

CENTRAL ASIA AS A SPACE, POLITY, PEOPLES, AND FATE

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I n t r o d u c t i o n

The study of contemporary Central Asia encounters problems of ontology and conceptualization. Not only current scholarly works on Central Asia, especially after 11 September 2001, but also recent post-independence studies of the region lack adequate and strong scientific approaches. The spectrum of incorrect views on Central Asia ranges from assertions about Uzbekistan's expansionism and hegemonism in the region and a prognosis of the "Balkanization" of Central Asia to re-

jection of the applicability of the regional integration concept with regard to the five countries of the region on the grounds that their cultures and political systems are too different. What is more, most locals, that is, Central Asians themselves, have been carried away by the perceptual works Western scholars have presented to them and written about them.

What is Central Asia? For Westerners it is *there*, for locals it is *here*. Is it strictly definable? People have an idea of America, an idea of Europe, an idea of Eurasia, etc. Does anyone have an idea of Central Asia? I cannot help but recall Edward Said's research. An interesting methodological warning can be found in his *Orientalism* that as both geographical and cultural entities—to say nothing of historical entities—such locales, regions, geo-

graphical sectors as “Orient” and “Occident” are man-made. “Therefore as much as the West itself, the Orient is an idea that has a history and a tradition of thought, imagery, and vocabulary that have given it reality and presence in and for the West.”¹

I believe this kind of contemplation can be applied to Central Asia. It is not an attempt to replace all the lies with the truth, all the myths with real history, and all the conjectures and prejudices with stringent and absolute definitions of Central Asia. It is only an attempt to make up for the insufficiently positive approach to the region from the viewpoint of the historical predisposition of its countries and peoples to integration.

¹ E. Said, *Orientalism*, Vintage Books, New York, 1979, p. 5.

Central Asia as a Space

The 9/11 terrorist attacks gave the entire system of world order a terrible shakeup, and the world community was impelled to reconsider the very paradigm of international relations. Central Asia seems to have its own place and status in this paradigm.

The thing is that today more and more countries are expressing a strong interest in land communication between Europe and Asia, and the idea of a new Great Silk Road is becoming increasingly popular.

In the long run the role of Central Asia will increase as the creation of trans-Asian railroads, highways, and communication networks in Afghanistan open up new possibilities of reaching the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean. What is more, the creation and exploitation of the TRACECA transportation corridor, which joins the railroads and highways of five Central Asian and three Caucasian countries into a single network, will increase the transit capabilities, as well as improve the investment climate of the countries concerned.²

As Ross H. Munro pointed out: “A new Silk Road of modern railroads and highways that would effectively give China a land route far to the west, ultimately to Europe and to an Iranian opening on the Persian Gulf, would have enormous strategic consequences, possibly comparable to the impact that the advent of Suez and Panama Canals once had.”³

By Central Asia we mean the five newly independent post-Soviet states of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. These five countries are in themselves a vast region with a territory of about 4 million sq. km. and a population of about 55 million people. The region's geopolitical role is stipulated by its intermediate location between the Heartland and Rimland, an area of permanent clashes between the world powers. In the West, the region's natural frontiers stretch along the shoreline of the Caspian sea, in the East, along the Djungar Alatau mountain systems of Tien Shan, in the South, along the Khorasan mountains and rivers of Amu Darya, Panj, and Amrek, and in the North, along the edge of the Kazakhstan steppes.

² For more detail, see: *Tsentrāl'naia Aziā: geoekonomika, geopolitika, bezobasnost*, ed. by R. Alimov, Sh. Arifkhanov, S. Rizaev, and F. Tolipov, Shark, Tashkent, 2002.

³ R.H. Munro, “China, India, and Central Asia,” in: *After Empire. The Emerging Geopolitics of Central Asia*, ed. by J. Snyder, National Defense University Press, Washington, 1995, p. 130.

What is more, Central Asia is a unique region in the OSCE area. For the first time in OSCE history, it covers a region with not only a predominantly Muslim population, but also non-democratic countries in terms of their political regime. From this point of view, the question arises about the extent to which the region will comply with European values and standards of democracy and the extent to which it will retain its archaic Eastern paternalistic nature. Where is the region, in the East or in the West?

Central Asia is becoming a proving ground for testing the traditional theory of division of the world into East and West. It can be said that it is a form of new delimitation between East and West.

Central Asia as a Polity

The Central Asian states have been undergoing profound and comprehensive changes since they gained their independence. These changes largely embrace economic, social, political, military, cultural, and even ideological spheres. It is a very complicated process which can be described by the anything but simple concept of national state-building. This process goes hand-in-hand with that of proclaimed regional integration. In other words, the factor of national self-identification currently co-exists with the factor of unification.

