

# In Defense of Greater Central Asia

By S. Frederick Starr

*Abstract : Great Central Asia is composed of three different geographical areas, diverse and notwithstandingly unique. After having been conquered for 2000 years by seven different empires, this area may again become a pivotal one by developing its relations with the most outstanding world actors: Russia, China and the United States. Countries of the region must build up their solidarity, while the United States must pay careful attention to the whole area.*

In recent years the term “Greater Central Asia” has become the subject of extravagant hypothesizing.<sup>1</sup> Is it the work of some international band of globe spinners, a conspiracy to be launched by Washington, or simply a new way of conceptualizing a region that has been there throughout history? Lacking clarity on its meaning, the phrase “Greater Central Asia” becomes a kind of Rorschach Test,

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<sup>1</sup> Among recent discussions of “Greater Central Asia” is the collection by various authors, M.N. Omarov, *Novaia bolshaia igra v bolshoi tsentralnoi azii: mify i realnost*, Bishkek, 2005; A. A. Kazi, “Pivotal Pakistan: Greater Central Asia Partnership and the Geopolitics of Central Asia’s Traditional Indus Basin Corridor,” paper presented at conference on “Partnership, Trade, and Development in Greater Central Asia,” Kabul, 1-2 April 2006; O. Gorupai, “V perekrest'e "bol'shoi igry," *Krasnaia zvezda*, 26 October 2007; M. Laumulin, “Bolshaia tsentral'naia Azia,”--novyi megaproekt SShA?,” *Kontinent*, No. 22 (158), 21 November 2005, pp. 16-29, and *Tsentralnaia Asia v zarubezhnoi politologii i mirovoi geopolitike*, 2 vols., Almaty, 2006, II, pp.297, ff.; two unsigned articles in *Rossii i global'naia politika*, “Kliuchi ot schast'ia, ili Bolshoi tsentral'noi Azii,” 2005, No. 4., July-August, and “Partnerstvo dlia Tsentral'noi Azii,” 2005, No. 4, July-August, 2005. For an example of clinical rage on the subject see A. Kniazev, “Bolshaia tsentral'noi Azii,”-eto vpolne ochevidnyi peopoliticheskii marazm,” interview on ferghana.ru, 5 July 2007 <[www.ferghana.ru/article.php?id=5214](http://www.ferghana.ru/article.php?id=5214)>) and of rationalism see S. Hanova, “Shifting Role of US Foreign Policy Doctrine,” unpubd. thesis, American University of Central Asia, 2007.

revealing more about the hopes and fears of the observer than about the actual region.

Because I have employed the phrase in print,<sup>2</sup> my name has been linked with the concept of a “Greater Central Asia.” In the essay in question I employed the term as a convenient way of denoting the larger cultural zone of which the five former Soviet republics—Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan—are a part, along with Afghanistan. It did not occur to me that this required an extensive explanation. But it clearly demands one, which this essay now attempts to provide.

## ***Is Greater Central Asia a Region?***

In approaching this task, it is useful to identify the question to which the notion of a “Greater Central Asia” is proposed as an answer: “What is the geographic area to which we refer when we use the term ‘Central Asia,’ and what are the intellectual and practical implications of such a definition?”

For more than a century this question has been answered in the terms generated by European imperial expansion, specifically, that of the Tsarist Russian Empire and of the Soviet Union. Russians from the mid-XIXth century referred to these lands as Middle (*Srednaia*) Asia. Much of the rest of the world adopted the Russians’ terminology and the assumption underlying it, namely, that the region was defined in terms of the territory under Russian control rather than by its intrinsic geographical, cultural, or economic properties.

This definition found acceptance in most quarters but, interestingly, not in Russia’s own government. Actions by the Tsarist and Soviet states over two centuries were based on the assumption that Russia’s territorial acquisition in the heart of Asia were incomplete and would remain so until Xinjiang and Afghanistan were brought under Russian control. Thus, the Soviet government actively built up proxy regimes in Xinjiang in the 1930s and then in the 1960s employed civil and military measures to undermine Beijing’s rule in the region.<sup>3</sup> The mass issuance of Soviet passports to Turkic citizens of Xinjiang in the 1960s, along with the construction of major air bases and military facilities along the border with Xinjiang in the same years, indicate the seriousness of Soviet intentions regarding this

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<sup>2</sup> S. F. Starr, “A Partnership for Central Asia,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 84, No. 4 (July/Aug. 2005), pp.164-178; and “A ‘Greater Central Asia Partnership’ for Afghanistan and Its Neighbors,” Silk Road Paper, Central Asia- Caucasus Institute, March 2005, <[www.isdp.eu/files/publications/srp/05/fs05greatercentral.pdf](http://www.isdp.eu/files/publications/srp/05/fs05greatercentral.pdf)>. The former is merely a reworked version of the latter.

