

# The Russo-Tajik agreement and its political effects on Central Asia

by M. Babur

*On July 15, the Russian Parliament ratified a Russian-Tajik Agreement on friendship, cooperation, and mutual aid which had been signed in the Kremlin on May 25. Up to the point of the signing, little mention had been made in the Russian or international press about this agreement. In the article that follows, M. Babur provides crucial background on the circumstances of the agreement, as seen from Moscow by a veteran Russian observer and writer on Central Asian and Oriental affairs who has had five decades experience in the field.*

*The ratification occurred soon after the well-publicized incident of July 11, in which Border Post No. 12 along the Afghan-Tajik border was attacked from two directions, the main attack mounted across the Pyandzh River by 400 armed refugees supported by soldiers of the 55th Infantry Division of the Afghan Army. The attacks resulted in the deaths of 25 Russian border guards, after two days of heavy fighting. Immediately thereafter, Russian Defense Minister Pavel Grachev and Deputy Defense Minister Konstantin Kobets rushed to the combat zone, and ordered heavy reprisals. To enforce this, President Boris Yeltsin, acting on Defense Ministry recommendations, immediately dispatched thousands of Russian troop reinforcements, plus combat aircraft and attack helicopters, to the border area.*

*M. Babur's analysis follows:*

On May 25 in the Kremlin, President of the Russian Federation Boris Yeltsin and Chairman of the Supreme Soviet of Tajikistan E. Rakhmonov signed an agreement on friendship, cooperation, and mutual aid between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Tajikistan. At the same time, a package of seven documents was signed, providing for official Russian and Tajik institutions to collaborate militarily and economically, as well in the defense of the state border. These documents, and the agreement in particular, are of extreme political and strategic importance for both states, and for the other countries of Central Asia and the Middle East.

Given the dire political, social, economic, and military situation that Tajikistan found itself in—after a year of bloody civil war; after the deaths of over 60,000 of its people and the exodus of another 250,000 to Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and (especially dangerous) Afghanistan; and after a series of serious earthquakes and floods—signing an

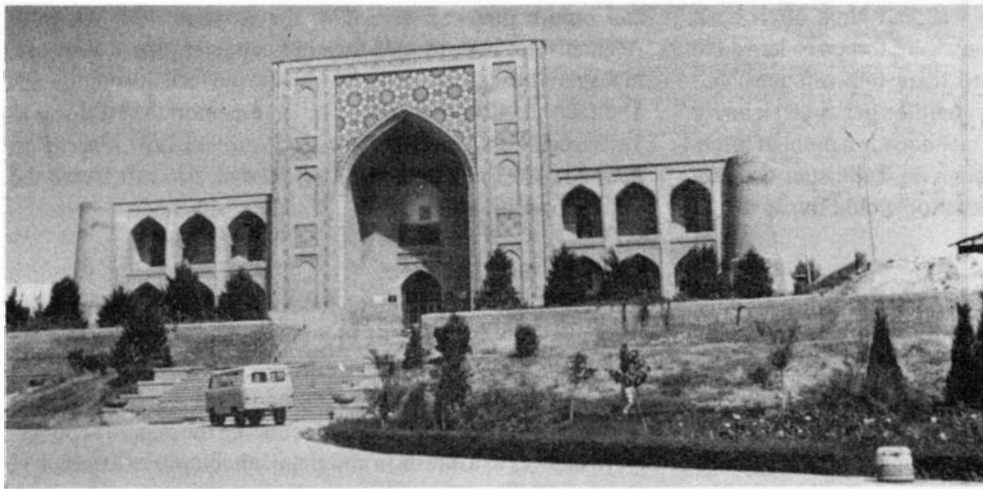
agreement with the Russian Federation offered the country a real chance of saving itself from impending disaster and from the destruction of its native population. One must remember that, at the time of the signing, there was no civil peace. In some areas, especially the Pamirs, battles raged pitting government forces against both the “Democratic-Islamic” opposition, supported by the Afghan *mujahedin*, and detachments of fighters, recruited mainly by force in the Tajik refugee camps in the Afghan border provinces of Balkh, Kunduz, Samangan, and Takhar, where they receive defense training from Afghan and foreign specialists working for fundamentalist groups in Afghanistan. One must also bear in mind, that as a result of the civil war and natural disasters, upwards of 150,000 homes and 80% of all businesses had been burnt or reduced to rubble. In autumn 1992, only one-seventh of the cotton harvest was brought in. The damage inflicted on the republic's economy, transport, and housing, was put at 350 billion rubles.

