

KYRGYZSTAN: A GEOPOLITICAL PORTRAIT

Murat SUIUNBAEV

*Assistant professor
at the Kyrgyz National University
(Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan)*

An analysis of Kyrgyzstan's geopolitical orientation requires first taking a look at its geopolitical portrait from the perspective initially understood by the founders of geopolitics.

Our country is located in the center of Eurasia a long way from the World Ocean (from 1,700 to 6,530 km), it is 453.9 km long from north to south, 925 km wide from east to west, and 199,900 sq km

in area. But the latter would be more if the folds of the Earth's crust, which form mountains, were smoothed out. The territory of Kyrgyzstan is approximately equal to the area of Portugal, Holland, Belgium, and Switzerland put together. Nevertheless, it constitutes only 5% of the territory of Central Asia, and 0.1478% of the planet's total area. The republic's population amounts to no more than 9% of the region's population and 0.08% of the Earth's population, and 6.5% and 0.0051% of the GDP, respectively. Forests cover 4.2% of our country's territory, water 4.4%, farmland 53.5%, and its border is 4,104 km long, 1,084 km of which it shares with China, 1,051 with Kazakhstan, 870 with Tajikistan, and 1,099 with Uzbekistan.

Kyrgyzstan occupies part of western ("Soviet") Tien Shan, and the eastern (larger) part of Tien Shan belongs to China. The highest elevation above sea level in Kyrgyzstan (Victory Peak) is 7,439 m, the lowest is 401 m (in the Liayliaksk District of the Batken Region), creating a difference in height of 7,038 m between the highest and lowest points, and an average elevation above sea level of 2,750 m. So 94.2% of the republic's territory is 1,000 m, and 40.8% is 3,000 m above sea level. More than 50% of the population settlements are located at elevations between 1,000 m and 2,000 m, in which 1,745,000 people live (36% of the population), while 240,000 people live at elevations above 2,000 m (approximately 5% of the population).

The territory of mountainous states does not form an integrated whole (as it does on flatland), it is characterized by intermittency and fragmentation. These gaps in space create gaps in time, which means backwardness. And time is money, so it can be said that for Kyrgyzstan, space is money.

Internal and external communication isolation is a factor of disintegration (also backwardness). The internal obstacles formed by the mountains are greater than the external, since toward the edges of the mountain systems they become lower in height. And indeed, it is more difficult to travel through Tyeye-Ashuu and Dolon than through Torugart or Santash. By the way, the Tyeye-Ashuu pass is located at 73°45' longitude and forms part of the "planet's scar." Due to its internal physical and geographical fragmentation, the dimensions of the republic's administrative territorial units (regions and districts) are smaller than optimal, which makes their management less efficient.

Whereas feudal fragmentation was a factor in leading to medieval Europe's backwardness, present-day Kyrgyzstan is held back by geographical fragmentation, and it was this that prevented it from creating a contemporary state in the 17th-19th centuries.

The centers of cordilleras are mountain plexuses (like Khan-Tengri), that is, by definition they are places least fit for habitation. The center of Kyrgyzstan (the village of Kochkorka) is not mountainous, but situated on flatland, since Kyrgyzstan occupies only part of western ("Soviet") Tien Shan.

The distance from Bishkek to Islamabad is 1,000 km. It is the same distance to Urumchi (the administrative center of the Xinjiang-Uighur Autonomous Region of China), which is one-and-a-half times less than the distance to Ashghabad. The distance from the town of Karakol to the Xinjiang town of Aksu (XUAR) is a little more than 200 km, but getting there in a straight line is nigh impossible. This is an indication of Kyrgyzstan's extreme external isolation. The cost of 90% of transport operations in the republic (by road) is 60-80-fold higher than most world (sea) shipments. Kyrgyzstan lies mid-way along the shortest air route between London and Singapore. The shortest route from Japan to Europe also passes through our country.

If supply lines (mainly by sea) are the center of the world economy, Kyrgyzstan is on the geo-economic outskirts. As we have already noted, 94% of the republic is occupied by mountains, only less than 6% is flatland, and the proportions of economic density and population density are essentially mirror opposites. A little more than 6% of the population lives in areas located at elevations higher than 3,000 m. The Naryn Region (approximately 1/4 of the country's territory) is composed entirely of high mountains, more than 80% of its population lives in rural areas, and the population density amounts to 1-5 people/sq km.