It should be mentioned that in this part of the world certain supra-national integrative quasi-polities have always existed, such as the empires of Genghis Khan and Tamerlane, the Bukhara Emirate, the Kokand and Khiva khanates, Turan, Turkistan, the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union with its “Central Asia *and* Kazakhstan,” and all kinds of post-Soviet formations of the Central Asian Economic Commonwealth or CIS types. **Waves of integration and disintegration come and go to create a complex geo-socio-cultural-political tectonics of regional development in which the line between the national and the regional can barely be discerned.**

These very complicated circumstances became the reason for the misperceptions and misrepresentations of Central Asia and the overall transformation processes unfolding in the region. One such misrepresentation, to my mind, is Mr. Zb. Brzezinski’s theory of the “Balkanization” of Central Asia. Even a deeper analysis of such conceptions makes it impossible to accept this analogy. If any such analogy were possible, it would more likely be the “Afghanization” of Tajikistan, the most vulnerable Central Asia country to external threats from the beginning of the 1990s to 2001.⁴ However, ironically, it is not the latter scenario, but its exact opposite, which is taking place: a certain cultural and civilizational experiment is being observed nowadays in Afghanistan, which so swiftly, within just a year, jumped from medieval, brutal, and man-hating obscurantism to the status of a partner-country of the OSCE.

In this respect, Central Asia is quite a unique polity. From the very outset of the Commonwealth of Independent States, which replaced the Soviet Union, the Central Asia countries adopted the Treaties on Eternal Friendship as their first interstate documents. They acknowledged the then-existing former Soviet administrative boundaries between them as interstate borders, and declared that they do not have any territorial claims against each other.

At the same time, the Soviet legacy and general context of the processes within the CIS gave rise to one-sided Western perceptions of the newly independent states (NIS) as immanently weak and conflict-prone. Moreover, in many geopolitical research studies, Central Asia was usually regarded from the viewpoint of the well-known “zero-sum game” of external powers over the region. Perhaps the sustainability of such a conception predetermined the current expectation that the foreign policy orientations of the Central Asian states would be diversified, that this diversification would be negative in nature, and negative in a sense that it is being organized and formed on the basis of the traditional model of balance of power. Even such a phenomenon as nationalism in this part of the world was historically caused to a great extent by geopolitical processes and itself became a tool of the latter.⁵

⁴ See: F. Tolipov, «Certain Theoretical Aspects of Central Asian Geopolitics,» *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, No. 6 (12), 2001.

⁵ See: F. Tolipov, “Nationalism as a Geopolitical Phenomenon: the Central Asian Case,” *Central Asian Survey*, No. 2, 2001.

It should be noted that the concept of balance of power, both for external powers and for the Central Asian countries themselves, was stipulated by the fact that it is the most widespread and well-known model for building international relations at a stage when the formation of independent foreign policy of any NIS is inevitably accompanied by “time-tested” forms borrowed from the outside. Such elements of *ersatz-policy* have led to negative foreign policy diversification. What is more, the Central Asian countries found themselves in a situation of double balancing, so to speak: balancing the policy of external powers, on the one hand, and their exaggerated apprehension about the necessity to create a balance among themselves on a regional scale, on the other.

Balance of power policy should be rejected as an irrelevant conception of relations between and among Central Asian states, as well as between them and external powers. Instead, the current strategic task for the region is to encourage integrationist attempts and efforts. The only alternative to the integration policy is mutual isolationism.

Countries under consideration are predisposed toward developing their own common *integration model*. This requires sorting out their ideas about what they have, do not have, and should have, in which areas they are experiencing problems, and in which they have succeeded with respect to the all-embracing integration process. In other words, it is a question of assets, conditions, problems, and possible areas of integration. Briefly:

- *The assets of Central Asian integration are:* Common origin and history; recognition and official declaration from the very beginning of independence and in different forms of the Central Asian regional commonwealth; establishment of the Nuclear Weapon Free Zone in Central Asia; existence of regional multilateral formats of summits and dialogue mechanisms developed at the level of the Central Asian Cooperation Organization (CACO); creation of functional interstate institutions/consortiums; slow but continuous institutionalization of regional integration.
- *The conditions of Central Asian integration are:* Common trans-border challenges to regional security; specific geographical location of the region; mutual economic, social, and strategic dependence; pressure of post-Cold War geopolitical realities and formation of a new world order.
- *The problems of Central Asian integration are:* Information warfare; destructive geopolitics; exaggerated understanding of national interests; autocratic political regimes and weakness of democratic institutions; lack of confidence and mutual trust; different false apprehensions of so-called Uzbek hegemonism and the alleged struggle between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan for domination in Central Asia.
- *The areas of Central Asian integration are:* Common information, scientific, and socioeconomic space; a common market; rejection of the visa regime; de-mining of certain border sections; re-consideration of models of economic relations and foreign policy strategies; full implementation of Treaties on Eternal Friendship; setting up of a collective security system.

