

# Rediscovering Central Asia

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The expression 'Central Asia' has been in use for about a century and a half and has been known mainly by aficionados of 19th-century travelogues, or students of the history of the so-called Great Game played between the British and the Russians in the second half of the 19th century. For the larger public of our times, there has been barely any political substance connected with the name. Luckily, or unluckily (it depends on one's point of view), since the fall of the Soviet Union the situation has changed drastically, and 'Central Asia' has become more widely known by journalists, a wider public and even by the civil servants working in various ministries of foreign affairs. A further and significant increase in the role played by Central Asian states in world politics occurred in the wake of a successful raid undertaken against the United States on 11 September 2001 by a group of young men with no connection to Central Asia. The attackers, usually referred to as terrorists, were all Arabs. Other Arabs and people of other nationalities, including British and American citizens, were trained for further attacks in Afghanistan, thus providing a pretext for the overthrow of the odious regime of the Taliban which then ruled over that country. Cooperation between the United States and Uzbekistan greatly facilitated their rapid defeat and a wider public became aware of the whereabouts of the river Amu-darya and of Uzbekistan.

The Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) created in December 1991 encompasses several of the former Socialist Soviet Republics (SSR), among them the newly independent republics of Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, and Kirgizstan (see Figure 1). Together they constitute what may loosely be called present-day Central Asia. Although all of them have a multi-ethnic and multilingual population, the titular language of Tajikistan is Iranian, while that of the other four republics is Turkic. In Soviet usage, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan constituted Middle Asia (*Srednaya Azija*) which then did not include Kazakhstan.

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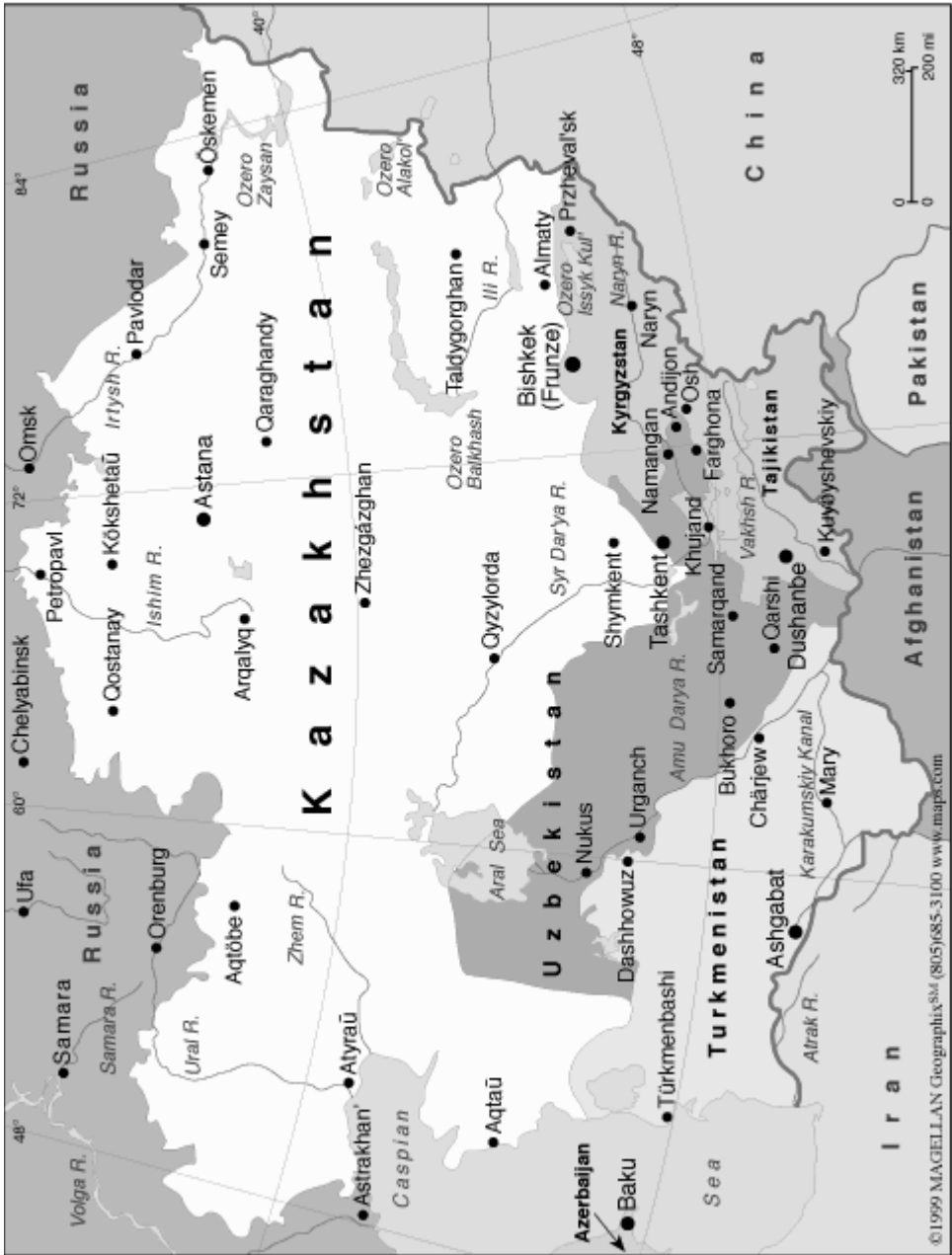


