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SPECIAL REPORT 15

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Release Date:
November 1995

The War in Tajikistan Three Years On

Key Points

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- **Players.** The main Tajik actors in the stalemated conflict are the Kulyabi- dominated Tajik government and the various opposition forces challenging the power structure established during the Soviet era. Neither side can be said to be united, however, as those from the Khojand region formerly allied to the Kulyabis are unhappy at having been pushed from power, and the increasingly public schisms in the opposition may weaken its ability to engage in military actions and reach a coordinated negotiating position within the UN-sponsored negotiations.
- **Sources of the Conflict.** Ideology is not a factor in the Tajikistan war. Rather, it is a power struggle among different regions of the country for access to political and economic spoils. Thus, it is not a clear-cut case of "good guys" against "bad guys."
- **Role of Russia.** Russia continues to be the most important non-Tajik actor. Russian troops present in the country since Soviet days have been active, and Russia is heavily engaged in supporting the current Tajik government militarily and economically. In addition, Russian border troops remain directly engaged in combat on the Tajik-Afghan border. The Russians have claimed to be fighting "Islamic fundamentalism," though some observers dispute its relevance in this conflict. Russia is the one actor that can put pressure on the Tajik government in the negotiations, but it has been unwilling to do so, thus far.
- **Fighting Intensifies.** In April, 1995, serious battles broke out between opposition forces stationed in Afghanistan and Tajik government and Russian troops. The fighting was in part a response to the increased unwillingness of the Russian border troops to pursue opposition forces located well over the border in Afghanistan. The fighting is also a result of the Russians' success in cutting off some of the opposition's infiltration routes into Tajikistan. There is some indication, however, that the scale of many of the border skirmishes are exaggerated in the Russian soldiers' accounts, as they have various incentives to claim to have seen combat.

- **Outside Actors.** The neighboring Central Asian state of Uzbekistan, fearing a spillover of Islamic activism and Tajik nationalism, initially backed Russia's policy of supporting the old-guard forces in the Tajikistan conflict. Now that the Uzbek leadership has eliminated virtually all opposition in its own country and sees no danger from the events in Tajikistan, Uzbekistan is hoping to become the broker of a resolution to the Tajik conflict. Iran, which takes a pragmatic stance toward Tajikistan, has always supported Russian involvement, as it has no interest in seeing any other influence there, either from Turkey or the other Turkic states in Central Asia, including Uzbekistan.
- **Negotiations.** UN- sponsored negotiations have taken place intermittently since mid-1994. However, little progress has been made on the main political issues, as neither side is prepared to negotiate in terms that would be acceptable to the other. The Tajik government bases its authority on having won the war and on the recently held, though tightly controlled, presidential and parliamentary elections, as well as a referendum on a new constitution. The opposition rejects the legitimacy of the elections and demands the resignation of the current government and the establishment of a state council on which it would have representation, a position to which the government says it will never agree. The most recent round of negotiations was held in Almaty, Kazakhstan, from May 22 through June 1, 1995, and though some agreements on an extension of the ceasefire and the return of refugees were reached, the principal issues remain.
- **Prospects for Peace.** Russia is seen as a key to breaking the current stalemate. Some change in Tajik leadership is needed, as several regions of the country probably will never accept the legitimacy of the current leaders. The negotiations, however slow-moving, must be continued, as the alternative is the possibility of a renewed, wider civil war. Small steps, such as ceasefire extensions and prisoner exchanges, are occurring. But any negotiation process rarely moves rapidly; people in Tajikistan were particularly brutalized in this war and they will not forget very easily. Thus, progress in the negotiations will perform be intermittent.

Introduction

The former Soviet republic of Tajikistan suffered a devastating civil war from May 1992 until early 1993. Regional divisions in this small country, exacerbated during the Soviet period to enhance Soviet control, exploded into violent conflict soon after the dissolution of the Soviet Union signaled that economic and political spoils were potentially "up for grabs." The war was particularly brutal, with summary executions and the mutilation of victims shockingly common. Especially vicious were the uncontrolled paramilitary groups that generally fought on behalf of the established power structures that had benefited during the Soviet period against those seeking change in the

economic and political status quo. Tens of thousands were killed and hundreds of thousands fled into neighboring countries, including Afghanistan. In addition, leaders of the opposition factions, which represent various Islamic, democratic, and other movements, have been forced into exile and their parties or movements banned.

Since the forces defending the old order reestablished power in early 1993, skirmishes on the Tajik-Afghan border with opposition groups now based in Afghanistan have continued. The new Tajik government, once dominated by leaders from the northern Khojand (previously named Leninabad) region, is now largely controlled by representatives of the Kulyab region who were previously subservient to, though allied with, the Khojand faction. The Russian forces left in Tajikistan from the Soviet period did not remain inactive during the war, and are now providing military aid to the Tajik government and supporting what remains of the country's economy.