All natural zones inherent in the Northern Hemisphere can be found in the republic, apart from tropical. The countryside is characterized by fragmentation: not one of its elements occupies an area of more than 1% of the country's territory. (That is, we know nothing of endless desert, hummocky topography, etc.)

Szyrts (*szirt* in Turkish means raised platform, level or slightly undulating territory in the

mountains) are the high-mountain analog of the tundra. The cold climate makes them (and anything higher) of little use and expensive (due to the funds required to prevent natural disasters) from the geo-economic point of view.

In terms of natural and climatic conditions, no more than 30% of the republic is fit for permanent habitation, and only about 20% (plains and lowland) can be considered suitable or relatively suitable for living, which is where most of the country's population resides. And about 50% of its territory is occupied by mountains with elevations between 1,500 and 7,000 meters.

In West European countries, one square kilometer of territory provides 600-fold more GDP than in Kyrgyzstan. The following factors have a retarding effect on the republic's economic density: high transportation costs; low territorial efficiency; low and inconsistent levels of precipitation; extreme temperatures (high in the summer and low in the winter, average duration of the cold season is 188 days), which limit natural biological productivity; steepness of the mountain slopes, making farming difficult, and the risk of soil degradation is higher than in other places; high risk of damage from natural disasters.

Geo-economic Situation

All the regions and 34 districts (out of 40) of the republic are border areas. We border on the most developed part of Kazakhstan and on the backward regions of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and China. This is one of the reasons why the Chu Region is the most developed area of Kyrgyzstan. And Central Eurasia (CEA) largely borders on the most backward areas of Russia, China, Iran, and Afghanistan. It stands to reason that wealth does not come easy when surrounded by poverty.

Due to the climatic conditions, some enterprises, for example in Naryn, can only operate four months out of the year, which is how long the warmer season lasts and mineral water can be bottled without needing to heat the facilities. But above 2,700-2,800 m, there are no warm seasons. The per capita land quota has been decreasing in recent years due to the rise in number of people. For example, whereas in 1965, each person had 4.06 ha of farmland, 0.48 ha of which was tillable land, in 1995, this amount dropped to 2.4 and 0.32 ha, and in 2004, to 2.15 and 0.28 ha, respectively. What is more, our republic, which is located in one of the largest mountain systems on the planet, plays a key role in maintaining environmental stability in Central Eurasia. Kyrgyzstan accounts for more than 1/3 of the 120 cubic km of water that gathers in the Aral Basin, that is, the fate of its mountain ecosystems influences the life of the population not only in our republic, but in neighboring countries as well. The glaciers hold enough water to last for 13 years. This is capital, the value of which is higher than the riches of mineral ores. In this way, in terms of water, biodiversity, and emission of greenhouse gases, Kyrgyzstan is an international environmental donor. And in terms of per capita supply of local river runoff per year, it is way ahead of other states in the region.

But horizontally, the country's territory is caught between the dry deserts of Moinkum, Kyzylkum, and Takla-Makan; and vertically between flat dry and high mountain glacier deserts. Our highland can be likened to polar deserts, flatlands analogous to them are located 3,500 km further north, and our szyrts are tundra, whereby similar flatlands can be found 3,000 km further north (on Taimyr). Such deserts and tundra do not have many investment-attractive production units (and even the ones that do exist are concentrated close to sea ports).

The Mountain Economy: Nomadic Livestock Breeding, High-Risk Farming

The mountains are a source of water, that is, "raw material" for hydropower plants and irrigable farming, and create unique opportunities for developing tourism and alpinism (including of international

significance). Geopolitical factors predetermine the nomadic economy, and nomadic livestock breeding is not conducive to raising labor productivity. Today, for a stock-keeper, this index is essentially the same as it was two thousand years ago. For nomadic livestock breeding, in contrast to other spheres of activity, essentially does not lend itself to mechanization, chemicalization, and so on. It was only at the end of the 1930s that the republic underwent a mass transfer to the sedentary way of life.

As we have already noted, Kyrgyzstan is characterized by internal communication isolation. This is related to the fact that in mountain systems, not only rivers, but also roads radiate out from the center, and centrifugal routes make it impossible to create an integrated economic space. So the importance of the Bishkek-Osh highway is phenomenal, the North-South railroad currently being planned will also play a similar role. It is only 100 km as the crow flies from Bishkek to the center of the Jumgal Region, as well as from Talas to the center of the Chatkal Valley, and from Osh to the center of the Alai Valley, but covering this “short” distance of 100 km is an essentially impossible task.

