

In Its Own Image: Toward a Re-conceptualization of Central Asia

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With the collapse of the USSR came the dislocation of the Soviet republics--not only from their former political and economic status within the former Soviet Union, but also from their placement within the Western policy and academic spheres of analysis. While some reorganization of policy and academic-related institutions has already taken place to accommodate these changes, the most appropriate analytical category and/or geographical context into which to place the various newly independent states remains a matter of heated debate among policy-makers and academics alike. Indeed, this is an important issue which requires further analysis and debate, since our (re)-conceptualization of these states has direct and long-term implications for our understanding and evaluation of the political, economic, and cultural challenges they face. The manner in which we classify them will, in turn, determine the manner in which we relate to them as well as the conclusions we draw from this interaction.

Nowhere is the question of the newly independent states' appropriate placement within policy and academic institutions more hotly contested and the ultimate choice more salient than in the Central Asian states. The dissension over a new approach toward Central Asia is due in large part to the scant attention and research directed toward this area of the world during the Soviet period, which was essentially viewed as an extension of Moscow. As a result, Central Asia has been consistently mis-analyzed by policy-makers and scholars alike in the post-Soviet period based on erroneous assumptions regarding Central Asia's past, present, and future development. In sum, following independence, most forecast imminent inter-ethnic conflict, the rise of Islamic fundamentalism, and neo-authoritarian regime. The empirical record in Central Asia, however, indicates quite a different set of post-independence outcomes: incidents of inter-ethnic conflict since independence have been rare and confined to a particular city or region (oblast); Islam has not become a dominant cultural or political force beyond Namangan Oblast in Uzbekistan's Ferghana Valley; and though at different paces and to varying degrees, political and economic institutional change is indeed occurring in each of these states.

In order to avoid any future mis-analysis, it is imperative that we carefully consider the implications of the possible analytical categories and/or geographical contexts according to which we may henceforth classify these states and choose one accordingly. This necessitates reviewing the most suitable pre-existing categories and contexts as well as developing wholly new ones. These include Central Asia as: (1) emerging Islamic states; (2) former Soviet republics; (3) states undergoing multiple transitions simultaneously; and (4) comprising part of a distinct and geostrategically significant region in its own right. While there are valid arguments for and against each one, only the latter constitutes a forward-looking approach which is not bound by current state borders or ideologies but takes into account broader political, economic,

cultural, and geographical characteristics which are becoming increasingly important in shaping Central Asia's future.

I. Central Asia as Emerging Islamic States

The utility of classifying Central Asia as part of the Islamic World is that it identifies one of the key differences between Central Asia and the majority of other former Soviet republics, particularly Russia and the Slavic republics in the northern half of the USSR. Moreover, it recognizes the fact that these states share not only cultural but geographical proximity to the Islamic world. Indeed, since independence, the neighboring Islamic states have done their best to exploit these cultural and geographic ties by providing funds for re-building mosques, supporting cultural and educational exchanges, and increasing trade with the Central Asian states. A strong case can also be made that the Central Asian states share some important economic and political characteristics of the states comprising the Islamic world, such as large deposits of oil and gas and a strong predilection for patrimonial over democratic institutions.

Yet, what this view of Central Asia fails to recognize, and indeed obscures, is that the Central Asian states have important characteristics which also make them distinct from the Islamic world. Those who prefer this analytical category and geographical context base their perceptions on Islam as primarily a cohesive religion and dominant political force. The form of Islam in Central Asia, however, is both secularized and de-politicized. This is directly related to the legacy of Soviet policy toward Islam, which amounted to simultaneously granting official recognition to Islam and suppressing open and widespread religious practice among Muslims. An "unofficial Islam" thus thrived throughout the Soviet period. Yet essentially cut-off from the rest of the Islamic world and from one another, Islamic communities in Central Asians developed their own interpretation and form of Islam which does not wholly correspond to any of the four recognized "schools."

