conflict and its Causes in Central Asia**

Central Asia is often called a land where Turkic language is used and Turkic people live. But the indigenous Turkic people have been divided into many ethnic groups due to the rule of alien nation. In addition to the indigenous Turkic people, a variety of ethnic groups including the White Russians of European descent joined Central Asia as the region went going through the Tsar and the Soviet era and became an exhibition hall where more than hundred different ethnic groups coexist. Ethnic activities were banned during the Soviet era as the society was actually led by the Russians. Currently, however, the indigenous people of each republic have become the leading people while the Russians and non-indigenous people are being discriminated. Considering that a large part of the population in Central Asia is the non-indigenous people living as citizens of each republic, it seems inappropriate to call Central Asia as Turkestan.

The mix of ethnic groups and sudden change of system in Central Asia led to the division of Turkic people and discord between the indigenous and the non-indigenous people, especially between the indigenous people and Russians, and also to international conflicts from exclusive possession of material resources in each republic.

1. **Division of Turkic People**

The Republics in Central Asia today became independent taking over the boundaries of the socialistic republics. The Soviet Union’s policy for indigenous people strictly prohibited racial discrimination or nationalism on the surface. In reality, however, the Soviet government made use of a disunion policy against the indigenous people in the name of national liberation or displaying sporadic consideration for the indigenous people. The geographical borders of the Central Asian states were first marked in the 1924 by the central government of Russia in an arbitrary manner and were finally established in the 1970s. The established borders between states caused territorial disputes and conflicts from shortage of land and water. However, these problems did not surface because of the power of the Soviet Union. This artificial demarcation was basically intended to impede unification among the indigenous people.

The movement of solidarity among indigenous people was present early on. Jadidism, a movement of reform by modern intellectuals among the indigenous people who originally resisted the imperial rule, wanted to integrate differences among tribal groups and form a pan-Turkic Muslim community that encompass the entire Central Asia. This wish, however, was not realized. The many tribes and clans of Central Asia that not have the concept of ethnicity were reorganized by the power of Soviet Union. In other words, the division and differences between tribes were magnified to differences between ethnic groups while these various people were classified without taking into account their existing material bases and spaces of historical experience. The Soviet authorities aimed to disrupt the pan-Turkic centripetal force because they considered that organizing or uniting the indigenous people would be a threat to the Soviet Union. The displacement policy of non-indigenous people into Central Asia enforced under the power of Stalin was a strategy to check on the power of the indigenous people by diffusing their attention and disposing non-indigenous people among them. The Government also transplanted the working people of one republic to another republic as needed.

There was an attempt to establish the Great Turkistan encompassing Asia Minor, Turkey and Central Asia concurrently with the independence of states. This plan, however, was not realized as the region was divided into many republic states that treated one another into competitive counterpart. Also, Turkey which had led the pan-Turkic movement lost its momentum and aggressiveness due to its domestic Kurdish problem and the limits of financial support for countries in Central Asia (Choi, 33).

The movement towards pan-Turkic solidarity in Central Asia attempted since the independence of states fell short of producing outcomes in terms of substance and practicality and only served the function of emotional solidarity among Turkic blood nation. Ethnic division and conflicts between republics instead of integration is an aspect heightening among the Turkic people of Central Asia. The historical context that caused this state of affairs involves the artificial establishment of borders implemented as part of the decentralization policy on the people by alien rulers, classification of nation without any regard to the characteristics of Turkic tribes, and forced relocation.

