Interview: Abdukhalil Razzakov

'Cooperation Should Be More Pro-active'

Professor Abdukhalil Razzakov of Tashkent State Economic University, Tashkent, Uzbekistan, provided these written answers to questions from EIR. *The answers have been translated from Russian.*

EIR: The plan to divert water from the rivers of Siberia to Central Asia is one of the most important potential "great projects" for the development of the Eurasian Landmass.

On history: You wrote in an article in June 2001, on the "Re-Routing of Siberian Rivers to Central Asia," that the proposal for such a great project was first made in the 1880s. Who made this proposal, and can you tell us more about it?

Razzakov: The idea to divert water from Siberian rivers to Central Asia emerged in 1868. It was authored by Y.G. Demchenko, an agronomist from Kiev. He first submitted to Imperial Russian Geographical Society a paper titled: "On Flooding the Aral-Caspian Lowlands to Improve the Climate." At that time, this issue was not pressing, and nobody saw the point in it. To improve the climate in the far reaches of Tsarist Russia was only of concern to a few.

Interest in this question grew considerably in the 1920s. During that period, the proposal to divert water to Central Asia was voiced in 1920 by D. Bukinich; in 1924 by N. Botvinkin; in 1927 by V. Monastirev and Z. Kirilets; and, in 1930 by A. Makarov. Every scientist proposed erecting dams on Irtysh, Ob, and Enisey rivers, and directing the water by its own flow through the Tugai Depression into Kazakstan and Central Asia.

An important new principle was put forward in 1936 by A. Muller. His plan envisaged that Siberian water would pass through the Tugai watershed not on its own, but with the assistance of pumping stations.

In 1947-54, the Hydroenergyproject Institute, headed by M. Davidov, prepared an initial technical assessment of such a diversion project, which included minor research and observation works.

The cultivation of new lands in Central Asia, and the gradual shrinking of the Aral Sea level during the 1960s, rendered this issue very urgent. The "Hydrovodhoz" and "Soyuzvodproject" institutes, under the leadership of I. Gerardi, proved not only the technical but also the economic viability of diverting part of Siberian rivers into the Aral Sea basin.

EIR: On the work of such Russian scientists as Aleksandr Fedorovich Middendorf and Vladimir Vernadsky, what have they written on this project? What Uzbek or other Central Asian scientists have worked on this?

Razzakov: Alexander Fedorovich Middendorf (1815-94) was a prominent Russian traveler and geographer who became famous after his big expedition to Northern and Eastern Siberia (1843-44), which produced rich scientific material. In 1876, the elderly Middendorf headed large expeditionary works in Central Asia, organized on the behest of Turkestan General-Governor K. Kaufman. Middendorf's expeditions devoted much attention to questions of cotton growing, irrigation, and so on. In 1880-81, he carried out research on the Ferghana Valley and wrote a book, titled *Ferghana Valley Notes.* In this book, he concluded that "Progress [in Central Asia] will inevitably stop, with [the] shortages of water and manure." These conclusions of the scientist have in fact been proved over time, and one could easily argue that Middendorf had a positive view on diverting parts of Siberian river water into Central Asia.

In Central Asia, including in Uzbekistan, over the last few years the cotton harvest has been shrinking, partly because of the shortage of water resources and particularly the decrease of soil humus.

Here we need to especially note, that interest in Central Asia had grown after the Civil War in the U.S.A. (1861-65). It is known that the war caused a substantive decrease of cotton imports to Russia. One of the most famous scientists of that time, Alexander Ivanovich Voeikov (1842-1916), studied at length the issue of water resources, cotton production, and irrigation (he visited Turkestan in 1912). He wrote: "Given the level of riches such as fertile soil and mild climate in Turkestan, it is time to expand irrigation works in the region. More water, which is not being used, and flows to the Aral Sea to simply evaporate into thin air, should be used for irrigation purposes. The Aral Sea should in time shrink and serve only as a sink for extra water in years with high levels of precipitation, and during low precipitation years, the whole body of water of the Amu and Syr Darya and their tributaries should be used for artificial irrigation."

The forecast of this academic has materialized, as the level of the Aral Sea has shrunk considerably.

EIR: There were well-developed plans in the Soviet Union, in the early 1980s. However, these were stopped for allegedly environmental reasons under Mikhail Gorbachov. Can you tell us more about why this important project was stopped? What was the political and economic impact in the Central Asian nations?