<sup>3</sup> These conflicts are covered by Y. Shichor, “The Great Wall of Steel: Military and Strategy” in S. Frederick Starr, ed., “Xinjiang” in *Xinjiang: China’s Muslim Borderland*, London: Armonk, 2004, pp.120-160.

Chinese-ruled part of “Middle Asia.” In Afghanistan the Soviets’ objective was the same as in Xinjiang, namely, for Russia to make whole a region that had been fragmented by Britain and China. After the fall of the Afghan monarchy in 1972 the USSR hoped its interests would finally prevail. When they did not, it invaded, unleashing a war that cost 2.5 million Afghan lives.

The collapse of the USSR was a transforming event, but its impact in Central Asia was incomplete. The five former Soviet republics gained sovereignty, but the former Soviet borders to the South and East remained sealed. Only when China was able to open its Western border on its own terms did it do so, i.e., with the establishment of the Shanghai Cooperation initiative in 1997, which stipulated that citizens and residents of signatory states were prohibited from engaging in separatist propaganda directed towards Xinjiang.<sup>4</sup> Also contributing was China’s accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO), which opened border trade to what was to become an exchange of Central Asian raw materials and energy for Chinese finished goods.

It was the United States that unintentionally opened the region to the South, by its destruction of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. This opened the prospect, for the first time since the 1930s, of easy interchange across the heretofore tightly sealed border and of links extending to Pakistan, India, and the littoral states of the Indian Ocean.

Even before these developments, the presidents of the new states began referring to their region as “Central Asia.” Askar Akayev of Kyrgyzstan, who had earlier declared his country the “Switzerland of Central Asia,” evinced special enthusiasm for the new term. One could reasonably have asked “Central to what?” But for what were then impoverished and insecure new sovereignties, being central was clearly preferable to being marginal.

Meanwhile, the Western academic world re-baptized Central Asia as “Central Eurasia.”<sup>5</sup> The only problem with this term is that it brings in its train the intellectual baggage of Eurasianism, a post-World War I movement that embraced the argument of Spengler’s *The Decline of the West* and sought Russia’s future instead in the

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<sup>4</sup> Shanghai Cooperation Organization, “Declaration on Establishment of Shanghai Cooperation Organization,” 15 June 2001, at <[www.sectsc.org/html/00088.html](http://www.sectsc.org/html/00088.html)> (1 August 2006). For a competent overview of SCO and security see S. Blank, “The Shanghai Cooperation Organization and Its Future,” *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, 22 May 2002.

<sup>5</sup> The Central Eurasia Studies Association was founded in 1997 and its journal *Central Asian Studies Review*, in 2002. Central Eurasia now figures in the name of programs at Indiana, Harvard, Chicago, The Wilson Center, and elsewhere. Increasingly, it embraces also the Caucasus, and sometimes Iran as well. See G. Gleason, “The Centrality of Central Eurasia,” *Central Asian Studies Review*, Vol. II, No.1, Winter, 2003, n.p.

East.<sup>6</sup> Whether in its Soviet or post-Soviet manifestation, the word “Eurasia” evokes ideas of Russian chauvinism and contempt for the West.<sup>7</sup>

How does the term “Greater Central Asia” fit into this maze of definitions and connotations? Like the term “Central Eurasia,” it is an attempt to break out of the narrow geographical definition of the region propounded by the USSR. It accepts the reality that for two millennia both Xinjiang and Afghanistan have been integral components of the same cultural zone of which the five former Soviet republics are a part. It also accepts the possibility of a yet wider definition, one that includes at least the Khorasan province of Iran, the Northern part of Pakistan, Mongolia, such Russian areas as Tatarstan, and even that part of Northern India extending from Rajastan to Agra.<sup>8</sup> Unlike the term “Central Eurasia,” however, it does not define the region in terms of any external power or national ideology. Instead, it focuses discussion where it should be focused, namely, on the character of the region itself, its distinctive geographical, cultural, and economic features, and the question of whether those features may be the keys to its future.

