



An Introduction to the Geopolitics of Central Asia

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Executive Summary

Despite the importance of the high seas for global trade, continental Asia, notably Central Asia, continues to be of vital importance for competing geopolitical interests of Russia, China, the EU and the U.S.A., to name just the most important external actors. Against a historical backdrop of centuries of Russian and Chinese expansion into Central Asia, modern-day actors offer competing economic, security and value-based approaches, while substantial regional disparities add an additional layer of complexity to the challenges of achieving prosperity, stability and democracy.

The following key points were presented at a panel discussion, "The Importance of Central and Inner Asia for Europe," hosted by the Hungarian György Hazai Foundation for Oriental Studies on June 3, 2020, with participants including János Hóváry, ambassador-at-large, Hungary, Hans-Ullrich Ihm, regional OSCE representative, Max Meier, regional representative of Germany's Hanns Seidel-Stiftung, as well as academical contributors Oliver Corff, David Somfai Kara and Aida Somfai Kara.

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Analysis

Key Points

Definitions

Central Asia is the stretch of land between the Caspian Sea in the west to China and Mongolia in the east, and from Russia in the north to Afghanistan and Iran in the south. In today's political geography, the five -*stans*, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, all of them being former republics of the Soviet Union, are understood as Central Asia.

It must be emphasized that there is no strict consensus on the definition of Central Asia. Traditional definitions include Khorasan, today a province of Iran, Afghanistan, and even Mongolia, as the UNESCO includes the latter in their definition of Central Asia.

For the purpose of this web seminar, we stay with the political definition given above.

In contrast, *Inner Asia* overlaps with the aforementioned definitions of *Central Asia*, but also includes the western part of China, Mongolia and the eastern part of Russia.

Rationale of Definitions

Depending on perspective, several definitions of the regions pertaining to Central Asia and Inner Asia are possible. The definition can be based on physical geography (all countries being landlocked countries), on the type of civilization, with the primary mode of production being nomadic-pastoral vs. agricultural; or the definition can be based on language, which shows that Turkic languages play a predominant role, as the national languages of four out of the five -*stans* are Turkic varieties, whereas Tajik, spoken in Tajikistan, is a variety of Persian, itself being an Indo-Iranian and thus a Indo-European language. In theory, it is possible to travel from the Mediterranean to Central China while relying exclusively on Turkic languages; yet the modern-day lingua franca of the Central Asian states undoubtedly is Russian, a USSR heritage.

Turkestan

In history, the region of Central Asia was also known as Turkestan; the name lives on in modern times as East Turkestan, as in the short-lived Republic of East Turkestan.

Russian Expansion

While early Russian expansion to the East which mainly took place in Siberia until the first treaties were signed with the Qing empire of China in 1689 (Treaty of Nerchinsk) and 1727 (Treaty of Kyakhta), Russia's conquest of Central Asia took place in the second half of the 19th century. The USSR kept Central Asia as Soviet Republics. Mongolia was firmly under Soviet control despite being nominally independent, and Afghanistan was occupied in 1979.

Qing Expansion

Similar to Russia's conquest of Central Asia, the expansion of the Qing empire towards the west and the integration of was then named for the first time as Xinjiang, literally "New Territories" into the empire, took place during the second half of the 19th century.



The Great Game

The southern part of Central Asia and Afghanistan became the staging area of what was later known as the Great Game, the confrontation between the British Empire and the Russian Empire over mutually blocking access to Central Asia (for the British) and India (for Russia). The Great Game lasted for the major part of the 19th century.

The Dawn of the 20th Century

The unfolding of modern history brought those fundamental changes which shape the development of Central Asia to this very day. Ranged weapons, notably firearms, allowed both Russia and the Qing empire to conquer large swathes of territory against forces who had relied on bow and arrow; the mapping of the world and the large-scale development of navigation and sea-faring vessels opened a new domain for trade and the projection of political power. In contrast, the traditional land-based trade along the trade routes of the Silk Road became obsolete in the 18th century, turning the historically advantageous position of Central Asia into a major disadvantage for development and prosperity.

Landlocked Countries

As of today, most of the landlocked countries, with the notable exception of a few highly developed nations like Switzerland, Austria and Luxembourg, are developing countries and have the lowest scores on the Human Development Index. For these landlocked countries, costs of trading are sometimes twice of three times higher than for coastal countries, to name just one disadvantage.