Central Asia as Peoples

Are the peoples of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan so different, even alien, that they have to discuss conflict prevention and crisis management between and among them? Certainly not; however, they have been forced to believe that they are, forced by the newly emerged geopolitical circumstances, which turned out to be the most negative outcome of independence and distorted their self-identification. These countries found themselves hostages of their own independence, which required inventing, shaping, constructing, and defending full-fledged statehood.

There is no doubt that crisis management and conflict prevention tools and mechanisms, as well as building up confidence among states and peoples have become one of the major trends of international politics in conflict-prone areas. This is acquiring even greater importance in the Central Asian countries,

since relations among them are increasingly affected by the geopolitical factor. Whereby the states' efforts to prevent conflicts will always be valued, since they demonstrate a permanent sign of their goodwill. "Ultimately, the content of confidence-building efforts may be less important than the process in instilling habits of cooperation that, over time, may result in greater understanding and increased levels of trust".⁶

From this point of view the "win-win" formula, which is an antithesis to the "zero-sum game," looks like the most valid one in the search for appropriate relationship models in Central Asia. This region is a single ecumene for all ethnic groups living in it. This is a positive factor. It is impossible to ignore the fact that the Central Asian countries and nations are interconnected and interdependent. Even their national self-identification cannot help but intermingle. The existence of a diaspora of each neighboring country and a number of enclaves in each of the countries is a reflection of this intermingling. Any search for a so-called national ideology should be complemented and, to be more exact, enriched by aspirations to create a regional ideology. In this sense nationalism and, so to say, supernationalism/regionalism co-exist and mutually complement each other.

This means that if ethnic pluralism within and cohesiveness of a particular country are of vital importance for national survival and prosperity, ethnic pluralism among and cohesiveness of countries are also vitally important for regional security and stability. The win-win strategy in this case implies that the national should never be pursued and put on the agenda at the expense of the regional, and vice versa.

On the other hand, the national self-determination process, in its traditional sense, is doomed to remain incomplete. Just as the region's division into five parts within the borders of the current republics was arbitrary and artificial, so any effort to conclude the building of nation-states based purely on an idealization of the traditional and outmoded concept of nationhood, state, and democracy will also be ineffective.

An analysis of the transformation processes taking place in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan reveals a national-regional dualism in their content, trends, and peculiarities. Therefore, the region's overall geopolitical transformation might be characterized as real revitalization and reinforcement of regionalism in Central Asia.

Unfortunately, scholars who study Central Asia very often overlook this factor. They mostly neglect the need for novel approaches to various intra-regional political issues which on the surface may typically look like national, or capable of producing ethnic tension and conflicts. The list of most "popular" issues of this kind includes, for instance, inequality among the Central Asian countries and peoples; Uzbekistan's intention to establish its own hegemony over the region; the struggle for leadership between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan; the struggle for natural resources and water; territorial disputes; ethnic tension, and etc. Independence has revealed the problem of stronger and weaker states in the region, and the problem of equal conditions and equal statuses. Those who are pessimistic about Central Asian regional unity are, deliberately or otherwise, playing up this problem. I see only one way to prevent exacerbation of this problem, namely equalizing the countries and peoples in one regional polity.

In this regard, cultural diversity among the peoples of Central Asia should not be understood as though they belong to different civilizations. They belong to the same civilization, and so political dialog develops between them within one civilization. I cannot help but recall our historians, who conclude: "We must remember that all the peoples populating Central Asia are descendants and heirs of the rich historical past of this huge center of world civilization."⁷ I would add "equal heirs."

Nevertheless, it is not so much cultural diversity that should concern us as the inappropriately constructed foreign policy diversification of the Central Asian states. Hence, we encounter a "cultural plural-

⁶ M.S. Pederson, S. Weeks, "A Survey of Confidence and Security Building Measures," in: *Asia Pacific Confidence and Security Building Measures*, ed. by Ralph A. Cossa, The Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington, DC, 1995 (quoted from: Susan L. Clark-Sestak, "Confidence and Security Building (CSBMs) in Central Asia: Trends and Prospects," in: *Conference on Regional Stability and Security in Central Asia*, Garmisch-Partenkirchen, 7-11 December, 1998).