Whatever term one employs, the question arises, “In what sense, if any, is this a region?” If the countries and territories included in the territory lack defining common characteristics, or if those common characteristics that exist are irrelevant to economic and social development, then it would be natural for the region to be organized from without. If, however, there are traits that are common, distinctive, and significant to development, then we should expect and want the region to be organized “from within.”

Greater Central Asia is divided into three dramatically different zones. On the north lies the great steppe belt running from Mongolia to the Hungarian plain. South of the steppes and stretching from the Caspian to the eastern border of Xinjiang lies desert, among the driest zones on earth. South of the desert and with a spur (the Tien-Shan and Alatau ranges) running from south to north, is the vast mountain zone of the Western Himalayas. One of these ranges, the Karakorums, includes mountains that are the highest in the world, measured from bottom to top.

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<sup>6</sup> On Eurasianism see M. Bassin, “Classical Eurasianism and the Geopolitics of Russian Identity,” Department of Geography, University College, London, unpubd. Ms., n.d. available at <[www.dartmouth.edu/crn/crn\\_papers/Bassin.pdf](http://www.dartmouth.edu/crn/crn_papers/Bassin.pdf)>.

<sup>7</sup> The leading Soviet era exponent of Eurasianism was the eccentric Leningrad intellectual Lev Gumilev, after whom, paradoxically, the national university of Kazakhstan has been renamed (see his *Drevnye Tiurki*, Leningrad, 1964). The most vocal exponent of such views today is Alexander Dugin (*Osnovy geopolitiki*, Moscow, 1997; and *Absoliutnaia rodina*, Moscow, 1999).

<sup>8</sup> Interestingly, UNESCO’s six-volume *History of the Civilizations of Central Asia*, published over a period of two decades on the basis of a 1976 decision, takes this very broad views, even though it takes care to speak of “civilizations” in the plural.

These three dramatically different geographical zones have been home to strikingly different societies. Nomadic pastoralists of the steppes favored horizontal over vertical forms of organization. Oasis dwellers lived in dense cities and were organized along the hierarchical lines appropriate for the management of complex irrigation systems. Mountaineers, notably Pamiris and Pashtuns, developed cultures that stressed group solidarity in a religiously or socially hostile environment.<sup>9</sup>

Reinforcing these geographic and social distinctions were ethnic and linguistic cleavages. Broadly speaking, the steppe nomads were Turkic while the urban and mountain dwellers were Persian. Beginning with the Kushans more than 2,000 years ago, Turkic and Mongol-Turkic hordes repeatedly conquered the settled oases and imposed their rule on the Persian speakers there. Besides having different languages, the two groups traditionally worshipped different gods, with the Turkic tribes adhering to various forms of animism and the Persians developing their distinctive faith of Zoroastrianism, as well as cults of local deities.

This picture of geographic, political, cultural, and linguistic diversity, if not economic and cultural schism, within the Greater Central Asia region has informed much recent thinking on the subject. According to this conception, the region is a hodgepodge with many internal divisions and few common features that are relevant to development. Its main geopolitical distinction is seen to lie in its natural resources and in the fact that it occupies the physical space between the major powers ringing it.

Those who stress the primacy of centrifugal over centripetal forces within the broad Central Asian region bring their argument right up to the present. They point to the failure of Central Asian leaders since independence to bring about effective cooperation, in spite of support from Presidents Karimov of Uzbekistan, Nazarbayev of Kazakhstan and the then president of Kyrgyzstan, Askar Akayev. A Central Asia Union was indeed formed, eventually including also Tajikistan, which emerged in 1997 from civil war.<sup>10</sup> And yet the effort in the end proved unsuccessful. Skeptics could point to the unwillingness of impoverished countries to invest in a common endeavor, and also the wariness with which each participating country viewed the motives and intentions of the others. The fact that

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<sup>9</sup> An early champion of this three-fold definition of the region and of its social correlaries was V. V. Bartold, *Turkestan Down to the Mongol Invasion*, 3rd English ed., New Delhi: Munshiram, 1992, Chapter I.