The Rise of modern Geopolitics

As it became more and more obvious that control of large territories of Central Asia directly correlates with political power, a glance at a globe revealed a new perspective hidden in the historical development outlined above: The potential control of the whole of the Eurasian supercontinent, or *World-Island* via control of its *Heartland*. This thought was formulated by Halford John Mackinder in 1904 as the "Geographical Pivot of History". The famous summary is:

Who rules East Europe commands the Heartland;
who rules the Heartland commands the World-Island;
who rules the World-Island commands the world.

For a comprehensive perspective, Alfred Thayer Mahan's seminal work of 1890, *The Influence of Sea Power on History*, is equally important for understanding how globalization reshaped the world which surrounds Central Asia.

Regional and Domestic Disparities

The socio-economic fabric of Central Asian states is far from evenly woven in terms of natural geography, ethnicities, populations and distribution of natural resources. While Kyrgyzstan is covered by high mountains, the vast plains of Kazakhstan offer an entirely different picture; in contrast, Turkmenistan has access to an international body of water, the Caspian Sea. Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan are rich in minerals and energy resources suitable for export, with the world's second-largest known gas field, Galkynysh Gas Field, located in Turkmenistan, while Kyrgyzstan relies on hydropower and metals; a significant portion of Kyrgyzstan's national GDP is generated by about one fifth of the Kyrgyz working abroad as migrant



labourers, mainly in Russia. Furthermore, in the past, ethnic tensions within and between Central Asian states have resulted in bloody clashes, even civil war.

Interests of External Actors

External actors do not necessarily share similar priorities; China, for instance, has a massive interest in and need for energy and mineral resources and invests heavily in the necessary infrastructure; Russia, in contrast, is not a significant customer of commodities, but rather wants to sustain her influence; the EU and the USA consider a stable and prosperous Central Asia essential for promoting security in the region and beyond. Turkey has been present in the region since the time of the Ottoman Empire, seeking to enlarge its influence as a regional power. Other nations in the immediate regional neighbourhood also have e.g. security interests.

The Competition for Influence Continues

As of today, the countries of Central Asia have to ensure their own national and development interests in the realms of politics, economy and security, while numerous international and regional intergovernmental organizations, external actors and initiatives base their competing offerings and bids for influence by appealing to fundamental interests (trade, security), values (human rights, democracy, freedom of press), but also by focusing on identity, be it language, culture or religion.

Victims of Objectification

Beginning with the Russian and Chinese conquest of Central Asia, the nations of the region have, frequently up to this very day, continued to be victims of objectification and denial of sovereignty, be it outright or subtle, challenging the principle of Westphalian sovereignty.

No One-Stop Source in Sight

A multitude of competing offers and at times antagonistic interests makes it difficult to obtain security *and* prosperity from a single source; offerings based on economical claims frequently lack a reliable security component, and security offers are not supported by a commensurate economic backup. Central Asian states are forced to “cherry-picking” but strive hard for gains in sovereign decision-making.

International and Regional Organizations

This is a non-exhaustive list of international, regional and national organizations, strategies and initiatives with Central Asian states as member states, observer states or other forms of relations. The list is in alphabetical order.

N.B. (1): The term *Relevant Member State* refers either to states which belong to the core definition of Central Asia, or to those states which are related to the subject by language and culture, like Azerbaijan.

N.B. (2): Detailed references for key documents are given in the Minimal Reading list at the end of this paper.

N.B. (3): All online references were checked and valid as of June 1st, 2020.



BRI

BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE. China's global development strategy established in 2013, involving infrastructure development and investment in approx. 70 countries. Until recently also known as *Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st-century Maritime Silk Road*.

Relevant member states: No formal membership.

Homepage: <https://eng.yidaiyilu.gov.cn/>.

CCTS

COOPERATION COUNCIL OF TURKIC-SPEAKING STATES (Turkish: *Türk Dili Konuşan Ülkeler İşbirliği Konseyi*); short: TURKIC COUNCIL. Founded on 3 October 2009 in Nakhchivan, this intergovernmental organization aims to promote comprehensive cooperation among Turkic states.

Relevant member states: Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. Observer State: Hungary.

Homepage: <https://www.turkkon.org>.

Key documents: "Nakhchivan Agreement on the Establishment of the Cooperation Council of Turkic Speaking States" October 3rd, 2009; Şahverdiyev and Veliyev 2019

CIS

COMMONWEALTH OF INDEPENDENT STATES (Russian: Содружество Независимых Государств, *Sodružestvo Nezavisimykh Gosudarstv*, СНГ, SNG). This intergovernmental organization was formed in the wake of the dissolution of the USSR 1991.