Moscow did use its influence to secure the Tajik government's agreement to participate in negotiations with the opposition forces. These talks, sponsored by the United Nations, have been held periodically since April 1994. The most recent round of negotiations took place in Almaty, Kazakhstan, from May 22 through June 1, 1995, although no agreement was reached on key political differences (such as the opposition's demands for the resignation of the current government and the establishment of a coalition government that would include some of its representatives), other matters such as a ceasefire and the safe return of refugees were negotiated. In recent months, most of the refugees have returned to Tajikistan, though in some cases they have faced reprisals, and many remain outside the country, afraid to return.

In April 1995, some of the most serious fighting since the end of the war erupted, and dozens of opposition activists and Russian and Tajik government soldiers were killed. In addition to the localized consequences of such violence, the conflict in Tajikistan remains of concern because the entire region is volatile. As Russian troops engage in direct combat there, continued fighting and a potential renewal of a wider war is of direct concern to the West. The issues raised go beyond the question of Russia's role in the former Soviet republics; as borders and institutions have broken down, drug smuggling and arms trading have increased.

In light of these concerns, on June 6, 1995, the United States Institute of Peace organized a forum on the Tajikistan conflict. Ambassador Stanley T. Escudero, the United States' chief representative in Dushanbe, Tajikistan, who had recently completed a three year tour of duty there, and French scholar Olivier Roy, currently at the French National Center for Scientific Research, and former head of the Organization on Security and Cooperation in Europe's (OSCE) mission in Dushanbe were invited to offer their expert perspectives on both the situation as it stands three years after the outbreak of the war, and the current state of the U.N-sponsored negotiations process. What follows is a summary of their remarks.

Current State of Affairs

Players and Factions

Roy asserted that there is now a stalemate in Tajikistan. The first player in this stalemate is the Tajik government, which is made up of the Kulyabi faction--people from the Kulyab region. This faction has a regional constituency that supports the government and is generally benefiting from the spoils system currently in place. The Kulyabis believe that they have fought a difficult war and won and are entitled to political power and the perks that go with it. They also believe that there is no reason why they should give up any of their power; indeed, many ordinary Kulyabis in this faction, according to Roy, feel that they now have their backs to the wall, and if they relinquish any power, they will all pay with their lives. The leaders in the government are generally the hard-liners from the Kulyabi faction, who have shown no inclination to share power.

The recent elections, Roy maintained, in fact brought even more hard-liners into the government. (A presidential election and referendum to approve a new constitution were held simultaneously in November 1994. Parliamentary elections were held in February 1995.) For example, the replacement of deputy leader Dostiyev by Mahmadsaid Ubaidullayev is a "bad omen." Ubaidullayev is not only a stronger player, but also, according to Roy, more opposed to any settlement on power sharing. Thus, from the government side, there is little likelihood that any steps will be taken toward power sharing, still less toward the holding of genuinely free elections.

The other main domestic actor, the opposition, is not an ideological opposition, Roy continued. Instead, it expresses the interests of the regions that were kept out of power during the Soviet period as well as of an intelligentsia that is not regionally based. The opposition has no real financial backing or foreign support; they are able to settle in Afghanistan or Iran, but are not "backed" by these or any other countries. Thus, the opposition currently has no choice but to follow a dual policy: maintain military pressure on the government on one hand, and push for negotiations on the other. According to Roy, this group has no hope of winning militarily, but they are not simply going to cease to exist. They will thus continue putting military pressure on the Tajik-Afghan border and trying to route armed guerrilla groups inside Tajikistan, as well as attempting to improve relations with other regional factions, like those from Khojand (Leninabad) province, which have been completely excluded from government power, though allied with the Kulyabis only two years ago.

Relations Within the Opposition

According to Roy, there is little point in trying to discern hard-liners and moderates within the opposition. Whatever their political or ideological differences, all opposition leaders agree on the political agenda they are advocating at the negotiating table. They have no choice. The opposition simply cannot win; the only way for it to gain a share in the government is to make deals with other factions and push for a broad-based coalition

government or government council. For the time being, therefore, it will continue to promote this position.

Roy stated further that the opposition leaders have full control over their military forces in Afghanistan, though certainly there is fighting among some opposition forces over local interests. In addition, relations among the various opposition leaders are relatively good; thus, if a settlement were acceptable to both opposition leaders Qadi Akbar Turajonzoda and Said Abdullah Nuri, all other factions would support it. Of the two, Roy said, Turajonzoda seems "more politically minded," which is not surprising given the fact that, as official leader of the clergy, he was an official in the Soviet system. Nuri, on the other hand, has always been outside the system. Both leaders, however, share an eagerness to find a political solution to the conflict.

Escudero disagreed, pointing out that there are some schisms within the Tajik opposition that weaken its capacity to engage in military activities and create some doubt that an agreement signed by the opposition leadership would in fact be adhered to by all factions. Within the Tajikistan Democratic Party, for example, there is a split between those who follow the original leader, Shodman Yusuf, and those who support Sattorzoda Sattarov. Yusuf states that he is prepared to work with the current government, and will one day return to Tajikistan and conduct political activities within the political scene as it now exists. He has thus broken with the Harekat Islami--the Islamic movement--made up of the Islamic Renaissance Party and other Islamic groups and operating under Nuri's direction, and headquartered in Afghanistan.