In the past, Kyrgyzstan’s economy and transportation network was not planned or developed with the thought in mind that one day it would become an independent state. Whereas at present the country’s economy is largely a “fragment” of the Soviet military-industrial complex, the supply line infrastructure is a “fragment” of the transportation networks of the Great Silk Road. There are no contemporary high-speed routes between the capital and the main regional centers of the republic, roads pass mainly around the periphery of the country, or form its borders.

The mountains make most of Kyrgyzstan’s state borders impassable for commerce. The mountainous nature of the territory makes it difficult to develop, requires larger amounts of capital and current investments, and significantly raises the cost of imported and exported merchandise. The country’s internal isolation (again due to the mountainous conditions) is one of the reasons for its poverty, and poverty results from the absence of jobs, and unemployment results from the absence of investments. There are no investments because there are no roads for bringing in equipment and materials and for taking out the finished product; there are no means of communication for receiving commercial information, carrying out payments, and so on.

Tax on Neighbors

Apart from the official duties levied on the borders, there are also illegal charges, essentially “tax on neighbors.” For example, the cost of 1 kg of freight sent to Siberia includes 0.15-0.3 dollars in transit fees through Kazakhstan. Goods and services which are not transport-intensive are conducive to export, as well as goods which have competitive advantages over a similar product manufactured in the CEA states, Caucasus, and South Caucasus. (Transport-intensity is that percentage of transport outlays incorporated into the cost of 1 kg of freight.)

We do not have merchandise in volumes high enough to make an impact on the regional and world economy, such as oil, metals, grain in Kazakhstan, or gas, cotton, and gold in Uzbekistan. However, Kyrgyzstan’s diverse natural conditions make it possible to organize the manufacture of products that enjoy demand on the world market. Only individual unique production units in the republic are capable of competing on this market, while the others can only compete on the regional market. But the regional market (including in the XUAR) is also primarily agrarian, and the economic structure of our state has not any relative advantages here either.

If transportation routes are developed, Kyrgyzstan will be able to make an appearance on the markets of the Central Eurasian countries and China and will be able (if other conditions are favorable) to produce goods and sell them to its neighbors. By helping to shift the “center of gravity” of the region’s economic relations toward the East, the republic has the chance of transforming itself from a periphery of the region and the CIS into a CEA center. But the world market has essentially no idea of where Kyrgyzstan is situated. As we have already noted, the information gap (isolation) is leading to a time gap—backwardness. Kyrgyzstan’s commercial cooperation with a few other geographically distant republics

of the Commonwealth is largely determined by the inherited information factor (although it is already becoming weaker).

Kyrgyzstan is a depressed region of CEA, which is due to the republic's physical, political, transportation, and customs isolation, as well as the backwardness of the territories of China, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan on which it borders, and the similarities among our economic structures. Since CEA itself is a depressed region of Eurasia, Kyrgyzstan is a depressed part of Eurasia squared, and its high mountain and remote regions cubed.

In this way, Kyrgyzstan has to define its external priorities based on the country's geopolitical and geo-economic insufficiency.

Geopolitical Aspects of Foreign Policy and Foreign Economic Orientation

Whereas at the beginning of the 18th century, Russia needed a "window" to Europe, at the beginning of the 21st century, Kyrgyzstan needs a "window" to the Asia Pacific Region. In this respect (by replacing several sea basins with "dry" ones), we will permit ourselves a few free comparisons.

Russia of the 18th century	Kyrgyzstan of the 21st century
St. Petersburg	Naryn-Torugart
Finnish Gulf	Kashgaria
Baltic Sea	China
Atlantic Ocean	Pacific Ocean

So the Torugart pass is our "uncut window" to the APR. To the north of our country is politically friendly Kazakhstan; to the south—unstable Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Kashmir, and Xinjiang (Kashgaria); to the east we border on China, which has immense military and demographic potential; and to the west on overpopulated and unstable Uzbekistan.

Some neighbors have an image which puts our republic's people on the alert, or with whom past relations have been negative, or with whom there are unresolved interstate problems. Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and China are among those states of the "near abroad" which have a direct influence on life in Kyrgyzstan. Russia, Tajikistan, and Afghanistan have an indirect influence. Our nearest neighbors are the reasons for some of our problems, including territorial disputes, reduction in goods turnover, and conflict situations in border regions.