1. **Anti-Russian sentiment**

The beginning of anti-Russian sentiment among Central Asian people dates back to the time of Russian imperialism. The Central Asian region was annexed by the expansionism and southward policy of the Russian Empire. Even after the collapse of the empire, the region was incorporated into the Soviet Union ruled by Russians regardless of the intention of indigenous people. From the standpoint of the indigenous people, the Russians were foreigners who trampled over their land. The indigenous people felt victimized for losing their territory and national sovereignty, and their ethnic identity such as their religion and language for centuries. Because of such sense of damage, hostile feelings towards Russians took root within the indigenous people. The great famine that struck the nomads due to the Soviet Union’s policy of collectivization from the late 1920s to the 1930s and the great repression of indigenous intellects by the Soviet authorities remains as huge scars to the indigenous people. In addition, the autonomy of each republic under the Soviet power ended up being a claim of formality; in content, it was aimed for grand Russianism. In order to become a part of the Soviet mainstream, the indigenous people and minorities had to be assimilated into Russian culture in terms of language. Also, non-Russians were regarded as second-class citizens while Russians were mainly appointed to high-ranking officials or professional positions. Moreover, complaints by Central Asian people escalated because all goods produced in each republic were transported to the central Russian government and was redistributed centering on the Russian republic and the Slavic republic (Choi, 36). The anti-Russian sentiment among the indigenous people of Central Asia erupted right after the independence Central Asian republics in a mob violence incident against Russians in the Republic of Uzbekistan. This incident shocked many Russians.

1. **Downfall of Russians to a minority**

The attempts to build indigenous nation states in the republics after their independence from the Soviet Union act as a major threat to minorities including Russians. Currently, Russians account for about 20% of the entire Central Asia region. These people, along with other ethnic minorities, are structurally placed in a position that can only be socially excluded in the process of building nation-states. In particular, they are burdened and conflicted by having to learn the language of the indigenous people since the indigenous language is designated as state language in respective countries. The reason Russian speakers have a hard time assimilating into indigenous languages is because they basically consider indigenous languages inferior (Myong and Chun, 2013). Even the elite indigenous people living in the city have become Russianized in terms of language that they find difficult to speak the native language. Shortly after the independence of the Central Asian states, Russians, Germans and Jews moved to their motherland due to the linguistic policy oriented toward indigenous language and the indigenous sovereignty restoration movement. The gap of skilled workers due to the outflow of professional manpower such as intellectuals and technicians resulted in national confusion in each country. Immigrants in this region including Russians are reluctant to move back to their own countries because they are treated as strangers in their homelands. For example, Russians who return to Russia are being discriminated against because they are considered ‘Russians from Central Asia’ and not ‘pure Russian.’

The Russians who remain as a minority group in Central Asia expect the Russian government to use its influence and protect them. From the standpoint of each republic, however, these Russians are viewed as a threat and burden that causes ethnic division and conflict. In particular, in places where there is a high population of Russians such as the northern part of Kazakhstan which borders with Russia, potential attempts demanding for self-government, independence or subjection to Russia are perceived as serious threat to the indigenous republic. In this context, relocating its capital city from the Almaty in south to Astana in north signified the intent of the Republic of Kazakhstan to actively manage and control its people. As intended by the Kazakhstan’s government, the capital relocation is absorbing Kazakh population into the new capital area and the active population policy is contributing to gradually lowering the Russian population density. As the Soviet power brought Russian settlers into the area of the indigenous people to decentralize the power of the indigenous people, independent governments likewise brought in indigenous people into the areas densely inhabited by Russians in order to block ethnic division.

1. **Religious dichotomy: Muslims vs. non-Muslims**

With the demise of socialism in Central Asia, two types of disparate religions came to the fore. The history of Islam in this region goes far back. As if to make up for the blank period of religion during the times of Soviet Union, the construction of mosques thrived and efforts were made to go turn back the clock to the times before the rule of alien people. Depending on ethnic groups or region and the religion policy of the republic, there are many slack Muslims who do not keep the commandments of the Islamic law. However, most of the indigenous people recognize Islam as their religious identity. Although the formal aspects of Islam weakened due to religious repression during the Soviet-era, Islam was inherited from generation to generation, indicating that the indigenous people shared emotionally deep ties to Islam.

Because of the deprivation of religious freedom by the Soviet authorities, dichotomous thinking of the indigenous Islam vs. the Russian Orthodox became prominent after the independence of Central Asian states. The outset of religious conflict in Central Asia was the establishment of a centralized system, territorial expansion, and anti-Islamic policies by Ivan IV of the Russian Empire. Inversely, anti-Christian sentiment counterworked and served as the force to adhere closely to Islamic practice even under the rule of Russia.