Figure 1. Central Asia

In January 1993 the presidents of the five CIS Central Asian republics agreed to rename their region Central Asia (*Central'naja Azija*) in Russian, along with its parallel in the titular languages.<sup>1</sup>

All of the above-mentioned states have but a short history. The tribal conglomerates which form their respective cores emerged as more or less distinct entities following the disintegration of the Mongol Empire in the second half of the 14th century. However, the cradle and power-base of Mongol power lay in Mongolia proper, outside the borders of Central Asia just indicated. So, however briefly, we must now expand the limit of our horizon to cover an area much wider, one which we may call Central Eurasia.

A cursory glance at any map of Eurasia, the biggest continuous landmass in the world, comprising Europe as well as Asia, will show that the major sedentary civilizations – i.e. in loose terminology Europe, the Middle East, the Indian Sub-continent, South-East Asia and East Asia all resting on an agricultural economic base – developed on the periphery of the huge continent. Surrounded by them, in the central part of the Eurasian continent, and distinct from the great sedentary civilizations in their historical role and comportment, lies the cultural area of Central Eurasia. For the purposes of this presentation it can be defined to include the focus of this paper, namely Central Asia proper (which comprises the above-mentioned CIS states), Mongolia, Manchuria, Siberia, and Chinese Turkestan.

Central Eurasia is a scholarly, literary term; no native of the region would ever refer to himself or herself as 'Central Eurasian' and no Mongol from Mongolia is likely to have a priori a feeling of solidarity with, say, a Turkmen.

From the physio-geographical point of view Central Eurasia can be subdivided into four natural zones.<sup>2</sup> The northernmost among them, the *tundra*, borders the Arctic Ocean and is for the most part an Arctic wasteland with an extremely low population which has played no noticeable part in world history. A somewhat larger, at any rate traceable role in history was played by the inhabitants of the second zone, a continuous belt of forests often referred to by its Russian name *taiga*, which extends from Scandinavia to the Sea of Okhotsk. The principal occupation of its inhabitants has been reindeer herding and hunting and their modest role in history is limited to interaction with the inhabitants of the grasslands of the steppe lying further to the south.

The third zone, the *steppe*, constitutes a narrow band extending from the lands north of the Black Sea to central areas of Mongolia and further on to the plains of Manchuria. This virtually continuous cover of grasslands was the home, the economic and power base, of the great nomad empires which, from the 2nd century BC up to the end of the 14th century AD played an important role on the scene of Eurasian history. The lush grasses of the steppe allowed horse-breeding on a scale unequalled elsewhere and, in its turn, the abundance of horses led to the development of a sophisticated cavalry warfare unknown and impracticable beyond the perimeter of the steppe. In a rather simplistic way it could be said that, until the introduction of firearms, and as long as there was pasture on which the multiplicity of their horses could feed, a well-led army of a strong nomad empire was virtually invincible by the armies of the sedentary world. The westernmost regions of the