The ambitions complicit in rich natural resources (oil and gas) can make the behavior of certain states in the region dangerous for Kyrgyzstan. Here we need to take a closer look at the attitude toward Uighur separatism. It will be very difficult for Bishkek to live through another civil war in "our regional communal apartment." Nor should we forget that while China does not have any territorial claims against Kyrgyzstan, the Uighur separatist (nationalist) organizations do ... the Kyrgyzstan mouse should not be fearing the Eurasia lions—the RF and PRC, or the "small dragons," but the "cats."

Insufficient water for its cotton plantations is one of the problems which will influence the development of Uzbekistan and its relations with Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Bishkek has still not made full use of the water trump card in resolving its economic trade problems with Tashkent, but this does not mean that it will never use it. Uzbekistan-phobia is widespread among the national elites of the region's countries. But Uzbekistan's might is small compared with such regional powers as Pakistan and Iran.

Tashkent's striving to resolve significant territorial problems unilaterally and in violation of international law (in particular we will note the setting up of mines on several border sections) is making relations between the two countries tense. Procrastination in resolving delimitation and demarcation border issues is allowing the Uzbek economic entities to carry out expansion in the southern regions of our country where a large number of ethnic Uzbeks live. (But many of them clearly do not want to join forces with their blood brothers.) Unemployment and land shortage in the Ferghana Valley could provoke social upheavals. Uzbekistan's unresolved problems in national policy are also aggravating the situation in the country. And the borders are becoming all the more reminiscent of the Berlin wall.

As for Kazakhstan, it does not have any territorial claims against Kyrgyzstan, and there are close kinship ties between the Kazakhs and the Kyrgyz. Kazakhstan has rich natural resources and vast territorial expanses, but the shortage of electric power and water in the country's southern regions could make Kyrgyzstan of use to it in the future. The Kazakhs have been our allies in the past on more than one occasion. This alliance could be an integrating factor for all of CEA.

Cooperation with Dushanbe is not developing because Tajikistan has still not overcome the serious consequences of the civil war and its economy is in ruins. Its mountainous topography and proximity to Uzbekistan and Afghanistan are the Achilles' heel of this country. Nevertheless, it has long been maintaining economic trade relations with the southern regions of Kyrgyzstan. But unfortunately Tajikistan is currently delivering drugs to the southern regions of Kyrgyzstan. There are certain disputes between our countries on border issues and water use. They are still not urgent, but this is no guarantee that they will be resolved in Kyrgyzstan's favor (if stability in Tajikistan is strengthened).

Investors from the "far abroad" were scared off by the civil war in Tajikistan and the terrorist acts in Uzbekistan, so even from afar Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Afghanistan look threateningly close.

The Russian Federation is expecting an economic revival, its military-political return to the region, and the luxury of conducting an independent policy in it. At one time, Russia put a halt to British, and then Chinese, Kokand, and American expansion to Central Asia. Due to Kyrgyzstan and Russia's relatively identical socioeconomic development, they will long be economic partners, although for the same reason Russia will not be able to ensure a sufficient inflow of new technology and large investments into our republic. What is more, Moscow will long remain Bishkek's strategic partner in maintaining security. In recent years, however, Russia has been activating its military cooperation with Uzbekistan. Taking into account Tashkent's regional influence and Moscow's worries about Kabul, this trend will continue. Implementing the Great Silk Road and TRACECA projects will mean Russia losing its foothold in the region, and it will not be able to guarantee Kyrgyzstan's interests here on its own.

Central Asia is the least important area for Russia in the entire space of the former U.S.S.R. So the post-Soviet period is dictating the need to incorporate all of CEA into the sphere of Russia's trade and other relations, that is, not only Central Asia, but the XUAR as well. The centripetal development trends on this market, high transportation costs, and relatively high salary level in the Russian Federation are bringing about a gradual decrease in the percentage of Russia's traditional goods on the Kyrgyz market compared with the Soviet period.

By supporting economic development in CEA, Moscow and Beijing will maintain stability on both sides of the spheres of their interests, as well as strengthen their influence. The Russian Federation in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan on the border with Afghanistan, and the PRC in Kashgaria (politically the most unstable part of the XUAR) contiguous to Kyrgyzstan.

At one time, Russia made a very significant contribution to Kyrgyzstan's modernization, to the development of its culture, and to raising the level of education of the republic's population, that is, it did more in these spheres than a border country might expect. The Islamic model of development is unpromising and unacceptable to Kyrgyzstan, while incorporation into China's sphere is tantamount to being swallowed up in a human ocean.