Since the independence of the Central Asian states, there were forces that insisted on introducing the Islamic nationalism of Saudi Arabia or Iran as a rival force against the movement of pan-Turkic alliance. Nevertheless, it was difficult for the autonomous republics to realistically accept such a demand given their stance of pursuing the western model after adopting democratic political system and capitalist economic system. The governments of Central Asian Turkic republics, with slight difference in degree between each government, are wary of Islamic fundamentalists and aggressive or extreme Islamic forces. Yet, many indigenous people practice Islam and view religions and cultures other than Islam as quite alien.

1. **Conflict over water resource**

Conflicts over water source among five countries in Central Asia that are spread across two rivers, Amu Darya and Syr Darya, are exacerbating as clues to solve the problem have not been found. In July 1989, there was a clash between the residents of Tajikistan and those of Kyrgyzstan when the later claimed their rights to territory and water resources. In another incident in 1995, 300 residents were killed in a fight over water use between the Uzbek people and Kyrgyz people in the Osh area of Kyrgyzstan (Smith, 1995: 10-11), which demonstrates that the division between the Turkic people is intensifying.

Without finding an efficient operating system, the independent countries in Central Asia were forced to take over the integrated water resource operating system of the former Soviet Union. In order to prevent international conflict over water resource, the five countries in Central Asia retained the BOVs (Basin Valley Organizations) from the Soviet Union and newly established the ICWC (Interstate Coordination Water Commission). They tried to find an agreement but failed (Koo, 2011:4) and are now going their respective ways.

Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan located in the downstream region are in need of water in the vast area of farmlands for agricultural purposes, while the countries in the upstream area, such as Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are using water for generation of hydroelectric power. Therefore, the downstream region is increasingly suffering from water shortage even as reclaimed farmlands are being expanded. Moreover, since raw cotton and crops are most produced for export, taking up an important part of the national economy, the problem of stable supply of water has become an issue that determines the national economic foothold.

Although a quota system was introduced with the 1992 Almaty Agreement, the countries in downstream region overused their quota without having an infrastructure to monitor their use of water resource resulting in more complaints for insufficient supply of water. In 1998, the countries agreed to implement the Barter System through which the countries in the downstream area supply their abundant energy resources to the countries in the upstream area while the countries in the upstream area suspend winter hydropower to provide stable supply of irrigation water in spring and summer. However, these countries failed to faithfully fulfill the agreement. Without having a legal device to control this agreement, mistrust among the five countries grew deeper. It is becoming even more difficult to find a solution since the population is growing as days go by and the farmland cultivation is expanding in the downstream area with limited water resource and distrusting international relationship.

1. **Ferghana Valley, the powder keg: territory and ethnic strife**

The Ferghana Valley is the powder keg of Central Asia where the people and borders are intricately entangled and disputes and bloody violence have never ceased since the collapse of the Soviet Union. The conflict that occurred most recently at the Ferghana area was the incident in 2013 when five of the residents (Uzbekistan) of Sokh, an independent district of Uzbek territory within Kyrgyzstan, received gunshot wounds during their attack on the border guards of Kyrgyzstan. Because of this incident, the residents of Sokh took hostage of more than 30 Kyrgyz people and seized their weapon. In another incident in June 2010 near Osh area of Kyrgyzstan, there was a bloody clash between the people of Kyrgyz and Uzbek. About 100 people have died and two hundred thousand have been displaced as a result of the conflict.

The Ferghana Valley area is located along rivers on a fertile land and is one of the most densely populated areas in Central Asia. It is also a place involved in acute tension over borders since three countries, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan intricately borders around the area. Prior to falling under the rule of the Russian Empire in 1876, this area was ruled by the Khanate of Kokand. It became one of the most unstable areas in Central Asia after the independence of Central Asian states due to the random marking of borders by the Soviet government in the course of dividing the territories without due consideration for the concept of same ethnic group. The demarcation of this area by the Soviet government did not take into account the natural geographical boundaries nor homogeneous aspects of language, group or economic living zone. Such an arrangement must have been made as a strategic decision due to concerns about the possibility of separatist movement by the independent republics of Central Asia (Kang, 2012:315).