During the signing of the agreement, Rakhmonov said: “The presence of the 201st Russian Division in Tajikistan is a guarantee of peace. If it had not been here, the number of people killed would have been not thousands, but about a million.” This was no exaggeration. Indeed, he added: “If it had not been for Russia and Boris Yeltsin personally . . . Tajikistan would already have ceased to exist.”

This is not to say that the efforts of Emomali Rakhmonov and Prime Minister Abdulmalik Abullodzhanov have been unanimously supported in Tajikistan. The Russian newspaper *Moskovsky Novosty* somehow came across a copy of a secret letter to Yeltsin from the leaders of the Tajik opposition, and published it, literally, on the eve of the signing of the agreement (issue No. 22, dated May 23-30). In this letter, the opposition strongly protested against Russia's support for the current leadership in Tajikistan, where all kinds of murder and torture were going on. *Moskovsky Novosty* considered the letter so important, that it printed it on its front page, together with a photograph showing how terrible conditions are for Tajik refugees in Afghanistan.

## ‘Outdoing Goebbels’

However, even in the Tajik government there was no unanimity over the question of an alliance with Russia. On May 19, the official organ of the Communist Party of Tajikis-



*Keldash Madrasah, a Muslim monument in Tashkent, the capital of Uzbekistan. It was in Tashkent that CIS leaders signed an Agreement on Collective Security in May 1992, and leaders in Tashkent are monitoring the situation in neighboring Tajikistan now with considerable worry.*

tan, which is still the only legally operating political organization in the republic, published, in issue No. 20, an article titled "Outdoing Goebbels." In it, the Russian government was called a "criminal clique" and "followers of Goebbels." Referring to the clashes in Moscow on May 1, and to the Russian President's conduct during the collapse of the U.S.S.R., the author of the piece, A. Ziborov, even said: "Yeltsin has betrayed his presidential oath and should be put before a court." Similarly, in recent months, the *Voice of Tajikistan* and other Tajik government papers (all newspapers there are government ones) had conducted a bitter campaign against the Russian press for reporting gross abuses of human rights and democratic freedoms in Tajikistan.

So the Tajik opposition, which maintained its positions in the Pamirs and isolated border areas, together with the underground groups in the cities and towns, criticized the Russian government for signing the agreement and sending more troops, charging that this would shore up the government of Rakhmonov-Abullodzhanov. Meanwhile, the Communists supported the latter's domestic policy, but at the same time echoed the slogans of the Russian Front for National Salvation, and criticized their leaders for signing an agreement with the "followers of Goebbels in the Kremlin."

### **Russia's national interests**

There can be no doubt that the agreement signed in the Kremlin on May 25 is very important from the point of view of Russia's national interests.

First, it sets the scene for preventing two potential war zones—Tajikistan and Afghanistan—from merging into one. It therefore averts the danger of a massive conflict that would undoubtedly have spread across a large part of Central Asia and the Middle East.