<sup>10</sup> Regarding the demise of a purely Central Asian organization see F. Tolipov, "CACO Merges with EEC: The Third Strike on Central Asia's Independence," in *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, 19 October 2005, <[www.cacianalyst.org/?q=node/3479](http://www.cacianalyst.org/?q=node/3479)> ; for current thinking on a new Central Asia union see J. Lillis, "Central Asia Leaders seek to Improve Regional Cooperation," in *Eurasia Insight*, 9 July 2006, Eurasianet.org, <[www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav090706.shtml](http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insight/articles/eav090706.shtml)>.

even in such critical areas as water and electrical energy they had difficulty finding common ground reinforced the skeptics' view. Meanwhile, intraregional commerce is stunted, and while one can fly directly from most Central Asian capitals to global transport hubs, it is all but impossible to find flights within the region.

As if this were not enough, recent economic development has opened further fault lines on the region. Thanks to new energy wealth, Xinjiang is booming, Kazakhstan has become a middle class society, and Turkmenistan will soon do so. Meanwhile, Afghanistan remains among the earth's poorest countries and Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan languish down at numbers 159, 167, and 172 among 209 nations in terms of gross domestic product (GDP) per capita.<sup>11</sup>

But all this is not the whole story. These divergences among the natural, ethnic, cultural, and linguistic conditions and current realities of Central Asian countries are more than balanced by their commonalities. Indeed, these are sufficiently strong to warrant our considering Greater Central Asia a region with its own dynamics, needs, and possibilities.

There is no denying that the physical contrast of steppe, deserts, and mountains is striking, yet its impact on human life is paradoxical: far from dividing groups from each other, from earliest times these differences led to specialized production in each zone and the growth of mutual dependencies among the three types of societies. Many scholars have demonstrated that neither nomadic nor settled societies could live without the other.<sup>12</sup> Nor is the line between them purely ethnic. Besides the fact that the Persian peoples had themselves once been nomads, there were oasis-dwelling Turks in the Fergana Valley and elsewhere by the 5th century. Furthermore, both mountain and oasis communities included many elements besides the Persian, many of them remnants of still earlier communities.

Whenever Turkic nomads conquered oasis cities they proceeded to transform these essentially Persian centers into the capitals of continental Turkic empires. Under the Kushans, Karakhanids, Ghaznavids, Seljuks, or Timurids, Persian remained the language of business and often of government, but the languages of the military and of power were Turkic. Even the brilliant Persian dynasty of the Samanids relied on Turkic troops. Indeed, all the most powerful empires that arose in the region were ethnically mixed, drawing on peoples of the steppe, oases, and mountains. Diversity is thus an important element of a common identity in the region.

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<sup>11</sup> Per capita GDP figures are from "GNI Per Capital," The World Bank, *Data and Statistics*, Washington, 2006, n. p.

<sup>12</sup> R. Amitai and M. Biran, eds., *Eurasian Nomads and the Sedentary World*, Leiden: Brill, 2005.



Such diversity extends to religion. True, the majority in every country is Sunni Muslim, and of the moderate Hanafi school of jurisprudence. True, too, the region can claim to have exerted a defining influence on Islam through al Bukhari's codification of the Sayings of Mohammed and through the many Sufi orders that were founded there. Yet the population as a whole is complex, with many Kazakhs and Kyrgyz having been converted only within the past two centuries and the Turkmen tribes having long distanced themselves from the Faith as practiced in neighboring Bukhara and Iran. Not only is there a large secular intelligentsia everywhere (the heritage of Soviet rule) but the region has a heritage both of Muslim reformism (Jaddidism) and of fundamentalist Salafism. Christian and Jewish minorities had long been a feature of national life in these highly diversified cultures.

It cannot be denied that fragmentation has been the order of the day in post-independence Central Asia. Yet the region's greatest eras of prosperity and power and virtually all of the region's foremost contributions to world culture occurred during periods of unity forged by powerful empires based within the region rather than having been imposed upon it from the outside. At the same time, such unity as existed under the Central Asian empires permitted a high degree of self-rule and diversity, provided taxes and troops were remitted to the center.