In sum, the Soviets molded Islam into solely a local and cultural identity and were thus able to officially secularize Islam as well as to nullify its political potential. As a result, Islam is not the primary socio-political cleavage which divides the multiple ethnic communities comprising the Central Asian states. Rather, there are other important socio-cultural identities which have had and are having a greater impact on political developments in each of these states than Islam--namely, what I refer to as "regionalism." Emphasizing the political importance of Islam while ignoring these other socio-political cleavages contributes to mis-analysis, and hence, to misguided foreign policy decisions which undermine US goals in the region. Indeed, this has already occurred in Tajikistan, where a violent Civil War erupted between regions, each of whom either wanted a share of national control following independence (Leninabad and Kolyab) or greater autonomy within the new state (Gorno-Badakshan). Yet, many Western analysts misinterpreted the civil war as one of Islamic Fundamentalists versus Democrats and thus supported so-called "anti-Islamic" forces who, in actuality, were leaders and proponents of the former Soviet regime against so-called "pro-Islamic" forces, some of whom were prominent members of Tajikistan's fledgling democratic opposition.

Most importantly, viewing Central Asia as emerging Islamic states emphasizes a classification to which the Central Asians themselves are uniformly resistant and highly sensitive. In other words, we must consider the fact that the Central Asian leaders themselves do not view their states solely under this rubric and do not want Western policymakers, academics, and members of the business community to do so either. Each of the Central Asian leaders has firmly discouraged the development of Islamic fundamentalism in their respective countries. Most have actually stated repeatedly since independence that their inclination is toward the "Turkish model" of secular statehood. This prejudice has become even stronger since the military victories of the Taliban in neighboring Afghanistan, whom the Central Asian leaders universally fear and loathe. Each of the Central Asian leaders has also made a conscious and concerted effort to expand their respective country's foreign relations and economic ties far beyond their Islamic neighbors and, thus far, have successfully regulated any direct intervention from these neighbors in their internal religious and political affairs.

In short, viewing the Central Asian states as emerging Islamic states would place them into an analytical category and geographical context to which they presently do not belong, have no desire to belong, and is not in the US interest that they belong. The result would be to create or encourage ideological boundaries and fault lines between Central Asia and the US which do not in fact exist or are muted, and which directly contradict US interests in preventing this part of the world from falling under the influence of Islamic extremists.

II. Central Asia as Former Soviet Republics

The second possibility is to continue to view Central Asia as part of the former Soviet Union. This approach is also potentially useful because it recognizes the crucial and long-standing influence of the shared Soviet legacy--e.g. centralized economic planning, authoritarian politics, and ethno-national territorial units--across these states as well as with the other newly independent states. Undoubtedly, the Soviet legacy is crucial for understanding the origins and constraints of formulating and implementing new political and economic policies and institutions in all of the former Soviet republics-turned-independent states. For example, they all have in common an aversion to full privatization of land and other natural resources as well as the continuation of large state subsidies to agriculture. The problems associated with political corruption and underdeveloped political party systems also tend to remain salient throughout the former Soviet Union. In addition, this approach sheds light on the consistent emergence of political systems based on strong presidential rule and weak (or weakened) legislative bodies.

Viewing Central Asia within this framework, however, is not without its serious drawbacks. In particular, there is a strong temptation for policy-makers and scholars alike to continue their previous treatment of this region as merely an extension of Moscow. This is already happening in that US foreign policy toward Central Asia is currently formulated in terms of balancing Russia's influence in the region, rather than in terms of promoting long-term US interests for peace and stability in the region. The former consists of making concessions to those Central Asian states whose leaders act independently of Moscow, and thus contributing to animosity between Russian and Central Asian leaders. In contrast, the latter requires: first, encouraging the development of effective political institutions to conduct foreign relations between these states

beyond the present generation of statesmen; and second, focusing efforts on promoting regional integration and cooperation among the Central Asian states themselves.