steppe-belt supported the military might of the Huns, the Avars and finally the Hungarians, the last nomadic invaders of Europe. When pushing further into the European heartland their efforts petered out for lack of the abundant pastures which could have provided the logistic support for their armies.<sup>3</sup> On the eastern end of the steppe-belt the pastoral nomads were more successful. In the last two millennia, with some accommodation to the constraints of the physical environment, the Central Eurasian peoples of the Khitan, the Tangut, the Mongol, and the Manchu were able to establish their own dynasty in China. Steppe-power – if I may be allowed to coin this term – culminated in the 13th century with the creation by Chingis Khan of the great Mongol Empire ranging east to west from China to Hungary and bordering in the south on the sedentary, essentially urban Iranian world. Between it and the steppe lies the fourth natural zone of Central Eurasia, that of the *deserts* ranging from the Caspian Sea to the eastern edges of the Gobi, the land of Central Asia, strictly speaking.

'Desert' is a forbidding word evoking the sandy solitudes of the Sahara, but the desert zone of Central Asia 'can also be described as a "sedentary zone," the area in which, in the course of history, all the rural and urban populations were located'.<sup>4</sup> In the earlier historical periods inhabited mainly by populations speaking an Iranian language, probably from the 7th or 8th centuries onward, the region was gradually turkicized and the people of Afghanistan and Persia began to refer to the land north of them under the name of Turkestan or Turkistan, i.e. the land of the Turks. Usually a distinction is made between western (formerly Russian) and eastern (Chinese) Turkestan, the two being separated by the towering mountain-chains of the Pamirs. The present interest of the western world is principally focused on western Turkestan.

There is thus a fairly homogeneous belt of Muslim and mainly Turkic populations along the southern and also part of the eastern border of what used to be the Soviet Union. It comprised about 350 miles of Soviet–Turkish, 1250 miles of Soviet–Iranian, 1200 miles of Soviet–Afghan border, a total of about 2800 miles, to which one should add almost 2000 miles of the Soviet–Chinese border along which are settled the Turkic-Muslim peoples in the Xinkiang region of the People's Republic of China.

In the middle of the 16th century, under Tsar Ivan the Terrible, an aggressive Russia expanding to the Caspian Sea became the immediate neighbour of this Turkic belt. Interestingly enough, it was an Englishman, Anthony Jenkinson, who established the first semi-official contacts between the tsar and the Central Asian khanates. A representative of the English Muscovy Company, he was in search of a land route to China and in 1558 he sailed down the Volga to the eastern shore of the Caspian Sea where he started on his arduous journey to the city of Urgench, the principal city of the Turkmen. According to Jenkinson they were nomadic bandits, who constantly robbed caravans and were nearly always at war among themselves.<sup>5</sup>

In the course of the 16th and 17th centuries Russia became the most important trading partner of the Central Asian khanates, namely Khiva, Bukhara, and Khokand. Their names are reasonably familiar to a wider public. In Khiva, the Khungrat dynasty established in 1770 secured a certain stability but in 1873 had to accept Russian protectorate. Russian interference in the internal affairs of Khiva was quite limited but the territory under Khivan rule was considerably reduced. From 1550 to

the Russian Revolution, with brief interruptions, the Uzbek Sheybanids ruled over Bukhara. The life-span of the independent khanate of Kokand was rather short, ranging from the early 19th century to 1876, the date of its incorporation into the Russian empire. All three of these khanates were essentially Uzbek states, i.e. their principal language was Uzbek. They are now part of Uzbekistan, of all the Central Asian republics the most civilized and the most sophisticated.

Politically, if not ethnically and linguistically, Uzbek power – like virtually all power in Central Asia – received its legitimacy from the Mongols. An important conglomeration of tribes became known as Uzbeks (Özbek) from the name of their khan Özbek (1313–41) who united them. Uzbek mentality cannot properly be understood without considering their history and – more particularly – the fact that they view themselves as heirs not only to their own history but also to that of the territory they conquered. In this respect Uzbek national and historical consciousness is somewhat similar to British mentality, which prides itself upon its Celtic, Roman, Anglo-Saxon and Norman heritage. Though many aspects of Iranian civilization have deeply influenced their culture, the majority of the Uzbeks are Sunnites and thus in opposition to Shiite Persia.