⁷ D. Alimova, Y. Buryakov, M. Filanovich, "Ob'ektivnost v istorii—otvetstvennost za budushchee," *Uchiitel' Uzbekistana*, 28 July, 2003.

ism *versus* geopolitical pluralism” situation. Indeed, the concept of cultural diversity, or pluralism, serves as grounds for and the manifestation of peaceful coexistence of peoples and thereby undermines the differences and puts the stress on cohesiveness between them. Geopolitical pluralism, on the contrary, undermines cultural pluralism precisely because it puts the stress on differences and, thereby, serves destructive geopolitics.

Talking about such issues as borders, inter-state economic cooperation, and resolving the diverse problems of their relations, we usually limit our considerations to only state actors, while there are also so-called trans-border actors, who very often challenge the traditional activity of the former. They are people, families, business groups, professional nongovernmental organizations, and a number of others. Cultural and civilization differences have never been essential for them in conducting their trans-border way of life and activities in the Central Asian context.

In addition, I should remind you that all the Central Asian peoples have one feature in common: they are all composed of sub-national local communities which have their origin in ancient tribes, so that the respective nations as such can be symbolically divided into micro-communities. (Take, for instance, the Uzbeks, a nation that, by origin, is composed of more than 90 tribe-related communities.) The peoples of the region are not only divided within the region, that is externally. They are divided internally as well. And we can confidently conclude that these two forms of division actually reflect the same phenomenon, the genesis of a nation in a modern sense of the word.

But interestingly, such a division can be continued and extended from the micro- and macro-level to the mega-level. If the micro-level pertains to sub-national communities and the macro-level to the nation itself, the mega-level is associated with a super-national community. **The sub-national, national, and super-national coexist simultaneously!** And it is the same people.

Central Asia as Fate

Fate for me is not the imaginative thinking of a fatalist. By fate I mean not simply fortune or misfortune. It is not only a state of affairs. It is also the future which is being built, and should be built.

From the viewpoint of “searching for the future,” we should ask whether Central Asia be a common home for the people living in it? Will they share a common fate by creating a common market and common democracy? What is and will be the correlation between Islam and secular statehood in these countries? Will the idea of pan-Turkism shape their future destiny?

It seems that the same answer to all these questions can come from the option the Central Asian peoples have chosen, which is reflected in the principle “Central Asia first!” It means the expediency and urgency of drawing up a common regional strategy regarding the key intra-regional and inter-national developments. They must deliberately refrain from straightforward and shortsighted attempts to create a pure national model for everything—statehood, democracy, the socioeconomic system, and especially security. Any search for a national model of democracy should be replaced with the search for a democratic model of the nation. Otherwise, the isolationistic justifications of autocratic regimes will always be advanced.

Prof. S. Huntington in his brilliant book rightly notes that after the collapse of communism the view was reinforced in the West, especially in the U.S., that its ideology of democratic liberalism had triumphed globally and hence was universally valid. However, the dominant attitudes toward these Western values in non-Western cultures range from widespread skepticism to intense opposition. “What is universalism to the West is imperialism to the rest.”⁸ In our case, I guess, we are not talking about the incompatibility of Western and Eastern values, but about the unwillingness of certain dominant political forces in Central Asian countries to incorporate democracy, which by-and-large is not a Western invention.

⁸ S. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, Touchstone Books, New York, 1997, p. 184.

Central Asia is undemocratic not because democracy is alien; on the contrary, its countries are not democratic because they are isolated from each other. D. Mitrany was quite right when he said that social activity in the region, in the broadest sense of the word, is cut off by state frontiers and may (or may not) be combined with similar activities beyond the boundaries with the help of “uncertain and cramping political ligatures.”⁹ When social activity (which by nature can spread beyond state frontiers) is cut off at the randomly drawn borders, this is tantamount to dismemberment of national self-identification, an effort to strengthen national specificity that leads nowhere.

The “Central Asia first” principle implies that everything—security, survival, the sociopolitical structure, well-being, and values—should be, so to speak, nationally-regionally defined.

Jean Monet, one of the great founding fathers of united Europe, once wrote that there would never be peace in Europe if states were revived again on the grounds of national sovereignty, which leads to the policy of prestige and economic protectionism. The European countries are too small to secure the possible and needed degree of their peoples’ well-being. He warned that well-being and necessary social development are inconceivable without a European federation which would form their economic unity.¹⁰ The same deliberations can rightfully be applied to Central Asia.