For two millennia the great engine of intra-regional communication within Central Asia was overland trade. Of course, such trade along the diverse Silk Roads also linked the region with the outside world. But because most traders bore the freight for only a segment of the larger journey, trade in every direction was a mighty force for mutual influence and benefit within Greater Central Asia proper.

The post-independence turn away from such regionalism may be regrettable but it is certainly understandable. New, post-imperial states everywhere ignore their neighbors, both because they are preoccupied with their own new sovereignties and because they seek to open links with the broader world from which they were earlier cut off. Such phases tend to be passing. This, along with constraints imposed by poverty and by massive reforms in many sectors, goes far towards explaining the failure of regionally focused initiatives in the 1990s.

But not entirely. Russia, as the former imperial power, had its own ideas on regional organization. Boris Yeltsin had proposed a Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) but this failed to gain credibility. Vladimir Putin instead set up a Eurasian Economic Zone that looked like what the European Union (EU) would have been had one member been seven times more populous than the next largest

member.<sup>13</sup> Meanwhile, Russia sought and received observer status within the Central Asia Union and then demanded full membership. Once admitted, Russia moved to merge the CAU with the Eurasian Economic Zone and to disband the CAU itself. From then until the present Russia has firmly informed that Central Asians that they have no right to establish any entity of which Russia itself is not a member.

The Central Asians themselves see things differently. Besides the calls for a regional organization by several regional presidents, cited above, they have worked tenaciously to create a Central Asian Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone (CANWFZ). Originally proposed by Uzbekistan, this finally bore fruit in 2008 with the signing of the Semipalatinsk Protocol.<sup>14</sup> For the first time since independence all five of the former Soviet states of Central Asia joined forces in an international agreement that does not include their powerful neighbors. Cleverly, they left the door open for other states that abjure nuclear weapons to join, which will probably include Afghanistan but not Russia or China.

If their differences are so great and their mutual interests so few, why would Central Asian states have expended so much effort to achieve this symbolic victory? The reason is that they perceive far greater commonalities between themselves than the skeptics would allow. These peoples have lived as neighbors for two millennia, and in no case fewer than five hundred years. Besides trading, they have moved freely across the territory, settling where they liked and intermarrying. In many areas, including all of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, Turkic and Persian (i.e., Tajik) intermarriage has gone on so long that identity is more a matter of preference than of genes.

Bearing all this in mind, it is clear that the answer to our question, “In what sense, if any, is this a region?” is “In many senses.” More to the point, the main factor which permits us to consider Central Eurasia or Greater Central Asia a region—centuries of intense economic and social interaction based on functional specialization and easy transport—is more directly relevant to economic and social development today than are the elements that divide the regional parts from one another.

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<sup>13</sup> The six-member Eurasian Economic Community was proposed in 1999, founded in 2000 and its charter ratified in 2001.

<sup>14</sup> S. Parrish and W. Potter, “Central Asian States Establish Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone Despite US Opposition,” Center for Non-Proliferation Studies, 5, 8 September, 2006.



## ***A Center or a Periphery in International Relations?***

Even if it is agreed that there exists a Greater Central Asian region that extends beyond the five former Soviet states and has important general features that are relevant to modernization, this in no sense determines how such a region should be viewed today. The choice is simple: in terms of its likely future development, is it a peripheral zone to some other world region or regions or is it in any sense a center in its own right?

Such a juxtaposition is by no means new. It figures as the central analytic choice posed by Sir Halford Mackinder in his famous lecture of 1904, "The Geographical Pivot of History."<sup>15</sup> Asking what geographical regions are central and which are peripheral, Mackinder concluded that in comparison with the great "world island" of Eurasia/Africa, all the Americas, Oceania, and even Britain, are peripheral. And within the "world island," Halford asserted that there is a true "heartland" consisting of the natural crossing point of continental land transportation. In comparison with this central zone, Mackinder argued, both Western Europe and most of East Asia are peripheral.

We may not accept Mackinder's idiosyncratic application of his own hypothesis, but his juxtaposition of "centers" and "peripheries" remains a useful concept, for it forces us to reconsider our discussion of distinctive regional characteristics. This time, however, we must take into account "gravitational pull" of the region's powerful continental neighbors, notably Russia, China, India, Iran, the Middle East, and Europe. Is any of these alone, or are several of them together, of such economic, social, and geopolitical weight as to turn Greater Central Asia into a peripheral zone, if not a backwater? Stated differently, does Central Asia's location doom it to being a marginal zone to *all* the major centers on the Eurasian land mass?