Beginning in the 15th century, with the increased use of maritime routes controlled by Europeans, the trans-continental caravan trade which had brought prosperity to the region declined. By the 18th century Central Asia, bypassed by progress, was in the trough of a period of political, economic and cultural decadence.

The power vacuum was to be filled by the Russians' penetration, greatly facilitated by the internal struggles of the peoples of the region. The general impression that the tsarist endeavours proceeded according to a deliberate plan of conquest does not correspond with the facts. Of course there was – in the minds of some – a 'manifest destiny' attitude, an urge to move forward into what was almost a political no-man's-land. In 1864 the tsar's chancellor Prince Gorchakov, in a memorandum addressed to other states, explained it in the following way:

The position of Russia in Central Asia is that of all civilized states which come into contact with half savage wandering tribes possessing no fixed social organization. It invariably happens in such cases that the interests of security on the frontier and of commercial relations compel the more civilized state to exercise a certain ascendancy over neighbours whose turbulence and nomadic instincts render them difficult to live with.<sup>6</sup>

The Russians proceeded along two main axes: they tried to secure the eastern borders of the Caspian and, at the same time, they were pushing east along the Sir-darya. The decision to advance beyond the Sir-darya into Turkestan towards China, Afghanistan and Persia was not taken without a great deal of argument. Tashkent was occupied, some say contrary to the wishes of the Russian government, in 1865 by General Cherniaev, who gained the respect and affection of the population, but their attitude was very different towards General A. P. von Kaufman, the first incumbent (1867–82) of the Governor-Generalship of Turkestan established in Tashkent in 1867. The Russian advance was partially motivated by the Russians' increased need for cotton, the importation of which from America had been interrupted by the Civil War. In fact American seed was imported to improve the local strain. Cotton production created an economic boom in the Ferghana valley and

Count Pahlen, who visited Khokand on his inspection tour undertaken in 1906–8, compared the building of its European quarter, dominated by ‘cotton kings’, to that of an American mining city.<sup>7</sup>

The aims and the methods of these conquests may have been typical of any western power. The handling of the conquered populations differed. Let me cite two testimonials to this effect, both coming from Englishmen. S. S. Hill, an English traveller in Siberia in the 1840s, noted with approval that ‘the terms of the Russian contact with the wild man are free from the ferocity of that of the Spaniards, and from the uncompromising character of that of the English’.<sup>8</sup>

More weight is carried by an extraordinary characterization of the Russian advance by its great opponent, the future Lord Curzon.

The Russian fraternises in the true sense of the word. He is guiltless of that air of conscious superiority and gloomy hauteur, which does more to inflame animosity than cruelty may have done to kindle it, and he does not shrink from entering into social and domestic relations with alien or inferior races. His own unconquerable carelessness renders it easy for him to adopt a *laissez-faire* attitude towards others, and the tolerance with which he has treated the religious practices, the social customs, and the local prejudices of his Asiatic fellow-subjects is less the outcome of diplomatic calculation than it is of ingrained *nonchalance*.<sup>9</sup>

The Russian conquest of Central Asia is a conquest of Orientals by Orientals, of cognate character by cognate character. It is the fusing of strong with weaker metal, but it is not the expulsion of an impure by a purer element.<sup>10</sup>

Depending on one’s temperament, the reference to ‘inferior races’ may give rise to a feeling of outrage, disbelief, or even an indulgent smile – it is so alien to our present public discourse. But the fact remains that in a comparison between British and Russian colonizing attitudes, Curzon conceded that the balance favours the Russians.

Though the Russians greatly contributed to the material welfare and security of the population and showed much religious tolerance, the relationship between native populations and Russian settlers was not devoid of tension. This also caused a considerable headache to the Russian administrators, for whom ‘a single Russian village was a source of more trouble than a few hundred native settlements’.<sup>11</sup>

The ferment of the Russian revolution of 1905 expanded into the Central Asian regions, affecting mainly railway workers, the military, and a small segment of the budding Russian-speaking intelligentsia. Some ten years later, in the summer of 1916, the situation became far uglier in response to the tsarist decree mobilizing non-Russians for non-combat service in the First World War. The rebellion was put down but the situation prevailing in Turkestan and the steppe region at the beginning of 1917 was ripe for a revolution of much larger dimensions. Yet the mostly Turkic, Muslim, almost totally illiterate population of the region was unprepared for the creation of a modern state. The spark that set the region ablaze was to come from Russia.