Second, the agreement strengthens Russia's military and political positions along the Amudar'ya and Pyandzh rivers, thus creating the conditions for preventing fighters and arms from being infiltrated from Afghan territory into Tajik territo-

ry. The Russian Ministry of Defense newspaper *Red Star* published on May 27 an article entitled "Russia and Tajikistan Are Back Together Again," which gave an extremely positive assessment of the agreement between the two sovereign states and emphasized that "the agreement stipulates a joint policy on defense and military technology, including financing military programs and buying arms. If an act of aggression is committed against one of the parties to the agreement, the other will offer the necessary assistance." The article pointed out that the agreement provides for keeping Russian armed forces on the territory of Tajikistan for a transitional period, while focusing attention on the border problems: "The agreement says that for a transitional period, and until Tajikistan has its own border troops, it is delegating the right to guard its borders and those of Russia and the Community of Independent States (CIS), to Russian border troops." It is quite specific, though, that "the Russian border troops will carry out their duties in accordance with agreements with neighboring Afghanistan and China, which remain in force."

Third, the agreement guarantees the inviolability of Tajikistan's borders. During the signing, Yeltsin remarked that the borders of Tajikistan, which are simultaneously the borders of the CIS, must be guarded through their joint efforts. "Especially," he emphasized, "because Afghanistan is not indifferent to Tajikistan, I mean territorially speaking." So, true to the commitments it entered into in the Agreement on Collective Security signed by the leaders of the CIS in Tashkent in May 1992, Russia had taken responsibility to defend the borders of the states of Central Asia and prevent terrorists, arms, and drugs from finding their way through the CIS into the countries of Europe. All of this indicates that the agreement of May 25, 1993 had increased Russia's authority in the Russian Federation and CIS, and particularly among the Central Asian states.

Fourth, the agreement improved the situation for Russians inside Tajikistan, who have been in an extremely dan-

gerous position during the civil war and have often been persecuted. Over 150,000 Russians were forced to leave the republic, and this not only turned them into refugees, but also deprived Tajikistan of highly qualified personnel it badly needed. In his Kremlin speech, Yeltsin made a point of referring to the problem of the Russians in Tajikistan and expressed the hope that now their situation would improve.

## A second Afghanistan?

However, some sections of Russian public opinion have been seriously worried about the implications of the agreement. On May 27, *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* published an article headlined, "Is Russia Being Drawn into Another Unnecessary War? The Agreement with Dushanbe Could Turn into a Second Afghanistan." The article continues: "Russian military figures consider that the situation in Tajikistan risks becoming a carbon copy of Afghanistan, with Russian troops in the valleys and partisans, some of whom are Afghans, in the mountains. Russia's war with Afghanistan shows what would happen. Having signed a document for joint military action, Russia is being drawn more and more into another war that is totally alien to it." Moreover, the article concluded, the signing of the agreement would strengthen the position of the Tajik government, which would hardly improve the state of human rights in the republic.

Radio Teheran and a number of other eastern radio stations pointed out that the Russo-Tajik Agreement of May 25 was not received with much enthusiasm in Tashkent, the capital of Tajikistan's neighbor Uzbekistan. The President of Uzbekistan, Islam Karimov, was extremely displeased with Rakhmonov's statement in the Kremlin, that "if it had not been for Russia and Boris Yeltsin personally, there would be no Uzbekistan and no Islam Karimov either, and Tajikistan would already have ceased to exist." After all, this was said by the same chairman of the Supreme Council of Tajikistan who, in November 1992, as he was being elected at a session of the Supreme Council in Khodzhen, called Karimov the "father of all the Tajiks"!

Indeed, the Uzbek leadership and Karimov in particular have done a great deal to help smash the "Democratic-Islamic" opposition in Tajikistan and to bring Rakhmonov and Abdullodzhanov to power in Dushanbe. According to reports in the Russian press, especially *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, *Rossiyskiya Vesti*, *Izvestia*, and *Novoye Vremya*, at the end of 1992, the Uzbek high command put a large quantity of arms at the disposal of the Tajik leadership, including field guns and twenty T-62 tanks, followed by an entire armored unit that had previously served in Afghanistan and was then stationed in Termez. Moreover, the Tajik Armed Forces and units of the Popular Front fighting the opposition included quite a few Uzbek advisers. Uzbekistan began to play a more active part in events in Tajikistan after the appointment, as Tajikistan's defense minister, of A. Shisklyannikov, who had previously worked in the Uzbek Ministry of Defense,

and before that had served in the Russian 40th Army in Afghanistan. He arranged for a helicopter regiment stationed in Kagan (near Bokhara) to be transferred to Tajik command. The facts about Uzbek armed involvement in the civil war in Tajikistan were published by the *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* on Feb. 23, 1993 in a piece entitled "Uzbek Aircraft Bomb the Tajik Opposition."