The implications for policy of either of these hypotheses, or of their opposite, are profound. If the region is not a center in its own right, if the underlying realities inextricably draw it into a peripheral relationship to one or more external powers, then it is inevitable that regional states would be treated as objects of other countries' policies rather than as subjects in their own right. If, however, Greater Central Asia has some claim to being central, i.e., to sharing benefits with major neighbors in every direction and not just one, then governments there can reasonably expect to function in international affairs as fully sovereign subjects. Given the importance of these contrasting paths, some clarity on the issue of center versus periphery is in order.

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<sup>15</sup> H. Mackinder, "The Geographical Pivot of History," *The Geographical Journal*, Vol. 170, No.4, December, 2004, pp. 298-321.

How does one measure the degree to which a given region is central or peripheral? Various indicators are relevant, but one that focuses on political control is especially promising. After all, if a given territory repeatedly falls under the rule of neighbors it suggests that the total resources of that territory are insufficient to generate centripetal force, no matter how significant its geographical or economic assets may be.

By this measure, the lands of Greater Central Asia would appear to come up short. The evidence is compelling: over the past two millennia no fewer than seven great empires have exerted control over part or all of the territory in question: Persians, Hellenistic Greeks, Chinese, Arabs, Mughals, British, and Russians. Some of them succeeded to the extent that they dominated regional affairs for several generations and even centuries.

But a closer look reveals the extent of these same external powers' failure. Persian rule in Central Asia under both Achaemenids and Sassanians was thin to nonexistent. Similarly, the heirs of Alexander the Great began losing power as soon as Alexander departed. Notwithstanding recent Chinese claims to the contrary, Ching China's influence in the region barely outlasted the Chinese army's brief presence there. Even in Xinjiang Chinese rule did not extend much beyond building a string of signal beacons and a few small garrisons. Xinjiang today may be different, thanks to massive Han migration and to Beijing's readiness to implement ruthlessly its "Strike Hard, Maximum Pressure" campaign against the indigenous population. But, as a Chinese premier said when asked about the French Revolution, "It's too early to say." Arabs conquered the region up to the Tien Shan but were too few in number to hold onto their gains. In due course they were absorbed by the indigenous populations. Even though the Mughals of India came originally from the Fergana Valley, they could never muster the will needed to reassert influence in the region. Britain's imperial system failed utterly to gain a permanent foothold anywhere in Central Asia, and was forced to settle for the transformation of Afghanistan into a buffer state and for so weak a presence in Xinjiang that it harassed neither the Chinese nor the Russians.

Russia did better militarily, thanks to which it could partly reshape Central Asian society according to a Russian and Soviet template. But in spite of collectivization and purges, the Soviets by the 1970s had to content themselves with ruling through regional satraps who extracted production for Moscow but otherwise ran local affairs quite independently of the center. As soon as scholars produce serious studies of the rule of Communist Party First Secretaries Sharov Rashidov in Uzbekistan, Turdakun Usabaliev in Kyrgyzstan,

Jabor Rasulov in Tajikistan, and Dinmukhamed Konayev in Kazakhstan the limits of Moscow's writ in Soviet Central Asia will be obvious to all.<sup>16</sup>

This brief overview leaves one skeptical about the possibility of any new outside power, no matter how powerful, gaining long-term hegemony over Greater Central Asia. But should it happen, the historical experience suggests the result would not be a period of vital development in the region. Generalizations must be treated with caution, but it appears that outside control has tended to isolate the region from continental trade, thwart its economic and cultural development, and ultimately destabilize it. By contrast, government exercised *from within the region by local forces* such as the Parthians, Samanids, Karakhanids, or Ghaznavids, or even by conquering nomadic Kushans or Seljuks, who settled down and established capitals there, tended to link the region with the outside world and to promote economic development. It is no surprise that these periods, far more than the eras of foreign rule, were also ages of great cultural effervescence, in which most of Central Asians' many seminal contributions to world culture were achieved.