In addition, Turajonzoda was not present at the May 1995 talks between Tajik president Imamali Rahmonov and Nuri in Kabul, which may have confirmed reports that there are considerable differences between him and Nuri. During the subsequent talks at Almaty, Turajonzoda was asked about the differences, and he replied that, within the opposition, there is no one single leader and no hierarchical structure, rather that there are a number of leaders. Escudero said that this indicates that determining the opposition position on a particular issue may become increasingly difficult--if in fact a coordinated opposition position could be found at all.

Furthermore, the opposition's military forces are not an organized army, Escudero said, but a group of semi-independent military coalitions that operate under the command of warlords who do not follow the same instructions all the time. For example, one warlord, who operates under the nom de guerre "Jomma," conducted attacks on humanitarian aid convoys passing through his territory at the end of 1993. These were convoys of aid from the Aga Khan Foundation, Medecins Sans Frontieres and the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), so it is extremely unlikely that Nuri would have sanctioned such attacks. No one, however, was apparently able to bring Jomma under control.

The most powerful warlord, Escudero continued, is a man named "Rezwan" who was for a time described as the commander-in-chief of the opposition and was primarily responsible for the attacks in the summer of 1994 on

government positions near the town of Tavail-dara. Opposition forces made considerable gains at the start of this offensive, but were driven back and eventually defeated, with great loss of life and equipment. Rezwan was blamed by other opposition leaders for this military defeat and placed under house arrest in the Afghan city of Taloqan, the opposition headquarters. He was released but later re-arrested, this time by the government in Kabul for "misbehavior" involving Afghan citizens.

These splits in the opposition, Escudero maintained, and the generally loose organization might pose problems if some agreement is reached that is favored by some in the opposition but not by others. It is also likely that the government will be inclined to encourage and take advantage of these differences, thus potentially reducing the opposition to small, feuding groups.

Recent Developments in the Fighting

In reference to the April 1995 battles, Escudero pointed out that it is somewhat unusual to have fighting on that scale at that time of year, as most of the fighting in Tajikistan takes place during the "good fighting season," the warm months of late June through early October. Escudero explained that the terrain on the border between Tajikistan and Afghanistan is mountainous with only a few accessible passes, as most are snowed in for much of the year. Furthermore, the opposition forces now stationed in Afghanistan require a certain amount of time to build up a logistical base to support their intended military actions.

One of the major routes used in the past by the opposition, Escudero continued, is the Yazgulyam Gorge that runs from the Afghanistan to the Tajikistan side and then to the northwest. This gorge has been blocked off by the Russians. Until the early months of 1995, it seemed almost as if the Russian border guards paid little attention to opposition activities once they were over the Tajikistan border; there used to be numerous reports of opposition units marching in formation, under arms, or opposition military vehicles operating in sight of border guards. These kinds of reports have stopped. "Clearly," Escudero surmised, "the Russian border units are taking a much stricter attitude toward opposition activity inside Afghanistan and the region along the border and defining their area of operation as running just a little deeper over the border than in the past."

The opposition groups, according to Escudero, reacted strongly to the attempt to cut off their infiltration route, and to the Russian move that trapped approximately 200 opposition fighters in the Yazgulyam Gorge on the Tajik side of the border. This was one specific incident that led to the fighting that erupted in April. However, the Russians clearly had anticipated that their actions would result in additional battles because there had been outbreaks of fighting after the death of an opposition leader earlier in 1995, and after other Russian activities that had taken place as early as December 1994 at checkpoints run by the opposition. The Russians had reinforced their position in Gorno-Badakhshan, an autonomous region in Tajikistan where there has been considerable opposition to the government and is still not fully under government control. Thus the Russians were able to respond effectively when

opposition forces came across the border.

The Pyanj river that runs along the border at this point is so narrow that convoys moving along the road can be fired upon from both sides. And indeed, there were incidents when the Russians were fired on; in some cases, substantial numbers of border guard troops with one or more armored vehicles were overwhelmed and, according to Escudero, some of the Russian soldiers were mutilated. The Russians responded by attacking the opposition forces' positions inside Afghanistan, at times with helicopter gunships. There has also been at least one bombing attack on opposition headquarters in Taloqan in Afghanistan--the headquarters of Said Abdullah Nuri--located well back from the border. It is assumed, Escudero stated, that this attack was carried out by Russian aircraft, though the Russians have never formally admitted this.

The Government and the Gorno-Badakhshan Region

Escudero suggested that the fighting was in part a reaction to the change in tactics initiated by the Russian border guards along the Tajik- Afghan border. The fighting was also a reaction to another factor, less concrete but no less important. In the past, the Dushanbe government had what could be called a "gentlemen's agreement" with the government of the autonomous republic of Gorno-Badakhshan, that the government would not station troops in the region (thus acknowledging less than full control over the territory), and in return, the Gorno-Badakhshan government would not permit opposition activity there. The Dushanbe government lived up to its side of the bargain, in part, it must be said, because it did not have any troops to station in the region even had it wanted to do so.