Relevant member states: Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkey and Uzbekistan. Turkmenistan is considered a founding state but did not ratify the Charter which would make it a member of the CIS.

Homepage: <http://www.cis.minsk.by/>.

CSTO

COLLECTIVE SECURITY TREATY ORGANIZATION (Russian: Организация Договора о Коллективной Безопасности, *Organizatsiya Dogovora o Kollektivnoy Bezopasnosti*, ODKB). This intergovernmental military alliance which grew out of the framework of the CIS was signed on 15 May 1992.

Relevant member states: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan.

Homepage: <https://odkb-csto.org/>.

Key document: "Collective Security Treaty" 1992

ECO

ECONOMIC COOPERATION ORGANIZATION, founded in 1985 by Iran, Pakistan and Turkey.

Relevant member states: Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkey, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan.

Homepage: <http://www.eco.int/>

Key document: "Treaty of Izmir" 14 September 1996

EEU

EURASIAN ECONOMIC UNION. The EEU is an economic union of states located in Eastern Europe, Central Asia and Western Asia. The Treaty of the EEU was signed on 29 May 2014.

Relevant member states: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan.

Homepage: <http://www.eaeunion.org/?lang=en>.

Key document: "Treaty of the Eurasian Economic Union" 2015EEAS



EUROPEAN EXTERNAL ACTION SERVICE, the European Union's diplomatic service.

The EU Strategy for a New Partnership with Central Asia was adopted by the European Council on 21–22 June 2007 in recognition of the increasing importance of Central Asia for EU interests relating to security, stability, governance and energy diversification. ("EU Strategy for a New Partnership with Central Asia – Implementation," July 7, 2016)

In 2018, the EEAS adopted *The European way to connectivity — a new strategy on how to better connect Europe and Asia*.

Homepage: <https://eeas.europa.eu> (EEAS), https://eeas.europa.eu/regions/central-asia/2068/central-asia_en (EEAS and Central Asia)

Key documents: (High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, September 19 2018), (General Secretariat of the Council 2009)

NATO

The NORTH ATLANTIC TREATY ORGANIZATION conducts exchanges with non-member countries in Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia via two key mechanisms: The Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council (EAPC) and Partnership for Peace (PfP) programme.

Relevant member states: Turkey is a key member state of NATO. Among the 20 partner countries of the PfP programme, we find Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, and Uzbekistan.

Homepage: <https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/51288.htm>

Key document: "Euro-Atlantic Partnership".

OIC

ORGANISATION OF ISLAMIC COOPERATION, founded in 1969, "the collective voice of the Muslim world".

Relevant member states: Among the 57 member states (53 of them being Muslim-majority) Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkey, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.

Homepage: <https://www.oic-oci.org/>

Key document: "Charter of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (Oic)," March 14, 2008.

OSCE

ORGANIZATION FOR SECURITY AND CO-OPERATION IN EUROPE. The world's largest security-oriented intergovernmental organization, with a broad mandate encompassing arms control, human rights, freedom of the press and fair elections. Having its origins in the 1975 Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, it welcomed new member states in Asia after the collapse of the USSR.

Relevant member states: Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan.

Homepage: <https://www.osce.org>.

Key document: "Astana Commemorative Declaration Towards a Security Community" 3 December 2010

SCO

SHANGHAI COOPERATION ORGANISATION. The SCO is a political, economic and security alliance; announced on 15 June 2001 in Shanghai (hence the name), it entered into force on 19 September 2003.

Relevant member states: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan; Dialogue Partners: Azerbaijan (2008), Turkey (2012).

Homepage: <http://eng.sectsco.org/>.



Key documents: “Declaration on the Establishment of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization” 2001; “Charter of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization” [2002]; “Bishkek Declaration of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation’s Heads of State Council” 14 June 2019

UN-OHRLLS

UN OFFICE OF THE HIGH REPRESENTATIVE FOR THE LEAST DEVELOPED COUNTRIES, LANDLOCKED DEVELOPING COUNTRIES AND SMALL ISLAND DEVELOPING STATES. This office of the United Nations Secretariat was founded in 2001 by United Nations resolution 56/227.

Homepage: <http://unohrlls.org/>

Key document: “Landlocked Developing Countries. Things to Know, Things to Do” 2016

A Minimal Reading List

This Reading List contains some essential papers for the understanding of geopolitics and geostrategy, historical and contemporary analysis of questions of Central Asia from different perspectives, as well as a list of official documents of international organizations, followed by strategy and policy papers.

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Remarks: Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author.



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In 2015, he was awarded the Clausewitz Medal of the City of Burg.



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