## Leninabad mafia

In Tashkent, of course, the situation in Tajikistan has been carefully monitored. In a press conference for foreign journalists back in May 1992, President Islam Karimov kept returning to the subject. He accused then-President Rakhman Nabiyeu, who has since died, of reducing the people to poverty. In answer to a question about the inhabitants of Leninabad Oblast in Tajikistan wanting to set up an autonomous territory inside Uzbekistan, Karimov said that the oblast (region) was basically peopled by Uzbeks, who wanted to become part of Uzbekistan. He stated firmly, however, that "to talk about borders in the current situation would be to tear Central Asia apart." Many newspapers used this statement as the headline for their report of the whole interview. The reference to Leninabad Oblast, which is the largest region in Tajikistan and until the beginning of the civil war used to supply the party and state apparatus with key personnel (so much so that people used to say "Leninabad runs Tajikistan"), is rather interesting. Leninabad Oblast is the most fertile and densely populated part of Tajikistan, and occupies a vital strategic position on the approaches to the Fergana Valley bordering Kyrgyzstan. Its center, which was recently given back its ancient name of Khodzhen, was known for 2,500 years as one of the largest transfer points on the famous "Silk Road." From 1917 to 1929, Leninabad and its environs formed part of Uzbekistan, and it was only after the formation of the Tajik Soviet Socialist Republic that they were handed over to the young republic at its insistence. As compensation, the Uzbek S.S.R. retained Samarkand and Bokhara Oblasts, which were mainly populated by Tajiks, who insisted, right up until 1992, that they should be handed over to Tajikistan. Thus, there are territorial differences between the two republics. Moreover, about a million Uzbeks live in Tajikistan, and approximately the same number of Tajiks in Uzbekistan.

With all of this, as well as events in Afghanistan, in mind, Karimov announced in the interview that Russia should become guarantor of the security of the Central Asian republics. He also stressed that "Tajikistan is an inalienable part of Central Asia, and there are absolutely no grounds for suggesting that it could suddenly come within the sphere of influence or under the protection of the *mujahedin* of Afghanistan."

In an interview that he gave to foreign correspondents 10 months later, on March 12, 1993, and which has been published in full only in Tashkent newspapers, Karimov said he was extremely worried by the situation in Tajikistan. He

confirmed that Uzbekistan had given active assistance to the legitimate rulers of the republic, on the basis of the Agreement on Collective Security signed in May 1992, and the Tajik-Uzbek treaty of friendship and cooperation signed in January 1993. However, he pointed out, whereas the international community was devoting an enormous amount of attention to the situation in Bosnia-Herzegovina, it seemed totally uninterested in the Tajik tragedy. He referred to Afghanistan's role in events in Tajikistan, and to the fact that there were more than half a million members of various military units in Afghanistan, equipped with the most up-to-date weapons, and continued: "Someone wants Afghanistan to be a kind of smoldering fire, from which embers can be plucked and cast into the independent states of Central Asia, and pressure put on them. It is no secret that certain dark forces cherish such dreams. . . . In Afghanistan, Pakistani and Iranian groups of terrorists are being trained to carry out subversive activity in our region." In conclusion, Karimov repeated his view that Russia must become the guarantor of security in Central Asia, but he stressed that the sovereignty of each republic must be strictly maintained.