The Gorno-Badakhshan government, Escudero maintained, did not support its end of the bargain. There are two rayons, or areas, in the region populated primarily by Sunni Muslims (unlike the majority in this small region, who are Ismailis, a breakaway sect of Shiia Islam), which even the regional Gorno-Badakhshan government cannot control. Opposition influence in these two areas is, as a result, very strong, and the opposition has used them as staging grounds. The Gorno-Badakhshan government has repeatedly proved unable to prevent this, even if it wanted to. Whatever the reason, it did not live up to its side of this "gentlemen's agreement," and the Dushanbe government sent a group of Tajik border guards to sites in the region near those manned by Russian border guards to help tighten border security. This became, of course, a violation of the agreement on the part of the Dushanbe government, and it was another factor to which the opposition was responding when it stepped up the fighting in April 1995.

For the moment, Escudero stated, the fighting has died down considerably. There are continued reports of border skirmishes, though their scale is frequently exaggerated, especially in the Russian press. This is in part because Russian troops get triple pay or credit for three days of service for each day served in a combat zone, giving most of them an interest in claiming that they have seen combat. "How, then, do they know it is a combat zone? They read about it in the Russian press." Escudero recounted that many such incidents were described to UN observers who then went to the reported site

of the combat, only to find that nothing had happened or that the size of the incident had been greatly exaggerated.

The Continued Role of Regionalism

Though the new government is controlled by Kulyabis, Escudero pointed out that a number of people in the government are from the Khojand region, including the prime minister and the ministers of economics and finance. It is true, however, that all political decisions are made by Kulyabis, and that in the immediate wake of the presidential and parliamentary elections, the regional base of the government has narrowed. At the same time, and perhaps in recognition of this fact, the two most senior Kulyabis--the speaker of the parliament and the national procurator--were removed from their positions and replaced by non-Kulyabis after the new parliament was seated.

However, Roy asserted that if the Khojandis have positions in the government, they are only token ones. Under the present circumstances, any government effort to broaden its base will be only "window dressing, and will change nothing." The genuinely important government positions-- those in the security apparatus-- will remain in the hands of the Kulyabis, who have no intention of giving them up. According to Roy, when the government held elections, it meant that the present government would be elected--plain and simple. It continues to be the case that, when the government's regional allies fail to fall in line, pressure is brought to bear until they learn their lesson. Not long after the recent elections, for example, there was a virtual military foray of Kulyabis into the Penjekent Valley because the vote there was not along expected lines. A few houses were burned, there was other destruction, and the point was made. And the people in Penjekent, Roy remarked, are the allies of the Kulyabis.

Ideology Not a Factor

According to Escudero, the war in Tajikistan is not about ideology-- communists vs. Islamists or democracy vs. autocracy. "It is not an ideological conflict at all," Escudero asserted. "It is a battle for power between two groups that represent different regions of the country. There is an Islamic aspect to the conflict (represented by the Islam-oriented parties in the opposition). Also, some members of the government were members of the Communist Party. Yet, some in the opposition were also party members, or achieved their positions by Soviet government appointment, making it impossible to distinguish between communists and noncommunists in this war. This war is not, Escudero stressed, "a good guy-bad guy situation." People on both sides of the war were brutally victimized, and they are not likely to forgive and forget very easily.

The Primary Outside Actor: Russia

Russian Interests and Aims

Without a doubt, Roy said, the Russians want to maintain a presence in

Tajikistan, as it is their last foothold in Central Asia. Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan are drifting away from Moscow and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). They are not necessarily opposed to Moscow--and there are many agreements between them--but they are taking charge of their own affairs. Both countries, for example, have refused to sign on to CIS military commitments. Roy asked, why should President Karimov of Uzbekistan support the American embargo against Iran? It is to show defiance of Moscow and signal a desire for closer links with Washington as a way to back up that defiance. Russian influence in these two countries is simply fading.

The Russians, according to Roy, need an unsettled, slightly chaotic situation in Tajikistan in order to maintain their foothold there, and they therefore are not pushing for a real settlement to the conflict. "They need to keep the fighting at an acceptable but low level," Roy stated. Without a doubt, Russia is the only country with real influence in Tajikistan; the OSCE, for example, has no means to apply any real pressure, as it is primarily a forum for discussion. Yet, thus far, Russia has not agreed to do the one thing that could change the situation: put pressure on the Kulyabis who are now running the government, not to give up power, but to make security guarantees to the opposition in the event that a real settlement is found. At each round of negotiations, Russia declines to be more than an observer, and to commit itself to implementing any security guarantees; it claims for itself a very neutral position, as if it were barely even an actor. But, Roy maintained, when a country (Russia) has 20,000 troops stationed in another nation (Tajikistan), making it that nation's largest military contingent, it cannot be considered just a neutral observer. "As long as Russia refuses to put real pressure on the Tajik government, or to offer security guarantees to the opposition, a settlement will be impossible," Roy said.