Source: Oblasts in the Ferghana Valley area. GRID Arendal (2012). [Link](http://www.grida.no/graphicslib/detail/oblasts-in-the-ferghana-valley-area_7488)

The areas around the Ferghana Valley that are involved in most heated conflict are Bakten and Osh in Kyrgyzstan. There are several enclaves of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan like Bakten. These enclaves do not have clear borders and the Uzbeks and Tajiks who reside in them had to suffer inconveniences due to the absence of safe passage to their motherlands. Passage was not an issue during the Soviet era, but since the independence, people had to go through strict procedures when crossing borders between republics, and in some cases, had to acquire visas (Kang, 2012). In a village where a border cuts through a community, visiting a relative living across became quite difficult. For this problem, the expression of frustration and anger of the Uzbek people living near the border led to clashes with the border guards. In Osh province of Kyrgyzstan, where a lot of Uzbeks live, ethnic conflicts led to violence and destruction as well. The bloody conflict in 2010, for instance, began between the southern forces of Kyrgyzstan who did not approve the resignation of former President Bakiyev and the Uzbeks who rather supported the interim government and ultimately led to a large scale clash with the Uzbeks, who had been discriminated against as aliens with respect to the problem of securing residence.

At the time when the Soviet government set up the boundaries of nations, the residents in the Ferghana region put the greatest meaning on their livelihood and economic lifestyle they have inherited rather than on ethnic belonging (Kang, 318). Naturally, their basic right to live was threatened when their economic life zone was severed from closed borders. Furthermore, water resource problem and poverty, lack of experience in terms of democratic governance, and exclusive nationalism escalated into disputes between ethnic groups and republics.

**Conclusion**

The conflicts between ethnic groups and republics in Central Asian today are the legacy left behind by aliens who ruled this region and a great part of this legacy proceeded from the Soviet system. The conflicts and divisions that surfaced after the independence of the Central Asian republics did not appear in a single vector but show complex aspects in conflicts between the indigenous people and aliens, internal trouble within Central Asian Turkic people, and discord between republics. The fall of the Soviet system brought an end to the reign of aliens in Central Asian states, and the indigenous people are now taking the lead in building their respective national state in order to reclaim their tradition and sovereignty that was once lost. Nevertheless, negative sentiments and victim mentality among the Central Asian indigenous people from being robbed of one’s identity in the past by others are working as factors of obstruction on each republic nation, which is already composed of more than 100 ethnic groups, in its pursuit for social unification and stability as a multicultural nation. In addition, the establishment of boundaries between republics and the policy of ethnic segregation inherited from the former Soviet system aggravated ethnic division among the indigenous people. Ferghana Valley is the representative area stained with ethnic enmity, territorial disputes, and water resource conflicts.

Most importantly, these conflicts are threatening the livelihoods of the local people and aggravating ethnic division. These structural problems are beyond the scope of self-resolution on the part of respective community and ethnic group. Rather, they require concession, mature consultation, and intervention among all involved countries. However, there is no sign of conflict mitigation under the present circumstances, when the countries have entered into a competitive system against each other and are accelerating even further with nationalistic tendency and focusing on the indigenous people. In addition, although these countries have broken away from a closed socialist system, the lack experience in democratic governance, political dictatorship, and rampant corruption are seriously blocking their road to social development and stability.

Rich resources, the introduction of democracy and private economy system, identity recovery of the indigenous people, policies to exclude radical Islam and nationalism, and cry for multicultural co-existence and tolerance are all future-oriented and positive elements of Central Asian countries for their advance towards symbiosis. The case of Kazakhstan, in particular, is regarded as a fine example of such an advance for leading the Congress of World Religions to emphasize religious reconciliation and harmony among ethnic groups. Meanwhile, anxieties are lurking here and there as effective compromise are yet to be found and acute conflicts ready for bloody clash continue. In order to overcome the diversity and conflicts between states and ethnic groups, the Central Asian countries are in dire need of awareness for human community and open attitude to seek for coexistence, placing higher importance on universal value with all the problems of conflict and division.

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