Inherent in this classification is also an acute danger that Central Asia's many similarities with other former Soviet republics will continue to be accorded greater attention than its many political, economic, and cultural distinctions alluded to above. Central Asia has its own peculiarities which differentiate both the form and degree of political and economic problems that it faces as well as the nature and effectiveness of state responses to them. This is a result not only of the aforementioned cultural differences, but also of the Soviet policies and institutions designed particularly for the Central Asian republics. Privatization, for example, is a much more complex issue due to the fact that the Central Asian labor force is segmented into titular (agricultural) and non-titular (industrial) nationalities and that the "best land" is most often occupied by non-titular nationalities. Thus, privatizing both industry and land does not merely involve formidable economic obstacles, it politically divides the multi-ethnic population. Political corruption is also more deeply entrenched due to the fact that Central Asian political elites almost never served outside of their own republics and rarely outside their own regions (oblasts). As a result, they were able to establish strong patron-client networks which persist today. This also causes serious problems for the state, since it must breakdown these local networks in order to centralize political control, but at the same time depends upon them in order to effectively administer the periphery.

III. Central Asia as States Undergoing Multiple Transitions Simultaneously

A third possibility is to develop a new analytical category into which Central Asia fits comfortably alongside the other Soviet Successor States. This involves shifting our analytical focus from the relative status of these states under Soviet rule to the simultaneous multiple transitions they all face as a result of Soviet rule. Although Central Asia is at a different level of political and economic development vis-à-vis the other Soviet Successor states, the shared Soviet legacy rule sets up very similar institutional constraints for political and economic reform. In particular, what makes this group of states unique is that they are undergoing three fundamental transitions simultaneously: (1) a political transition to more democratic forms of governance; (2) an economic transition to a market-based system; and (3) a national transition to independent statehood. This situation is wholly unprecedented. It therefore generates unique problems and challenges for which there is really no single model to either avoid or emulate.

There are several benefits to this approach. First of all, it is the most flexible of the aforementioned possibilities since it does not confine our analysis of events and trends in Central Asia to either "proto-Islamic" or "post-Soviet." Yet, at the same time, it still acknowledges the potential for Central Asia to embark on a separate path to transition that might include Islam as well as the crucial and long-standing influence of the shared Soviet legacy across these states. Secondly, it does not confine our evaluation to a particular geographical context, but opens up a broad analytical category. This category facilitates comparisons between the various paths of transition pursued in each Soviet Successor State--for example, with the East Central European states on one end of the continuum along paths toward democratization, marketization and viable state formation and the Central Asian states on the other. It therefore enables us to develop our

own model of states undergoing multiple transitions simultaneously rather than basing our analysis on existing models which do not replicate the experience of the Soviet Successor States.

Finally, and most importantly, approaching these states in light of the simultaneity of multiple transitions would greatly alleviate the tendency for the US to enact contradictory policies toward Central Asia. Currently, the US policymaking community appears to compartmentalize the transitions that are occurring in the Soviet Successor States, rather than approaching them as an integral whole. This results in policies which are appropriate when political, economic, and national reform paths are viewed as separate entities but which actually conflict with one another due to the overlapping and contentious nature of these transitions. In Central Asia, for example, the US has insisted upon both "free and fair" elections and rapid adoption of a market economy in return for economic aid. As a result, Central Asian presidents consistently justify either ignoring or dissolving democratically-elected parliaments that are "unfriendly" to economic reform. Similarly, the US has supported programs to encourage regional economic integration--particularly over water-sharing arrangements which involve barter for water, coal, and gas between Kyrgyzstan, Kazakstan, and Uzbekistan, respectively--while at the same time pushing for full privatization of natural resources.

While a purely analytical category has the advantage of promoting insight into the particular problems of countries undergoing multiple transitions simultaneously, it also has disadvantages. One of these is that it ignores the relative opportunities and constraints presented by the geographical context in which these states are located and their consequent geostrategic position. Another clear drawback to this view of Central Asia is that, like the categories and contexts discussed above, it has the potential to obscure the region's peculiarities vis-à-vis the other Soviet Successor States. One might argue that this danger is even greater when the Central Asian states are placed in a category so broad as to include East Central Europe. Yet, for this very reason, the category "states undergoing multiple transitions simultaneously" is only useful in the short-term; it should not last beyond a decade of policymaking and scholarly analysis. Indeed, several factors indicate the necessity of a creating another analytical category and geographical context for evaluating Central Asia in the future.