Clearly, the Russo-Tajik Agreement on friendship, cooperation, and mutual aid (the last point was absent from the Uzbek-Tajik friendship treaty), in combination with the Tajik leaders' statements in the Kremlin, have led to a certain wariness in Tashkent, as a number of radio stations in the East (especially Iran) have suggested. To this must be added the provocative and ambivalent article entitled "Asian Gas Will Go to the West: The New Alliance Will Harm Russia's Interests," by two responsible officials from the Russian Ministry of Foreign Trade, published in *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* on May 13, 1993. This stated that a Central Asian Regional Union was going to be formed by forces allegedly believing in a Greater Turkestan, who intended to include in it not only the five republics of Central Asia, but also the Muslim republics that are part of the Russian Federation. It was claimed that the scenario for the Osh tragedy in Kyrgyzia in 1990 [in which ethnic Uzbeks living in Kyrgyzia were attacked] was worked out in Tashkent, with the aid of the Turkish secret service; that the leader of the Afghan Uzbeks, A. Dostum, was receiving great support from Uzbekistan and Turkey; and that the leaders of the planned Central Asian Regional Union (by implication, principally Uzbekistan) had far-reaching designs against the "Persian-speaking bloc" (Iran, Afghanistan, and Tajikistan) and presented a serious threat to Russia's economic and strategic interests. All this was published less than a fortnight before the signature of the Russo-Tajik Agreement!

### **Uzbek indignation**

On May 25, i.e., the day when the agreement was signed, the editor of *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* published a long letter from the Embassy of Uzbekistan's press office, expressing indignation at the attacks and wild claims contained in the

article by the two officials from the Russian Foreign Trade Ministry. The letter, which was longer than the original newspaper article, concluded: "The publication of this article a day before the heads of state and heads of government of the CIS met in Moscow [May 14] to discuss the question of setting up an economic union, was politically provocative, a blatant attempt to stir things up and set the leaders of the CIS countries against one another." In a footnote to the letter, the editor of *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* offered his apologies, which is an extremely rare occurrence.

In Tashkent, however, they are not only unhappy about the Russo-Tajik Agreement. Immediately after the meeting in Moscow of the heads of government of the CIS, the Tashkent newspaper *Narodnoye Slovo*, which is the organ of the Supreme Council and government of Uzbekistan, published an article headlined "Sudden U-turns Resemble Revolutions: They End in Tears," which was signed by the Uzbek Information Agency. At the center of the article was an attack on Nursultan Nazarbayev, the President of Kazakhstan, for allegedly attempting at the Moscow meeting to revive the Soviet Union!

### **Central Asia split looming?**

Nazarbayev, of course, is a figure whose authority extends far beyond the borders of Central Asia. In an article entitled "Integration Not in the Cards: Anti-Nazarbayev Article in Uzbek Newspaper Confirms Presence of Differences Between Regional Leaders," *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* of May 28 commented on this attack on him: "A political split is obviously opening up inside Central Asia. . . . Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are leaning toward democracy and market reforms, whilst Uzbekistan and the somewhat kindred political regime in Tajikistan are blatantly trying to preserve the features of Soviet totalitarianism, 'flavoring' it with a national revival." This was *Nezavisimaya Gazeta's* revenge for the trouble it had with its article, "Asian Gas Will Go to the West." It was also expressing its displeasure at the Kremlin's support for the government of Rakhmonov-Abdullodzhanov, and warning of a split amongst the leaders of Central Asia, at a time when the fundamentalist threat was increasing, and the civil war in Tajikistan fanned from Afghan territory was still burning.

Meanwhile, the bloody, drawn-out conflict among the leaders of the *mujahedin* in Afghanistan has been settled for the time being, by an agreement in Jalalabad on May 20 among the leaders of the warring factions. The popular Minister of Defense Ahmad Shah Masoud, who is a Tajik by nationality and supports a political settlement in Tajikistan, is also to retire. A government has finally been formed in Kabul headed by the leader of the "Islamic Party of Afghanistan," G. Hekmatyar, who is well-known for his support of the Tajiks who are fighting their government. All of this does not bode well for peace on the banks of the Amudar'ya, and it indicates the importance and timeliness of the May 25, 1993 agreement.