After Kerensky’s ‘February’ revolution (1917) there were various attempts among the Muslim populations to move towards unity. The ‘October’ Revolution gave new

impetus to these movements, which were received with sympathy by the Russian revolutionaries. One of the first acts to be performed by the new regime was the establishment on 9 November 1917 of the People's Commissariat of Nationalities (*Narkomnats*). On 15 November 1917 the newly formed Soviet Government declared the right to self-determination, including secession, of all the peoples of Russia. On 3 December, the Council of the People's Commissars issued an 'appeal to the Muslims of Russia and the east' which showed remarkable tolerance towards Islam. At the end of January 1918, a few days following the creation of the Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic (RSFSR), decrees issued by Lenin and Stalin established a special Commissariat for Muslim Affairs.

Because of the Civil War and Allied (mainly British and French) interventions, communications between Turkestan and the Bolshevik forces were disrupted, but with the help of local, mainly Russian, communists, in January 1918 the Fourth Regional Congress of Turkestan Soviets, meeting in Khokand, proclaimed the autonomy of a Turkestan republic. But mere declarations serve little purpose if they are not followed by vigorous action. Let me illustrate this point by a brief description of what happened in Bukhara, where a native modernist party, the Young Bukharans, decided to attempt a reform against the tyrannical emir. Two hundred Young Bukharans, reinforced by a handful of Red Guards dispatched by the Tashkent Soviet, went to Bukhara to deliver an ultimatum to the emir. In Geoffrey Wheeler's description:

This attempt was repulsed by a fanatical mob stirred up by the mullahs . . . The Emir, who in April 1917 had issued a manifesto promising limited reforms, now treated the Young Bukharans to a reign of terror. At the same time, he declared a Holy War on the Russians and tore up large stretches of the railway track to prevent a second Soviet invasion. He also concluded agreements with Persia and Afghanistan for the supply of arms and made contact with other counter-revolutionary organizations including the Basmachis, and also with the British forces in Persia.<sup>12</sup>

A similar situation obtained in Khiva where, up to the Revolution, the Uzbek sedentary population had been protected from Turkmen depredations by the presence of a small Russian garrison. When it was evacuated 'early in 1918, the Uzbeks were left at the mercy of the Turkmen raiders, whose leader, Junayd Khan, now instituted a campaign of terror and wholesale plunder'. A small party known as the Young Khivans, modernist in its outlook, now appealed to the Soviet Government, and in January 1920 a small Red Army force of some 800 quickly drove Junayd Khan and his forces into the Karakum desert.<sup>13</sup>

Soviet political control of Central Asia occurred in a period of deep internal turmoil bred from the conflict . . . between two groups of Central Asian elites: the modernizers (Jadidists) and the traditionalists (Kadimists) . . . many among the Jadidists came to regard the Russian revolution as a harbinger of modernity.<sup>14</sup>

By the first half of 1920 several Turkic Soviet Republics had come into being. The time was deemed ripe to convene in Baku 'The First Congress of the Peoples of the East' (1–8 September 1920), attended by some 800 delegates. Until that time the

Bolsheviks (Lenin and Stalin) had handled the Muslim question with considerable skill. The Baku Congress almost undid what had already been accomplished. As could be expected, most of the participants were mullahs, who listened in bewilderment to the harangues of three Jewish atheistic intellectuals (Zinoviev, Radek, Kun) attacking Islam and Muslim religious institutions. The Baku Congress did accomplish its purpose of stirring up the Muslim peoples, but not in a manner envisaged by the Soviets. Compared to Zinoviev's undiplomatic outbursts, the attitude adopted by Lenin and Stalin was one of great moderation.