Razzakov: In the 1970s and 1980s, there already were thought-out projects for such water diversion. An All-Union Conference on this problem was held in 1978. The project of I. Gerardi was supported, and the following academics, among others, took the floor: G. Voropaev, director of the Water

Problems Institute; Academician A. Aganbegyan; and Academician S. Ziyadullaev.

It is worth noting that, along with the generally optimistic tone, somewhat pessimistic ideas were voiced in terms of the ecological consequences of the project. In order to make myself clear, it is necessary to describe what was envisaged under this project.

The "Tugai" option needed a 2,270-kilometer-long canal starting at Belogorye village on the Ob River and extending to the Amu Darya River in Karakalpakstan. The median depth of the canal should be 12 meters; width 120-170 meters. In the first stage, 25 cubic kilometers of water should be diverted; in the second stage, 60 cubic kilometers (or about 5-10% of Ob River flow).

Shrinking of the Aral Sea began in 1960. . . . Only in the 1980s did the real alarm bells for the dying sea start to toll. Now this problem has become international; it cannot be resolved by Central Asian states only.

According to G. Voropaev's assessment, the price tag of this canal was 13.8 billion rubles—i.e., each kilometer of the canal would cost 5.1 million rubles. The successful implementation of this project would result in development of 4.5 million hectares of new land, including 1.5 million in the Russian Federation, and 3 million in Central Asia.

However, during the years of *perestroika,* M. Gorbachev's rule—particularly in the period just before U.S.S.R.'s demise—the diversion works were suspended and later abandoned, because of sharply decreased attention to this issue. I believe that the following reasons played a significant role for such a decision.

First and foremost, was the situation in the country at that time. In the late 1980s, the economic situation worsened and resulted in protracted stagnation and crises, and, usually, in this kind of situation, these kinds of projects attract little interest. Second, was the demise of the Soviet Union and emergence of independent states. Everything had to be divided and nobody wanted to share. The third reason is nationalistic ambitions, as well as the effects of the creation of new independent countries.

In that period, there was a sharp increase of "ecological" statements and views by Russian writers, which opposed this diversion project. I would like to underscore this fact: These were *not* by scientists and academics.

According to the authors of the project, the diversion of a small part of Siberian river flow, should result in a positive outcome, such as the decrease of precipitation expenses and shrinking of horizons, and draining large marshes between the Ob and Irtysh.

Some academics (especially in the U.S.A.) were against this project because of fear that water intake might lead to decrease in the level of water in seaport harbors, which would hamper navigation.

However, during the last 50 years, the water in the world ocean has warmed up 0.06° Celsius, and ice at the poles of the Earth is melting. This would, consequently, lead to an increased sea level and devastating flooding. The area of large glaciers is gradually shrinking. Thus, contrary to what those Americans had said, the opposite might be the case.

EIR: Can you describe your own interest in, and work on this project?

Razzakov: I personally have a positive view of these kind of projects, because mankind, over thousands of years, has used artificial irrigation for redistribution and transportation of water resources, since land and water resources are distributed extremely unevenly. One can give lots of examples to support this claim.

But at the same time, I support a scientific complex approach to such problems; in orther words, I am for a "balanced approach." The main idea should be "do not harm," since extreme and not-thought-out interference in natural processes may cause unpredictable consequences.

Population growth and human development in general (1.2 billion live in poverty now) will always create a demand for these kind of projects. For instance, after the Siberian river diversion project had been abandoned, a new idea was put forward, foreseeing the diversion of the Hind (Indus) River to Central Asia. (The author of the project was Academician N. Khamraev.)

The Aral Sea tragedy, a multi-year drought in the region, and substantial decreases of agricultural production, have forced scientists and experts to reinvigorate the old idea. The Mayor of Moscow, Yuri Luzhkov, in 2001 raised the question of rehabilitation of the Siberian project. He talked about the commercialization of water resources.

EIR: Can you outline your view of how this project should be built, and in what time-frame?

Razzakov: I, too, think that this project has a right to exist. But to make it happen, the following factors loom large: the political will of interested parties; securing capital resources; creation of a single economic area; and throwing aside nationalistic ambitions.

In terms of time limits on implementing this project, I would say all Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS)

countries are going through a transition period. Only after the transition is complete, I believe, would it be constructive to initiate a dialogue on this issue. For now, the thrust of attention and efforts should be directed at rational use of existing water resources.