IV. Central Asia as a Distinct and Important Region

A more long-term possibility is to view the Central Asian states as comprising a region which is politically, economically, and culturally distinct and geostrategically significant in its own right. This involves not only creating a new analytical category for Central Asia which focuses on its potential for political and economic development, but also geographically redefining the region. Such an approach is distinguished from those discussed above by an emphasis on looking forward instead of backward; that is, in the direction toward which these countries appear to be headed rather than in the direction from where they have come.

In this regard, there are at least three possible ways to re-conceptualize Central Asia as a region. The first is to maintain the narrow definition of Central Asia as comprised of the five former Soviet republics of Kazakstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. This is useful in that it acknowledges an increasing trend among the Central Asian states toward greater

integration and cooperation in certain spheres, particularly the economy. In other words, the Central Asian leaders themselves are beginning to emphasize the common characteristics of the region and to recognize its growing significance as a region, apart from both the former Soviet Union and the Islamic world. This is related in part to their shared historical experiences and cultural ties as well as to their similar levels of political and economic development. It is more accurately viewed, however, as a calculated attempt to "escape" from under the shadow of Russia. Thus, such a view would promote US foreign policy goals since we should encourage (and in fact are encouraging) regional integration as a way of helping these countries disengage from Russia and, ultimately, serve as a buffer to Russia, China, and the Middle East.

A second possibility is to include the former Soviet Central Asian republics as well as the territory presently known as Afghanistan and Xinjiang. This new category and context explicitly recognizes the political, economic, cultural, and geostrategic similarities that the Central Asian states share not only with one another but with Central Asia as it is historically and geographically conceived. The region is comprised of states with "artificial" or contrived borders which cut across cultural and historical ties and most can only be described as having achieved juridical statehood at best. All of them are therefore struggling with various levels of state formation (Kazakstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan) and fragmentation (Tajikistan and Afghanistan). Political stability throughout the region is directly affected by the instability in key parts of the region. It is impossible to ignore, for example, the drug trafficking and arms trade which originates in Afghanistan and moves across the Central Asian states, the emerging Uighur separatist movement in Xinjiang which appeals to Uighurs living in Kazakstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan, and the real threat of spreading Taliban extremism. This region shares important economic features as well in that it is primarily rural and lacks a strong industrial base or skilled labor force. As the Central Asian states develop their oil and gas resources, the potential for greater economic development will increase in the region as a whole. Political stability in Afghanistan and Xinjiang will also gain added significance. Moreover, Central Asia conceived in this way is a region situated in a unique and significant geostrategic position; it stands at the crossroads between those areas of the world that presently receive the bulk of our attention and concern--Russia, China, and the Middle East.

The third possibility is to redefine Central Asia as a regional economic trading bloc, thus shifting our emphasis to its economic potential and geo-physical realities. This situates Central Asia within both an analytical category and a geographical context. Economically, the region's future development is tied directly to the exploitation of its rich natural resources, which requires the political as well as economic cooperation of the Central Asian states with their immediate neighbors to the north, south, east, and west. The exploitation of vast oil and gas reserves is also rapidly becoming the main integrating force both within this region and between this region and the global economy. Geographically, beginning with the main water basins in the region--the Aral Sea and the Caspian Sea, both of which contain substantial oil reserves--the region includes both Iran and Azerbaijan. Considering the region's mountain ranges, it also includes Afghanistan and Xinjiang. Most importantly, there are several natural trade routes between Central Asia, broadly conceived, and China, Europe, Russia, South Asia, and the Middle East.

In short, the third of these possibilities is the most beneficial to US Foreign Policy in the long term because it is the broadest and most flexible. It approaches the re-conceptualization of

Central Asia as a fluid and evolving, rather than a fixed, process and therefore allows a range of future possibilities rather than locking the Central Asian states into a particular path of development. This is crucial because the assumptions we bring to our evaluation of Central Asia undoubtedly shape our conclusions; in this way, the categories and contexts we chose for Central Asia can actually predetermine its developmental path. Viewing Central Asia as an regional economic trading bloc allows the US to develop a comprehensive policy toward the region which stresses economic interdependence and political stability. This re-conceptualization of Central Asia will push the region as a whole in the direction that most serves the direct and long-term interests of the US--that is, toward the establishment of liberal economic trade regimes and, ultimately, more democratic political regimes.

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