Turkic intelligentsia all over Central Asia had strong attachments to Turkey somewhat similar to Jewish feelings for Israel. The almost simultaneous collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the Caliphate was deplored by many but did not lead to a severance of the ties of solidarity. Conversely, to at least some Turks from Turkey, Central Asia represented the hope for the future, the source of rejuvenation, a return to the Turkic roots of the Ottoman culture saturated with Arab and Persian elements. Among their number was Enver Pasha, at the outbreak of the First World War deputy commander of the Ottoman army. Early in 1920 he went to Moscow and in September attended in Baku the aforementioned Congress of the Peoples of the East. After his arrival in Bukhara in October 1921 Enver joined the budding nationalist movement of the Basmachi, to whom he brought much needed military expertise. He was killed on 5 August while leading a cavalry counter-charge against a superior Russian force. Slowly the Basmachi movement petered out and by 1927 Soviet physical control over the five republics that were to constitute Soviet Central Asia was complete. Neither Lenin nor Stalin seems to have taken seriously the danger of pan-Turkism, a force which again has become one to be reckoned with in the post-Soviet era. The first contacts between the RSFSR and Atatürk's Turkey were friendly; on 16 March 1921 the two states concluded a treaty of friendship.

The Great Purge reached Central Asia in 1937 and, if one may say so, it was non-discriminatory, though its first victims were accused of nationalism on trumped-up charges. It is probably safe to say that in the gulags the Central Asians were represented in proportion to their share of the total population figures.

In the Second World War, all in all, the Central Asians supported the Soviet war efforts. While in the West the First World War dealt a devastating blow to civilized standards and opened up an era of political violence in which we still live, such conditions have always been endemic in Central Asia and not even the excesses of Stalinism seemed to be out of the ordinary. After the Second World War, and mainly during the Khrushchev era (1953–64), important changes began to occur and it is safe to say that the time that has since elapsed constitutes a period of peace unprecedented in the whole recorded history of the region. Slowly but surely, without having resorted to the excesses of affirmative action as practised in the United States, the native populations were educated, literacy became general, an intelligentsia sharing both the local and western culture was formed, and modern technicians of all sorts were trained to serve their own people. There were no shortages of food and if the choice in consumer goods was not on a par with, say, that of Western Europe, it satisfied local demands. To be sure, the hospitals which provided free medical care to all were not comparable to western facilities. Even so, towards the end of the Soviet period the Uzbek infant mortality rate was more favourable than that of the



black population of the United States. Today it stands at a frightening 71–2/1000. The human condition is never idyllic but it is certain that for the vast majority of the people the material living standards of the Central Asian populations were higher than those of Iran, Afghanistan, India, Pakistan or Bangladesh. As for civil liberties or human rights, well, there was not much to be envied in neighbouring countries such as Khomeini's (or the Shah's) Iran, Iraq or Syria. In looking across the border, or even somewhat beyond to the other countries of the Third World, any reasonable Central Asian could only be pleased to live in the Soviet Union. In the referendum of 17 March 1991 on the Soviet Union's future, with majorities of over 90 percent, the populations of the Central Asian republics voted to preserve the Union.<sup>15</sup> None of them had taken any steps to break away. Most people in the republics were also proud to be citizens of a superpower. As we well know, the diminished international status of Russia is widely resented by its population.

It is beyond doubt that the overwhelming majority of the Central Asian population feels or felt a sense of gratitude towards the Soviet system by which – through Gorbachev's incompetence – it has been betrayed and abandoned. The declarations of independence by the republics have been mostly prompted by the desire to sever ties with the Moscow reformers gone berserk and to ensure that business can go on, more or less, as before. This explains why former leaders of the Communist Party have been elected to presidencies and other important posts. The republics seceded because they wanted independence, not from the old but from the new Kremlin. Since then, the peoples of Central Asia, erstwhile beneficiaries of a *pax sovietica*, have had to learn to fend for themselves in a capitalist world which, because of their Soviet education, was virtually unknown to them.

It has been said with some justification that sovietization was highly successful in cutting off Central Asians from their cultural reference points. Notably, 70-odd years of more or less virulent anti-religious propaganda certainly weakened the influence of Islam. The sudden and totally preventable collapse of the Soviet Union left the vast majority of the peoples of the Soviets disoriented. While in Europe the 20th century witnessed the erosion of religious influence, a somewhat similar development led in the Soviet Union to an agnosticism focused on the dominant, pseudo-Marxist political ideology. In the last few decades the disintegration of Soviet social services, for technical reasons often backward by western standards yet all-inclusive in their intent, has brought hardships previously unknown to vast segments of the population and, in Central Asia, has strengthened the anti-modernist, fundamentalist forces represented by certain Islamic factions. The permeability of the frontiers of the Central Asian republics – now no longer sealed off from the outside world by the paranoid Soviet system – allows the infiltration not only of ideologies but, more important, of people bent on creating subversion and, alas, of narcotics to finance their activities.