We should recognize that the national division of Central Asia carried out in the 1920s-1930s, which placed rigid limits on the economic and social development of the republics, was erroneous.¹¹ Therefore, reunification is a timely and strategic task. It is also a way to overcome inequality, as was mentioned above.

Equalization of the countries concerned, that is, integration, not only creates a new status-quo, a club of equals, but also reduces the potential for the separatism, irredentism, mutual suspicion, mistrust, and rivalry which can be aroused by ethnic tension. Thus, integrationist political equality is a precondition and prerequisite of equality among multiethnic societies.

Fate divided the Central Asian peoples into several states. And divided, they were persuaded that they need a mediator in their newly emerging disputes, they need help, foreign security assistance, including a foreign military presence. Now they must reshape their fate. Their readiness to help themselves and prevent crises in their relations, as well as their desire to resist common security threats together and build a common regional home are prerequisites of a respectful attitude toward the Central Asian countries by external powers. Central Asian integration should not be merely good will, but should be widely and democratically discussed, nurtured, planned, constructed, and secured. It is the historical responsibility of the governments, nations, and peoples.

“The independence of each Central Asian country will be more valuable based on the principle of cooperative development; otherwise there will be greater risk of losing more and finding oneself on the periphery.”¹² Peripheral development, weakness, and division plus wrong stereotypes and misperceptions of Central Asia (what E. Said may have called “Central Asianism”) will inevitably require a certain foreign peacekeeping presence. Paraphrasing the author of *Orientalism*, we can assume that in the worst case “Central Asianism” will be successfully accommodated to the new imperialism, whereby its ruling paradigm does not contest, but even confirms, the continuing imperial design to dominate Central Asia.

C o n c l u s i o n

The new studies of the Central Asian political processes are dominated by conscious or unconscious views of the overall relations among Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan,

⁹ D. Mitrany, *The Functional Theory of Politics*, London School of Economics and Political Science; Martin Robertson and Co., London, 1975, p. 118.

¹⁰ See: H. Kohl, “Die Europäische Gemeinschaft.—Bilans und Perspective,” in: *Europe—unsere Zukunft*, Herford, 1989, S. 21.

¹¹ See: *Razvitie mezhetnicheskikh otnosheniy v novykh nezavisimyykh gosudarstvakh Tsentral’noy Azii*, Ilim Publishers, Bishkek, 1996, p. 201 (see also: S. Kushkumbaev, *Tsentral’naia Azia na putiah integratsii: geopolitika, etnichnost, bezopasnost*, Kazakhstan Publishers, Almaty, 2002, p. 75).

¹² S. Kushkumbaev, op. cit., p. 146.

as well as their foreign policy strategy, through the prism of the balance of power. However, we very often overlook the fact that a destructive policy regarding the balance of power is turning the region into a buffer zone between the global superpowers and causing it to lose its independence. Yet Hans Morgenthau warned: "The more intimately a local balance of power is connected with the dominant one, the less opportunity it has to operate autonomously and the more it tends to become merely a localized manifestation of the dominant balance of power."¹³ The apprehension over such a would-be perspective should impel the Central Asian states to avoid it and resist it by means of unification.

Meanwhile, new geopolitics is arising in this part of the world which implies that Central Asia must play its own role in the international system and world politics. 11 September merely accelerated this process. And scholarly works reveal again the problem of theory: we are simply observing the passage from old stereotypes and prejudices to new ones. Various widespread analytical speculations, official statements, public suspicions, and allegations about the newly established American military-political presence in Central Asia can prove this thesis.

Public opinion, knowledge, and perceptions of international relations are very often limited to such oversimplified "pro-" or "anti-" dichotomy, or to the idea that "military-economic power necessitates hegemony-prone politics," that the typical balance of power frameworks appear to be the only theory that was demanded and accepted. The adherents of this theory, and they constitute the majority, constantly repeat the phrase about Russia's domination of Central Asia, which is currently being replaced by the alleged American domination.

At the same time, the new Central Asian library is only just getting to its feet. Due to the new discovery of the region, "Central Asianism," like "Orientalism," as a system of knowledge, needs renovation. The leading idea for this renovation might be the thesis that "the notion that there are geographical spaces with indigenous, radically 'different' inhabitants who can be defined on the basis of some religion, culture, or racial essence proper to that geographical space is a highly debatable idea."¹⁴

¹³ H.J. Morgenthau, *Politics among Nations. The Struggle for Power and Peace*, Alfred-A-Knopf, New York, 1985, p. 219.

¹⁴ E. Said, *op. cit.*, p. 5.