The Fight Against "Islamic Fundamentalism"

Russia has claimed that it is fighting against Islamic fundamentalism in Tajikistan on behalf of Europe-- and the world. Yet, Roy asked, who and where are the fundamentalists? There are no revolution-exporting Islamic fundamentalists in Afghanistan, as no one in that country is interested in any spillover into Tajikistan. According to Roy, the factions fighting in Afghanistan have two main interests: (1) gaining power in Kabul for power over Afghanistan, not some "greater Tajikistan" (the case even for Afghan- Tajik leader Masud); and (2) securing access to communication with the outside world. The current government in Kabul is on bad terms with Pakistan, leaving Central Asia (including Tajikistan) the only direct route to the outside world. In the present situation, the ones who control that access are the Russian border guards, which provides the Afghans with incentives to negotiate with the Russians--which is, in fact, Masud's strategy. Furthermore, for the access to remain reliable, stability in Tajikistan is needed. Thus the Afghans have little interest in giving military support to the Tajik opposition if that would only prolong the hostilities. "Kabul is not pushing for an Islamic government in Tajikistan-- that is clear," Roy declared. "For Kabul, the priority is a deal with Moscow, not to support the Tajik opposition."

In any case, Roy asked, if Russia truly is concerned about an Islamic threat, why is it selling weapons to Iran? Far from worrying about Islamic fundamentalism, it appears that Russia has good relations with Iran. Furthermore, it is clear that Iran is not supporting Islamic fundamentalism in the Caucasus or Central Asia; in fact, Iran is supporting the (Christian) Armenians against the (Shiia Muslim) Azeris for its own reasons. Roy said if Moscow believes itself to be battling Islamic fundamentalism in Tajikistan, it is "fighting an elusive battle." Roy asserted that he did not believe an Islamic revolution is possible in Central Asia, but if it were, it would not come from over the border but would be generated from within, from the Ferghana Valley, Tashkent, or even Tatarstan. If there is an Islamic threat, Roy noted, "it is not beyond the [old Soviet Central Asian] border but behind it."

Escudero agreed that many of the opposition leaders are not Islamic fundamentalists (or at least they were not when they were in power in Tajikistan), but stated that the current government in Dushanbe certainly does not view the situation this way. Escudero maintained that there is a risk that if the opposition were to come to power-- though this is unlikely--its approach would now be more fundamentalist than in the past because it would have to be responsive to those who supported it while it was in Afghanistan, people not from Afghanistan but from other countries--fundamentalists from outside.

Roy, however, disagreed. There is disillusionment among the opposition about Islam, he said, and about the fundamentalist view. There was a wave of Islamic enthusiasm in Tajikistan in 1990-92, but the opposition's defeat, and the continued difficulty of its current situation, has made its leaders and their constituency adopt a more pragmatic, realistic attitude. Put simply, they, like everyone else in Tajikistan, want peace and food. Furthermore, Roy reiterated, there is no real foreign support for the promotion of religious fundamentalism in Tajikistan. If the opposition were to come to power, and Roy agreed with Escudero that this prospect is extremely unlikely, an opposition-dominated government would not get millions of dollars in support from Iran or Saudi Arabia. In fact, the domestic situation would likely not change much, since the opposition would need the support of the Khojandis, for example, and would continue to let them go about their business. There would be not only political continuity, but economic continuity as well, as the opposition would have no incentive to abrogate economic agreements or other arrangements. The Tajik opposition, is now headed by politically minded, moderate leaders, even if some local armed groups on the border are headed by those not so moderate.

Another factor in this equation that cannot be discounted is smuggling, which generates a great deal of money for everyone, regardless of politics, ideology, or ethnic stripe--first and foremost for the doorkeepers, those who guard the border. The border guards thus have vested interests in maintaining the current situation. Obviously, Roy said, there are many things about this war that are not political, still less ideological.

Other Actors: Uzbekistan and Iran

At the beginning of the war, according to Roy, Uzbekistan essentially had the

same policy as Russia toward the conflict--to support the Kulyabis and crush the opposition. At that time, the Uzbekistan government greatly feared an "Islamic spillover" and the stirring of nationalism among Tajiks in Uzbekistan, both of which could have dire consequences for Uzbekistan's domestic political situation. However, since about mid-1994, the Uzbek government's position has changed; it no longer fears a spillover from Islamists or Tajik nationalists. One main reason for the change--after three years of brutal policies against the Uzbek opposition, the Uzbek government is now very much in charge of the political scene in that country. There are a few "hotspots," such as the Ferghana Valley, but the situation is largely under control.