At the beginning of this paper I suggested that there must be a cluster of attributes by which a human group or cultural sphere is defined, and, if they are to serve a useful purpose, these must be specific and essential.

Let me illustrate what I mean by giving the example of China, unified and defined by its script. Ethnic, cultural, linguistic, historical diversities within that country are dwarfed by the overriding homogeneity imposed by the script. It is fashionable to

regard globalization as a contemporary phenomenon and it is often forgotten that the strongest links between, one may safely say, all the inhabitants of our earth are the use of the Arabic numerals and the universal measuring of time, the division of the day into 24 hours and the universal adoption of the Christian calendar.

We now may ask whether it is possible to find for Central Asia such a cluster of attributes which, on the one hand, links the political entities into one definable group and, on the other, distinguishes the region as an entity from the surrounding areas of the world. Such attributes may not be easy to find since, well into the 20th century, 'extreme tribal and clan fragmentation has marked the political life of the region . . . There has been no overarching political vision or unity based on ethnic identification.'<sup>16</sup>

What then are the ties that still link and are likely to do so in the future, the now independent states of Central Asia? Let us disregard ephemeral political or economic agreements and cooperation projects, and rather focus on common elements that are more constant between the Central Asian members of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). These can be found in a shared history going back to Mongol times, though relationships were far from harmonious and armed conflicts usually set Central Asians against Central Asians. Today the shared Soviet past is still a strong bond manifested mainly in ways of thinking, in the intellectual or administrative approach to problems. For example, in the elementary and secondary education (embracing a total of 11 grades) in all six states, Soviet administrative practice continues.<sup>17</sup> Yet, with new generations, memory of the common Soviet past will unavoidably fade.

Of course the fact that in all but one of the Central Asian republics – namely Tajikistan – the titular language is Turkic creates a bond among them. There is also the powerful link of the common Russian language, the official status of which varies from state to state though it remains not only the official language of inter-ethnic communications but also the primary means of instruction in many schools and, of course, universities. Let me cite the words of Kyrgyzstan's President Akaev: 'The Russian language . . . is part of the spiritual world of the Kyrgyz.'<sup>18</sup> As a matter of fact, as recently as December 2001, in Kyrgyzstan Russian was made an official language, equal in status to Kyrgyz. In Kazakhstan, where Kazakhs constitute only 53.4 percent of the total population, Russian remains the official 'language of inter-ethnic communication'. In Tajikistan, Russians constitute just 3.5 percent of the total population but Russian is still generally used in government and business because knowledge of this language is shared with the Uzbeks who make up 25 percent of the population. It seems likely that in some distant future there will be an erosion of the use of Russian in inter-ethnic communications but, in my view, it will remain in general use for years to come.

Let me now move on to the one factor that, the use of Arabic numerals excepted, is the strongest in defining a cultural area, namely the script.

As mentioned before, up to Soviet times the population of Central Asia was generally illiterate. The few who were not used either the Cyrillic script for Russian or the Arabic script for their mother tongues such as Chagatay, the Turkic literary language, and its later variants. In the Soviet period great and successful efforts were made to wipe out illiteracy 'in a country in which some 130 languages were spoken,

out of which only about 20 possessed written alphabets'.<sup>19</sup> After decades of hesitation the general acceptance of the Cyrillic script in 1940 was intended not only to bring all the illiterate peoples closer to each other and to the Russians but also to drive a wedge between Muslim, Turkic and Iranian communities living within the Soviet Union and their relatives abroad.

With their independence achieved, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan among the Central Asian republics have adopted the Latin alphabet. Kyrgyzstan hesitates and in Kazakhstan – with more Russian than Kazakh speakers – the basic decision on whether to reform the current Kazakh alphabet or switch to the Latin script still seems far away. Tajikistan – strong Iranian pressure for the adoption of the Arabic script notwithstanding – has stuck with Cyrillic though it has modified the alphabet to better suit the language.