Summing up, then, there is a strong historical, economic, and cultural case for treating Greater Central Asia today as a central area rather than as a periphery to any external economy or state, and as a subject of international diplomacy rather than simply as an object of the actions of outsiders. Unfortunately, few see it this way. With wonderful timing, the British scholar Peter Hopkirk in 1992 sent to press his great book on 19th century Russia-British rivalry in Central Asia, *The Great Game*.<sup>17</sup> Subsequently, the American analyst Zbigniew Brzezinski conjured up the image of a regional chess match, Russians invoked the marginalizing notion of Central Asia as their "back yard," and the Chinese seem to have acted on the assumption that their perceived security needs in Xinjiang entitled them to restrict the sovereignty of the new states to their West.<sup>18</sup>

Lost amidst this competition was any clear sense of the needs and rights of the regional states themselves. Aid organizations and financial institutions claimed to be attending to these matters, but they did so within the restricted space that was not filled by the geopolitical rivalry. Courted and pressured from all sides, the new regional states were being told they were the object of a zero sum game that they could win only by casting their lot irrevocably with one party or another. The price of survival, in other words, was to abandon all

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<sup>16</sup> The best work on this current is J. Critchlow, *Nationalism in Uzbekistan: A Soviet Republic's Road to Sovereignty*, Bolder, CO, Westview Press, 1991; for Kyrgyz First Secretary T. Usabaliev's fascinating memoir of this time see *Epokha, sozidanie, sud'by*, Bishkek, 1995.

<sup>17</sup> P. Hopkirk, *The Great Game: The Struggle for Empire in Central Asia*, New York: Kodansha International, 1992.

<sup>18</sup> Z. Brzeziński, *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and its Geostrategic Imperatives*, New York: Basic Books, 1997.

claims of being a center and to accept a peripheral status on the best terms offered... in short, security at the price of losing the right of self-determination and independence.

Gradually at first, but then with increasing assertiveness, Central Asians developed a very different solution to their geopolitical dilemma. They came to realize that it was at least partly within their powers to open up productive and strategic relations with all the major powers, and to manipulate these relationships in such a way as to create a balance among them. First systematically elaborated in Kazakhstan in 1997-2001, this approach has subsequently been embraced explicitly or implicitly by nearly all the states of the region.<sup>19</sup> Turkmenistan's declared neutrality prevents it from entering into strategic partnerships but otherwise meshes neatly with the notion of balance. Only Afghanistan remains outside this informal system, as is understandable in light of its history since 1989.

The only exposition of this approach from outside the region was a *Strategic Assessment of Central Asia and the Caucasus* issued by the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute in 2000. This document proposed a "concert" among major external powers for the Central Eurasian region, that is:

– a system of mutual tradeoffs emphasizing the common objective of a stable and open environment in which sovereignty and independence are respected by all powers. It requires an agreement—either formal or tacit—;

–among the states that the maintenance of the concert should be their principal regional objective. In practice, a regional concert [also] requires that all the major powers demonstrate a degree of mutual restraint in pursuing their individual ambitions...<sup>20</sup>

Such a "concert" is the natural end point of the policy of balance adopted de facto by most of the regional states themselves. As a solution to the problem of Greater Central Asia, it would, on the one hand, assure security, sovereignty, and self-determination to the region itself (i.e., a central rather than marginal place in the world, and the status of subject rather than object) and, on the other hand, protect the legitimate interests of all major powers. As such, it is even more desirable today than in 2000.

But for three reasons it remains far from reality. First, none of the major external powers is yet prepared to live with it. Russia remains committed to its program of maximizing economic and political control in the region, an approach rooted in 19th century

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<sup>19</sup> The author of this "multi-vectored" approach was then Foreign Minister of Kazakhstan, Kasymnzhomart Tokayev. See S. F. Starr, "Kazakhstan Security: a Model for Central Asia?" *Central Asia Affairs*, Vol. I, No. 3, 16 January 2007.

<sup>20</sup> S. F. Starr, C. C. Fairbanks, R. Nelson and K. Weisbrode, *Strategic Assessment of Central Eurasia*, Washington, D.C.: The Atlantic Council and Central Asia-Caucasus Institute (CACI), 2001, p.6.

zero-sum thinking, while China pursues what appears a milder strategy but which presents its own dangers to the region's economic and political self-determination. The United States, as an influential but distant power lacking a territorial border with the region, could play a significant role, but since 2001 has lacked a clear regional strategy.<sup>21</sup> The positions of India and the European Union are so tentative as to remain, for the time being, nearly irrelevant. Only Japan, with its innovative "Central Asia + Japan" program, is conducting itself in a manner compatible with a concert.