An official clergy has been established--a very clever move, according to Roy, as it has made a number of concessions to committed believers (Islamic holidays have been made official, Uzbek President Karimov has made the hajj,), while forestalling any chance for the strengthening of a politicized Islamic opposition in Uzbekistan. And in a significant demonstration that he no longer dreads the specter of an Islamic movement in Tajikistan, in April 1995, Karimov met with Tajik Islamic opposition leader Turajonzoda, who, only two years earlier, was considered a traitor and a danger to Uzbekistan. Moreover, the civil war in Tajikistan has killed even the most extremist dreams of a "greater Tajikistan," as Tajiks in Uzbekistan, frightened by events in Tajikistan, have chosen to remain citizens of Uzbekistan. They still want some cultural concessions, such as Tajik schools, but by and large the Tajiks in Uzbekistan are not repressed. "The Tajiks in Uzbekistan are not treated like the Kurds in Turkey," Roy stated.

Now that there is no danger to Uzbekistan from problems in Tajikistan, Roy continued, Karimov is eager to act the part of "godfather" for a new Tajikistan. In any case, Tajikistan will without a doubt remain weak, and Uzbekistan "dreams of being the heavyweight" in the region. What the Uzbeks have adopted now, Roy said, is something of a patronizing attitude of superiority, taking the position that they need "to support the poor Tajiks who cannot build their own country." Karimov wants to be the broker, and in this role, his only rival is Russia. Currently, Russia is the broker, but all of Karimov's recent endeavors have been to convince the United Nations and the West to give up Moscow and take on Tashkent as the main power broker. This is why, according to Roy, the Uzbeks are staying out of the negotiation process; they did not even send an observer to Islamabad or Tehran [the sites of earlier rounds of negotiations] though they were entitled to.

Iran has generally changed its attitude toward the Central Asian countries since the breakup of the Soviet Union, Roy continued. When the USSR collapsed, Iran was at first concerned that there would be a power vacuum in Central Asia, out of which would develop either some sort of Turkic-based nationalist movement or a Saudi-backed Sunni Muslim resurgence, neither of which would have been welcome to the Iranians. To forestall especially the latter, the Iranians quickly developed contacts with the Sunni Muslim groups in Central Asia, with the various branches of the Islamic Renaissance Party, for example. It was not long, however, before Russia "came back" to Central Asia,

which for Iran was the most desirable development. The Iranians, according to Roy, now prefer to have a direct dialogue with Moscow about their mutual interest in preventing the Turks from making greater inroads in Central Asia and the Caucasus, as it is better for the Iranians to deal directly with Moscow--the effective power broker--than with a number of small groups in Central Asia. Furthermore, the Iranians are in favor of the presence of Russian border guards on the Azeri-Iranian border for other reasons involving Azerbaijan's overtures toward the Azeri population in Iran. "The Iranians," Roy maintained, "are pragmatists despite what many may think."

Throughout the Tajikistan conflict, the Iranians have been careful--and very clever-- to maintain contacts with all sides. Despite the makeup of the Tajik government, for example, and its apparent anti-Islamist stance, the Iranian embassy in Dushanbe, unlike the Pakistan consulate, has not been closed. The Kulyabis in the government thus understood who was really supporting Islamic activism in Tajikistan.

The Negotiations

Each Side's Approach

Escudero maintained that the fighting has not impeded both sides from continuing with the negotiation process, though each side views it from a different perspective. The Tajik government believes that it holds legitimate political power, which has been fortified by a constitution approved in a fair referendum by a majority in Tajikistan. Though the parliamentary and presidential elections could not be regarded as fully free and fair by the United States, Escudero continued, it is on the basis of those elections that the Tajik government has control of all organs of authority, conferring on it power it wants to keep. It is the view of the government that the constitution and the recent elections are not negotiable, though within the parameters set out in the constitution, some matters are negotiable. According to the government, if the opposition wants to accept these terms, then a discussion is possible about the circumstances under which the opposition could return to Tajikistan and participate in the political system.

In the opposition's view, the referendum on the constitution and the elections should be considered null and void because they occurred without opposition participation and thus cannot be seen as fair. The opposition has insisted throughout the negotiation process that the Dushanbe government should resign and be replaced by a state council made up of 40 percent members of the government, 40 percent representatives of the opposition and 20 percent of people not in either category. The purpose of the council would be to take the place of a government until the appointment of a group of "neutral technocrats" whose primary function would be to create the necessary conditions for staging free and fair elections in the future. This position has been unacceptable to the government and consequently, no real progress has been made in the negotiations on this fundamental issue. Neither side,

Escudero said, has been prepared to discuss terms that could be considered meaningful to the other.

***Some Success at the Recent Round of Talks:
Ceasefire and the Return of Refugees***

Despite this state of affairs, however, some progress was made in the talks between Said Abdullah Nuri and President Rahmonov in Kabul in May 1995 or the subsequent round of negotiations in Almaty from May 22 through June 1. Escudero pointed out that the ceasefire, which in the past had been increased only by increments of one month at a time since the end of the war, was just increased by a three month increment. This is more significant than it sounds, Escudero maintained, as it not only covers a longer time period, but includes the months of the "good fighting season." In the past, a ceasefire would be agreed upon only during the bad weather months when no fighting would have occurred anyway.

