

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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A Survey Of The Seattle-Tashkent Sister-City Relationship

Dear Peter,

The other week when in Washington, I looked up an old friend in the State Department who formerly served in Turkey. His new brief, he informed me, is to look into the possibility of expanding contacts with the Turkic Republics of the Soviet Union, specifically Uzbekistan. Needless to say, he was very glad to hear that I was going to be in Tashkent, where the US government may soon be starting up a consulate.

"But Phillip," I said, "There already is one."

"Impossible," replied my friend, "And I should know and you should not."

De jure, Philip was of course correct: there is no legal institution associated with the Government of the United States in the capital of Uzbekistan SSR.

But de facto, I was in the right: for there is a very active Yankee presence in Tashkent, albeit one that falls completely outside the established channels of diplomacy and of which American officialdom is apparently oblivious.

I refer to a very special group of dedicated citizen-diplomats of Seattle, Washington, who have promoted a unique sister-city relationship between their fair city and Tashkent, Uzbekistan since 1972, and to their quasi-consul general, one Dr Roscius (Rosh) Doan, who, if not officially recognized by the Government of the United States as any sort of diplomat, is effectively recognized in Tashkent as exactly that.

"We have a very specific bias," said Kahramon Rakhmanov, head of the Tashkent municipality's foreign relations department, "From getting visas to cutting through red-tape in getting joint ventures off the ground, Seattle residents are treated differently than other Americans, and it is all because of the sister city relationship."

Today, when "sister city" relationships (or "twin cities", as the Soviets prefer to call them) between the USA and the USSR are a dime a dozen, it is difficult to appreciate the pioneering role of Seattle in defying the conventional wisdom of what is (or was) possible for citizen

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diplomacy to accomplish between the USA and the USSR. Now, nearly 20 years after the first contacts were initiated, the relationship has flowered into one of the most extensive and fascinating USA/USSR experiments in international glasnost and perestroika--a "no strings attached" formula which has resulted in all manner of exchanges occurring every year.

The apocrypha has it that the Seattle-Tashkent sister city relationship occurred nearly by fluke.

Charles Royer, then mayor of Seattle but now the head of the Institute for Politics at Harvard's Kennedy Government Center, was attending an international conference of mayors and just happened to be sitting next to the Mir Sayidov--then mayor of Tashkent, but now Prime Minister of Uzbekistan. The two got along famously, and when Sayidov suggested establishing a sister-city relationship, Royer said 'why not?'

According to Professor Ilse Cirtautas, head of the Near Eastern Studies department at the University of Washington, Royer nearly regretted his decision after he was informed that Tashkent was not in Mother Russia, but rather, in deepest-darkest Central Asia. It looked like a faux pas for the history books: the mayor of a major American city, oblivious to the fact that in establishing the first detente-era relationship between an American and Soviet city, he was setting up a rapport with the capital of a Soviet Republic of Central Asia where the majority of the population were ethnic Turkic Muslims, and not Russians at all.

For Cirtautas, a dyed-in-the-wool Lithuanian nationalist and the long-time advocate of Central Asian Turkic studies at the UW, the signal to Moscow could not have been better and she did much to convince the mayor that far from ill, much good would come out of selecting Tashkent--and not Kiev or Krasnodar--as Seattle's (and America's) first Soviet mate.

"I assured the mayor that the idea of associating Seattle with Tashkent was perfect," said Cirtautas, "And perfect it has been."

But aside from the exchange of dance groups and other, specialist cultural fare, nothing much really happened. There were, to be sure, some wild-eyed attempts to create business, my personal favorite being an aborted deal aimed at exporting lamb slaughtered according to Muslim rite in western China to Iran that was to use liquid nitrogen refrigeration trucks belonging to the Soviet military which usually carried rockets.

Then in 1975, Washington Senator Henry ("Scoop") Jackson sponsored a bill severely limiting American trade and investment with the USSR. But curiously, it was the very tension growing between Moscow and Washington that served as the greatest impetus in revitalizing the languishing connection between Seattle and Tashkent.

A certain amnesia prevails over the state of Soviet-American relations during that period, but a few key words should suffice to reactivate memories of pre-post Cold War perceptions of the USSR held by most Americans:

The United States had lost the war in Vietnam and was going through the agony of Watergate in anticipation of the drift years of the Ford and then Carter presidencies; on the Soviet front, the 1970s were the height of the Brezhnev chryonism and of Soviet expansionism, culminating in the invasion of Afghanistan in 1979. Superpower tensions came into full bloom with Ronald Reagan's entrance into the White House in 1980 and his declaration that the USSR was indeed "The Evil Empire".

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In a word, the international mood was bad, and if most Americans were concerned about the possibility of nuclear war, Seattle was obsessed: the presence of Boeing Aircraft, Microsoft Corporation and other aerospace and high-tech science-related industry made the city, quite simply, a major target for any in-coming ICBM.