The PRC is an economic giant trying to execute a smooth transition of its economic reforms into political transformations. At one time, China helped Kyrgyzstan to deal with the Arabs, Mongols, and

Jungars, while today the Celestial Kingdom needs Kyrgyzstan as a buffer to shelter the Chinese from Islamic extremism. But Beijing is still a “bronze prize winner” among Bishkek’s trade partners (at different times Uzbekistan, the FRG, and Switzerland were also in this category), after Russia and Kazakhstan. In 2003, the GDP of the XUAR was almost 20-fold higher than Kyrgyzstan’s GDP, and the goods turnover between Kyrgyzstan and the PRC in the same year amounted to more than 100 million dollars, 23 million dollars of which constituted our country’s export, mainly raw leather, wool (21 million dollars), metals, and items made from them.

The U.S. is showing a strategic interest in the CEA countries as a whole and in Kyrgyzstan in particular. At the moment, our country is the most dependent on the IMF, where the United States plays a leading role, and Washington could put pressure on regional leaders. But Russian and Chinese interests are not permitting an increase in American influence in the region.

Cooperation with the EU has several strategic advantages. For example, Germany is our largest trade partner outside the CIS. If the Great Silk Road and TRACECA projects are implemented, the European Union and China will become even more interested in the sovereignty and development of the region’s countries. The very concept of a “Europe-Asia corridor” reflects the idea of an advance in European economic interests into the Asian continent, including into our region.

Tokyo is Bishkek’s largest individual sponsor. Japan and Germany are the largest shareholders of the Asian Development Bank (ADB). Most grants and loans received from the ADB and World Bank are essentially Japanese money.

India is a member of the WTO and a nuclear power. By 2050, it will tear ahead in terms of population and become world market No. 1. The radical prerequisite for economic cooperation between Delhi and Bishkek—the Kyrgyzstan’s membership in the WTO—has been created, which makes it possible to lower the tariff barriers Kyrgyzstan encounters and turn it into the WTO’s outpost in Central Eurasia.

In this way, if we imagine the Earth as a high-rise apartment block in which we all live, our republic resides on the same floor as China, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan. (We used to live in the same apartment with the last three.) We live in the same entrance as Russia only on different floors, but in an entrance at a vast distance from the U.S., even in apartment buildings owned by different housing associations.

CEA is a buffer zone between the CIS and the APR. As part of this zone, Kyrgyzstan should have a flexible response to the trends on both sides, and it has to find an optimal balance between the northwest (CIS) and southeast (APR, and so on). Our state currently faces a choice: either to use Russia’s opportunities, by orientating itself toward developing diverse relations with other members of the CIS, or to cultivate the potential of the southern regions, by orientating itself both toward other Commonwealth republics and the APR countries. The second alternative is more difficult, its implementation requires a lot of time, and a comprehensive program of domestic and foreign policy will have to be drawn up, including keeping in mind the development of the XUAR. But the first path does not have a great future.

CEA may be the result of post-Soviet Central Asia’s self-identification. What is more, in all likelihood, “small integration” will be insufficient for the region, and the prospects for its “great integration” (identity) are being drawn up within the framework of the SCO. But “great integration” is made more difficult by the fact that Russian and Chinese territory is located next to CEA—Siberia and Xinjiang—respectively. The main vectors of economic activity of the latter are not directed toward Central Eurasia. What is more, the opportunity is arising for China to integrate not so much with the CEA economy as with its drug traffic and terrorism.

The future of the region’s long-term integration is seen in the framework of interaction with the EU (where Germany dominates) and ASEAN and the APR (where Japan dominates). But on the world arena, the political clout of these two major regional sponsors does not compare with their economic potential. However, in order for the region’s long-term integration to be effective, the CEA countries, including Kyrgyzstan, must make their contribution to reorganizing the U.N. As we know, Germany and Japan are not standing members of the U.N. Security Council, and the Central Eurasian states could help them to

gain this status, that is, support a corresponding resolution draft when it is put up for a vote. This will be just a small show of gratitude from the region's countries for the assistance they have received in their development. It seems that 60 years is long enough to close the political outcome of World War II.

Today, Central Eurasia is like a kindergarten without caregivers, in which the children want to, but cannot come to terms on a code of conduct. And the CEA countries need to enter a "kindergarten" where precise rules have been established, the WTO.