In addition, Escudero continued, agreements were reached at Almaty that dealt with the return of refugees, involving guarantees for the treatment of internationally displaced persons (IDPs), their employment and security guarantees, and the housing they had occupied. These agreements are significant because the Tajik government has not always behaved well in this regard, as some refugees and IDPs have been and are still subject to "various pressures" in Tajikistan, especially in the southern part of the country. In the early days after the war, for example, there were some cases of refugees being beaten and even killed, though there have been few such reports in recent months.

"The fact is," Escudero stated, "the government does not fully control everything that goes on in all parts of the country. There are, in some areas, what are called field commanders in local parlance, people who control small groups of armed men left-over from the civil war who have not as yet been brought under control and may not be for some time, and who are a law unto themselves." These people, he added, often have "radical, reactionary" views toward refugees, and they and their "armed thugs" tend to treat refugees badly. This is important because not all the refugees have returned, and there are still thousands left (the exact number is not certain) mainly in the area around Kunduz, Afghanistan. Many of these refugees do not want to return, but obstacles have been put in the way of those who do, according to Escudero.

Thus, on the one hand, the government has not always treated the refugees well upon their return to Tajikistan. On the other, Escudero maintained, the opposition has realized the advantage of having the refugees remain in Afghanistan. There, they can not only be used as "fodder for recruitment," but also as a propaganda tool for the opposition claim that there are thousands of people in Afghanistan who are unable to return to Tajikistan because of the dictatorial regime in Dushanbe. This is yet one more illustration of the fact that this conflict is not a good guy-bad guy situation; the government is not 100 percent right nor is the opposition, and both sides have valid points and have violated the human rights of people in their midst, as is often the case in civil

conflicts.

Moreover, there are many refugees who are not in Afghanistan. In fact, Escudero asserted, there are vast disparities in the numbers of refugees claimed by the opposition and the Tajik government in part because of different definitions of who constitutes a refugee. The opposition definition tends to include everyone who has left the country, even Russian, Germans, Jews and others who have no intention of returning. The government often excludes people who left Tajikistan but who are not in Afghanistan, and who would like to return if they felt they could do so safely. The definition of a refugee has not yet been dealt with adequately in the context of the Tajikistan war. The bottom line, however, is that there are many people who would like to return to Tajikistan, and if they do, the issue of the treatment they receive upon their return remains significant.

Prospects for Peace and Development

Economic Situation

Since the end of the war, the Tajik government has been attempting to rebuild Tajikistan's destroyed economy, largely with Russian aid. In the hope of returning the country to some level of normality, the government is also seeking aid and investment from outside sources. Commenting on the positive opportunities for foreign investment in this war-torn country, Escudero said that, while there are areas of conflict in Tajikistan, they are remote from the places where investment opportunities lie. Investment in gold mining, for example, is an excellent prospect for an outside investor, and in fact some British entrepreneurs have recently formed the Zarafshan Gold Co., a joint venture with the Tajik government. This venture has taken over an old Soviet mine in the town of Penjekent, where there are three large gold deposits, and, according to Escudero, all operations are being carried out in full safety--the case even during the war. He reminded the audience that, other than Russians, who cannot really be considered foreigners in this war, no foreigner has ever been hurt in any way in the Tajikistan conflict. Escudero maintained that "extraordinary business opportunities" exist in Tajikistan, especially in the field of mineral exploitation. For its part, the Tajik government is interested in doing what is necessary to promote cooperation with western firms, and is in fact rewriting legislation to facilitate this prospect.

The government, however, has not yet received any large return from the gold sales, though when gold from the Penjekent mine begins to come on line, the government stands to receive 51 percent of the profit. There are enough gold deposits to stabilize the currency and to help Tajikistan qualify for international loans, among other things--if the gold income is used properly. It remains to be seen, Escudero noted, what the government will eventually do with these considerable profits.

The government in Tajikistan recently reasserted control over cotton and

aluminum exports, the primary foreign exchange earners, Escudero continued. This cannot be considered a step in the direction of privatization or free-market reform. But when the export of cotton and aluminum was licensed privately before the government's re-exertion of authority, there were virtually no controls, which led to flagrant corruption. Individual warlords were simply taking cotton from growers and exporting it under their own name, with the money landing in Swiss bank accounts. Almost none of the benefit of that export went to the government or the local economy. There is hope that by resuming some sort of control over these exports, the government can stabilize the situation and eventually create a workable system of privatized export. According to Escudero, the government maintains that it does not intend to control the export of these raw materials indefinitely. In any case, however inefficient they may be now, current government controls are likely to be more beneficial to the country than the chaotic "private" system they replaced.

Political Outlook and Recommendations

Roy stated that, as the political situation now stands, "nobody can win," and neither side seems committed to finding a short-term settlement. Only Russia is in a position to break this stalemate, which it has thus far been unwilling to do. As with the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh, where it is a "fiction" that Russia is a partner of the OSCE's in a search for a resolution, so it is with the United Nations and Tajikistan. Russia has its own agenda, which is to promote the organization and management of its sphere of influence. It is Moscow's official position, Roy asserted, that the entire former Soviet Union should be considered its sphere of influence, and this position is not, unfortunately, countered by other countries. Russia's relations with the former republics are thus not partnerships.