The wrangling, in which both linguists and politicians take part, goes on and its outcome is bound to have profound political consequences. Obviously, adoption of the Latin script would mean closer ties not only with what is called the West but first and foremost with Turkey, which in 1992, 1993 and again in 1998 organized encounters among all the Turks of Central Asia and elsewhere and pushed vigorously for the general adoption of the Latin scripts as a basis for national Turkic alphabets.

Azerbaijan, whose language is very close to Turkish, has also adopted the Latin alphabet.

The importance of a switch in script cannot be overestimated. The imagination boggles at the thought of what would be the situation of Turkey in the contemporary world if in 1928 Kemal Atatürk had not, with quite brutal methods, compelled his compatriots to switch from Arabic to Latin alphabet. As things now stand, from the Mediterranean through the Caucasus and all along the border with the Iranian world, there is a Turkic belt committed to a complete switch to Latin script. The Turks of Central Russia, such as the Bashkirs and the Tatars and other smaller groups, embedded as they are in the Slavic world, cannot afford a change, so they will remain linked with the more northern Turks: the Kazakh and the Kirghiz. The problems are complex, perhaps insoluble, and it cannot be my task to describe them in this short paper.

About a century ago, the British geographer Sir Halford Mackinder was perhaps the first to call attention to the political importance of Central Asia. He called the region 'the geographical pivot of history', the 'heartland'.<sup>20</sup> At the outset of this new millennium, through a concatenation of unforeseen circumstances – such as the meltdown of the Soviet Union and the paranoia of the United States (brought about by the fanaticism of a handful of Arabs) – the existence of Central Asia is again receiving some belated yet intensive attention. As recently as December 2002, at a conference held at the Woodrow Wilson Center in Washington DC, the view was expressed that

The U.S. is at war with terrorism, with all that the term implies, while Europe is not . . . Europe is no longer at the center of U.S. interest – attention has shifted to Central Asia.<sup>21</sup>

I have my doubts as to whether this view is correct or widely shared but it is an indication that even political scientists take cognizance of Central Asia's existence. While

the climatic and demographic constants of the region would not, in my view, lead to the development of a major world power in Central Asia, the genie is out of the bottle and, as recent tragic events such as the war in Iraq have shown, even minor powers may have a major role in global politics. In a well-informed recent article Martha Brill Olcott sounds an ominous note:

Slowly but surely the United States, as a lone superpower, is bringing this region [i.e. Central Asia] under its security umbrella in ways that are certain to have an impact on the region's former and aspiring hegemony.<sup>22</sup>

Looking at the recent American record in the Near and Middle East, from Palestine to Afghanistan, one shudders at the thought of what such a 'security umbrella' may mean to the local populations. Be that as it may, it would appear that for the first time since the 14th century and thus for the second time in recorded history, Central Asia is playing a political role that transcends its own borders. A better general acquaintance with its history, culture and languages is imperative.

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### Notes

1. Landau and Kellner-Heinkele (2001: 149). This well-documented, perceptive book was of substantial help in the writing of this essay.
2. On the natural zones of Central Eurasia see Taaffe (1990).
3. In Sinor (1972) I have dealt in some detail with the role of pasture in Central Eurasian warfare.
4. Bregel (2003: 2).
5. Hakluyt (1962), vol. I, p. 450.
6. Cited by Caroe (1967: 75).
7. Pahlen (1964: 119).
8. Hill (1854), vol. II, p. 186.
9. Curzon (1889/1967: 399).
10. Curzon (1889/1967: 392).
11. Pahlen (1964: 183).
12. Wheeler (1964: 112).
13. On all this I follow, sometimes verbatim, Wheeler (1964: 111).
14. Black et al. (1991: 298).
15. Landau and Kellner-Heinkele (2001: 12).
16. Black et al. (1991: 332).
17. Landau and Kellner-Heinkele (2001: 167).
18. Landau and Kellner-Heinkele (2001: 188).
19. Landau and Kellner-Heinkele (2001: 51).
20. See Mackinder (1904).
21. Wilson (2003: 70).
22. Olcott (2002: 227).

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