On that note, a ten day nuclear teach-in was mounted in late 1982, entitled "Target Seattle: Preventing Nuclear War".

Turnout was massive and included speakers and representatives from across the political spectrum--from "unilateral disarmamentists to nuc-'em now advocates," in the words of the current head of the Seattle-Tashkent sister city committee, Aldon Bell, professor of history at UW.

"It was the tension in the US-Soviet relationship that really got us started," Bell told me, "There we were, just a bunch of ordinary folks who felt we had to do something, so we did."

Early in that new year, Bell and 30 associates decided to gain direct insight into the Soviet Union by traveling to Tashkent. Upon their return, the group was mobbed by the local press and a fantastically curious public. Here was a group of American "just folks" who had thrown government policy and caution to the wind and penetrated the Evil Empire on a human level--and literally at the same moment that Uncle Ron was announcing the "Star Wars" program.

So enthusiastic was the response that a second, ten-day conference was mounted in Seattle in 1984, entitled "Target Seattle: Soviet Realities", followed by a third conference/teach-in, expanded to the state level, called "Target: Washington", which even included Senator Tom Foley on the list of speakers.

Thus, on a macro-level, keen interest had been stirred in Seattle for information about the Big Picture; on a micro-level, individuals wanted to get beyond the teach-in phase and actually make direct, sustained contact with Soviets. And there stood the moribund sister-city relationship between Seattle and Tashkent--a natural vehicle to realize these goals.

I think it can be said that per capita, more residents of Seattle have now had a direct encounter with the USSR than any other city in the USA. For no sooner had the sister city connection been revived, than Tashkent became a destination of choice for the politically and culturally conscious. Rather than spend one's vacation in, say, the Bahamas, doctors, lawyers, realstate developers and others began taking trips to Central Asia. All manner of sub-committees began springing up, involved in everything from the exchange of lawyers and judges and academics (the University of Tashkent and the University of Washington established the first, direct university exchanges between the USA and the USSR) to boy scouts and even puppet theater and rock and roll: to reciprocate the visit of a traditional Uzbek musical group, Seattle sent the popular band 'Baby Cadillac' to Tashkent for a concert that was run live on radio in both cities simultaneously.

Perhaps the most politically motivated group--and that with argueably the greatest impact in both Seattle and Tashkent--was Ploughshares, whose mission was to make a concrete example of international cooperation and understanding, symbolized by a peace park in Tashkent. For their part, the authorities in Tashkent issued visas to anyone associated with the project and allowed the import all manner of materials--including thousands of personalized tiles to involve an even broader section of Seattle society.

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The crowning moment of the project was the wedding of Ploughshares founder Fred Noland in the completed Peace Park.

Not content with building a symbol to peace in just Tashkent, Ploughshares next engaged itself as part of the reconstruction of Soviet Armenia following the terrible earthquake there of December, 1988; the gesture was reciprocated by a group of Soviet volunteers who built low-income housing for Indians outside Seattle.

Soviet Peace Corps volunteers in the US of A!

The culmination of the growing level of cooperation came about in 1990, when the two groups merged to form a joint American/Soviet project to build a model village in southern Ethiopia, utilizing experimental (and appropriate) farming and fishing technology, which, in principle, would create a simple, self-sustaining food chain.

Sadly, this heady project has been beset by problems, not the least of which is the continued state of political instability in Ethiopia and the sad fact that many of the Ethiopians in the village do not like Russians; the Soviet team of volunteers, too, was said to be more interested in foreign currency transactions than in the job of volunteering.

Noland himself has now decided to return to his law practice after a six year leave of absence, and without his energy behind Ploughshares, the group appears now to be in a state of drift. No new projects are in the pipeline, in Tashkent or elsewhere.

But the baton appears to have been handed on to others, especially businessmen. A Seattle entrepreneur is setting up a Pizza shop in the Hotel Uzbekistan, and Uzbek nationals are thinking about opening a "Plov" restaurant in Seattle. A group called Context which promotes a sort of watered-down EST course for small businessmen and entrepreneurs in Seattle is now holding a special symposium devoted to "international business management" in Tashkent along with Interprogress, a recently established firm based in Uzbekistan. Move over, Werner Erhardtov! Also, with the rumor of economic change in the air, social services have become hot issues, and Seattle area experts on child care and unemployment are set to visit Tashkent soon.

The flip-side of all this activity, of course, is just what Seattle gets out of Tashkent, aside from simply feeling good.

This is, admittedly, obscure. But the very fact that so much human and institutional contact now links Seattle and Tashkent cannot but augur well for the future of the sister-city relationship as well as for the important rapport between Moscow and Washington.

Well, enough for now—for the next installment I will be changing gears radically, and writing to you about the Kurds, in the hour of their misery and self-made plight.

Best Regards,

Thomas Goltz



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