Roy acknowledged that Tajikistan is out of the West's direct sphere of interest and influence. This fact, however, should enable westerners to see the situation in Tajikistan in the broader context--how to cope with the "arc of crisis" that has developed from the Crimea--through the Caucasus and Central Asia--to Tajikistan, and how to find "new rules of the game" in order to have a clear policy toward this entire region.

In the short term, there will be no spillover of the war from Tajikistan into other Central Asian countries, Roy continued. The longer-term issue is the relationship between Moscow and all the states of Central Asia, particularly with Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. This is what is at stake in Tajikistan. The issue is not Islamic fundamentalism, or ideologies imported from Afghanistan or Iran. Nor is there any special concern in Moscow over the aims of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, as these countries have their own policies of cooperation with Moscow for their own reasons. The crucial issue that keeps Russia involved in Tajikistan is its desire to maintain its influence in the key Central Asian countries of Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan.

For a negotiated agreement to work in Tajikistan, Roy said, it must be a political agreement that provides for a change in leadership. Either a new coalition government must be established, or some sort of state council as

proposed by the opposition that would reflect a regional balance, with a Khojandi or someone acceptable to both sides as head of state, and with Kulyabis in other positions of power. The regional rivalry and hatred that currently exists between the Kulyabis and the Garmis [from the Kurgan-Teppe region] is such that neither will ever accept leadership by the other. There must also be security guarantees for all sides in the dispute--and this is where there would be a role for the Russian army. Finally, because of the regional factionalism that was behind the conflict and the resulting violence between the regions, the political system in Tajikistan would have to allow for a considerable amount of local autonomy, at least until a new government, legitimate in the eyes of all the regions, could establish a lawful state apparatus.

Escudero reiterated that for the immediate future, it is unlikely that either side is going to be interested in discussing national reconciliation in terms that will be acceptable to the other, since a common set of parameters has not yet been reached. Meanwhile, other helpful steps can be taken, such as allowing for more prisoner exchanges. In addition, the ceasefire must be extended beyond the current three month because the mandate of the UN military observers has been tied by the Security Council to the existence of a ceasefire. Needless to say, it would be extremely harmful if the military observers were to be withdrawn from Tajikistan in the wake of a ceasefire termination.

Furthermore, the Tajikistan government would be prepared to discuss with the opposition certain other concessions that would be offered, if the opposition played by the general rules set down by the government, based on the constitution and the elections. These concessions would include a limited number of parliamentary seats made available to the opposition in special elections, which would increase its number of parliamentary seats. One or more deputy prime ministers would be appointed, providing the opposition an opportunity to take a minority position in a coalition government. As an opening offer, Escudero said, these concessions are significant.

The negotiation process, in whatever form, must be continued, Escudero cautioned, as the alternative would be extremely serious. There is no reason to expect a full resumption of the 1992 civil war, as the opposition does not have the capacity to launch a full-scale attack at the moment and the position of the Russian military in Tajikistan is such that it would be militarily disastrous for the opposition even to try. Nevertheless, there remains the real possibility of a smaller conflict.

Realistic Expectations

In any case, Escudero noted, the negotiation process should be viewed with the understanding that the civil war in Tajikistan was a very recent event. Furthermore, while it did not last as long as many other such conflicts, this war was particularly brutal. Thus it simply is not reasonable to expect people who were victimized in that way to forgive and forget easily, however much outside observers and international negotiators may wish. In diplomacy, after all, one of the most important qualities is persistence; progress must, of necessity, be

incremental, and more cannot be expected. All well-wishers and supporters of the negotiated peace process in Tajikistan must work to maintain this general, if slow, rate of progress, which will eventually make possible a wide-reaching negotiated solution.

About the Report

As many as 50,000 people have died and thousands more have been wounded and made homeless by the civil war that has raged in Tajikistan, the poorest of the Central Asian republics of the former Soviet Union. It was the bloodiest conflict in the aftermath of the Soviet collapse, until Chechnya. But the torment in Tajikistan was obscured by the carnage in the Balkans and Chechnya. A military stalemate and a cease-fire have produced a fragile moment of peace that has periodically been marred by fighting and could be fully shattered by any of the forces, in addition to the Tajik government and the opposition, competing for influence and power--Russia, Iran, Uzbekistan, opposition supporters in Afghanistan, and even ubiquitous arms and drug smugglers who profit from the conflict.

On June 6, 1995 the United States Institute of Peace organized a forum on the Tajikistan conflict to explore prospects for negotiations and an end to the war. It included Ambassador Stanley T. Escudero, who had recently completed three years as the chief U.S. representative in the Tajik capital, Dushanbe, and French scholar Olivier Roy, now at the French National Center for Scientific Research and former head of mission in Tajikistan for the Organization on Security and Cooperation in Europe. This report is based on that forum. For further information, please contact [Patricia Carley](#).

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