EIR: There are ideas, that pipelines, rather than an open canal, could be used to transport the water. Do you think this would be an appropriate method?

Razzakov: Along with irrigation and other relevant measures, any re-routing plan should envisage also amelioration measures (drainage), because in open canals (envisaged in the project), up to 50% of the water goes underground unused. This results in more marshy lands and secondary salinization of the soil, which gravely affects soil fertility.

Given this circumstance and technical progress, including emergence of new materials in irrigation-related construction works, experts prefer using pipelines, which is, of course, expensive; but as some say, the goal justifies the means. This idea might be very hard to implement, but, at least, a combination of open and closed methods of water diversion, depending on the concrete existing conditions in parts of the route, looks very feasible. Indeed, anti-filtration measures should be widely used.

EIR: My institute, the Schiller Institute, is committed to promoting the policy of "dialogue among civilizations," and that the claim of an inevitable "clash of civilizations" is wrong. Of greatest importance for this dialogue, is economic cooperation. Such great projects as diverting the Siberian rivers, could play a key role in Eurasia. It would benefit all Eurasia, including western China as well as Central Asia. It could also have a good impact in Russia, by promoting economic development of the nations of Central Asia. Can you tell me your views on this?

Razzakov: According to historical experience and economic theories, integration processes are a necessity and reality. The examples of the European Union and NAFTA are good examples of successful integration.

Regional integration initiatives in Central Asia include the establishment in 1993 of the Central Asian Economic Community (including all Central Asian countries except Turkilometersenistan, and which has been renamed and now is called Organization for Central Asian Cooperation), and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (consisting of China, Russia, and Central Asian nations except Turkilometersenistan). These regional groups should also concentrate on the issues of closer economic integration. There are other similar organizations. I think that, in fact, the proper mechanisms of cooperation and dialogue are taking shape.

However, now Central Asian and other former U.S.S.R. republics are preoccupied with political problems related mostly to fulfilling their ambitions (the main argument being whose model of economic development is better and who is the true leader in the region). Border demarcation has not taken place, and there are arguments over natural resources, including water—a God-given bounty!

During drought years, the water issue has became so acute, that it threatened to easily turn into a full-fledged conflict. Kyrgyzstan, located on the upper stream of the Syr Darya, sometimes releases water at its own behest at very inappropriate times, and stores water (at its Toktogul reservoir) during the active growing period (the other way is adequate, i.e., store water in Winter and release in Summer). Different countries (Turkilometersenistan and Uzbekistan) pursue the policy of "closed doors." For instance, import duties in Uzbekistan are very high (up to 70%).

These factors do not encourage the development of economic cooperation among the countries of the region.

Privatization of state property did not take place properly, and in many countries of the region, the state still holds the large share of industrial assets.

The stabilization of Afghanistan may result in its increased claims for water intake from the Amu Darya, as it may start building grandiose irrigation canals, which would further intensify the existing situation with regards to water resources in the region.

All these factors—political, social, economic, regional, and inter-regional—require their proper solution.

The project to divert Siberian rivers to Central Asia evolved at a time when the Aral Sea was not a problem. According to hydrologists (Prof. V. Shultz), shrinking of the Aral Sea began in 1960 (shrinking meaning that evaporation is greater than inflow). But at that time it was deemed a result of cyclical factors, and only in the 1980s did the real alarm bells for the dying sea start to toll. Now this problem has become international; it cannot be resolved by Central Asian states only. All efforts to resolve this problem should be consolidated with the assistance of such international organizations as the United Nations, the World Bank, IMF, UNDP, and so on. The diversion of the part of Siberian rivers would be very much to the point in terms of saving the Aral Sea basin—economic and ecological problems would be resolved.

I hold the view that for resolving this global problem, as peoples of Central Asia say, we need to have a worldwide *hashar. Hashar* is when friends, neighbors, and others come to help free of charge—to build houses, mosques, canals, schools, bridges, and to perform other public works.

The nations of Central Asia, located along the historic Great Silk Route, in the past played an important role in connecting East and West, Europe and Asia, economically, politically, and culturally. I think that now it is high time to rehabilitate "the dialogue among civilizations," which would also boost economic cooperation. There are already a few such projects (such as TRASECA), but that is not enough. Cooperation should be more pro-active and based on equality and mutual benefit.