The second reason for which a center-affirming policy of balance is not fully in place across Greater Central Asia is because it would require more and better communication among the regional states themselves than now exists. Without such intra-regional ties, extra-regional relationships cannot be developed in a comprehensive manner. Only if intra-regional contacts improve at the level of presidencies, key ministries, and parliaments will the states of Central Eurasia be able effectively to convince their larger partners that their interests as major powers are better secured by a Greater Central Asia that is a center and a subject rather than a periphery and an object. Without them, the external powers will continue to play regional states against one another at will, to the detriment of all. Therefore, it makes sense for the world community to affirm the Central Asians' right to meet among themselves as they wish, and to oppose Russia's inappropriate attempt to prevent this.

Finally, this affirmation of the sovereignty of an important emerging world region has not occurred because only two of the potential external actors are actively engaged in the region, China and Russia, and a third, the United States, focuses its attention mainly on only one country, Afghanistan. Their interests are far from identical and in many respects on a collision course, but they have the board to themselves. Until the United States, India, Japan, or Europe, either singly or in some combination, present a more multi-dimensional and sustained commitment to the region as a whole, the Central Asians' own idea of a region that is central, self-determining, and balanced in its relations, will be doomed.

Japan's "Central Asia + Japan" program is a worthy if cautious step in this direction, as is the US' Trade and Investment Framework Agreement (TIFA) and the EU's recent initiatives.<sup>22</sup> India's modest but expanding presence in the region is an equally welcome

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<sup>21</sup> The closest to such a categorical commitment is the introduction (sec. 101) to the Silk Road Strategy Act II of 2006, still pending before Congress: "In General- The United States has significant long-term interests in the countries of Central Asia and the South Caucasus. These interests concern security, economic development, energy, and human rights." (22 U.S.C. 2151).

<sup>22</sup> On "Central Asia + Japan" see A. Rizayev, "First Meeting of 'Central Asia + Japan' Initiative Held in Tashkent," *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, Central Asia Caucasus Institute and Silk Road Studies Program, 4 May 2005, or <[www.cacianalyst.org](http://www.cacianalyst.org)> (archive).

development. If the US or any other power were to indicate more categorically than it has its long-term interest in the development of regional states as sovereign, secure, secular, open, and market-oriented, an important precondition for a policy of balance would be in place. Russia and/or China may object, but the resulting concert would go further towards securing the interests of these two powers than would any kind of zero-sum arrangement they may devise on their own. It is for this reason that a partnership has been proposed between the US and the Greater Central Asia region. This is not conceived in a zero-sum spirit, and is in fact the only workable antidote to zero-sum thinking on the part of other major powers. It will empower the Central Asians to take their future into their own hands, and at the same time will move the larger region towards the kind of stable development that benefits all continental neighbors.

The concert that results from this process may not be the first preference of any outside power but it will be the second-best solution for all of them. It will also close the gap that now exists between words and deeds. Russia and China, in a 2005 declaration, affirmed their intention to base relations with the broad Central Asian region on the principles of “mutual respect of sovereignty, territorial integrity, mutual non-aggression and non-interference.”<sup>23</sup> A balanced “concert” of powers will enable, encourage, and even require these two powers to translate these noble ideals into action with respect to their neighbors across Greater Central Asia.

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The idea of an open Greater Central Asia that is an economic and transport center rather than a periphery, and a self-determined subject of international affairs rather than a pliable object, is nothing new. True, it stands in contrast to the territorial colonialism that ended in 1991-2 and to the energy-driven colonialism which threatens the region today. It deserves to be taken seriously because it represents some of the best thinking within the region itself. No less, it arises from two thousand years of history, including eras when Greater Central Asia was indeed central to the world in a political, economic, and civilizational sense. With competent government within the region and restraint from the external powers, Greater Central Asia can regain some of that glory today.

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<sup>23</sup> S. Blagov, “Shanghai Cooperation Organization Summit Suggests New Russia-China Links,” *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 6 July 2005, at <[www.jamestown.org/edm/article.php?article\\_id=2369975](http://www.jamestown.org/edm/article.php?article_id=2369975)> (26 July 2006).