Perspectives

Setting the Stakes of a New Society

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Were we living in the days of the vast empires of Chinggis Khan or Tamerlane, when political unity was imposed over a domain extending across much of Eurasia from China to Eastern Europe and Asia Minor, perhaps no one would doubt the sense in founding a Central Eurasian Studies Society. Politics, after all, determines how many people think we should carve up the world for scholarship. Today, too, perhaps the arguments might seem more compelling as we follow the war in Afghanistan, which could send waves of instability outward across the political terrain of Central Eurasia.

I am not among those who hope for things to get worse so that others will recognize the importance of this region. Were we working in the 13th century, even if there had not been the world largest empire in this region, I think there would still have been enough for our field of scholarship to explore in the culture reflected in Chinggis Khan's yurt, or in the spread of Mongol terms and military institutions all across Eurasia, or in the comparative economy of Chinese, Muslim and Russian cities after nomadic conquest. There need not have been an empire at stake. And building a strong scholarly community will not hinge on the journalists and policy-makers gathering to watch the region go up in flames.

I believe that the historical moment at which we have arrived — which has allowed the Central Eurasian Studies Society to embark on its trajectory — is propitious for the success of its endeavor in much deeper and more positive ways. This is the point which I will elaborate in this short survey of the Central Eurasian Studies Society as we stake out our goals and foundation. Those goals are two-fold: we want to improve communication among scholars as well as consumers of scholarly research, and we want to foster higher standards of scholarship. Before elaborating our goals, I should first define Central Eurasia, as we use this term, and then I will explain why a new society is needed to achieve these goals.

What is Central Eurasia?

While definitional discussions are often polemical and dogmatic, my purpose here — and I think our purpose in the Society — is to define a domain in which scholars will find it useful to communicate among themselves. Put another way, we seek to specify the geography that begs for close comparisons and common understanding. Any region — and especially one which is situated amidst so many others, as Central Eurasia is — requires connections and comparisons in many directions.

Our definition of Central Eurasia is anything but dogmatic. In my time as President of the Central Eurasian Studies Society, I have received dozens of queries from scholars of regions which are treated as marginal to other area studies domains, asking whether they fit the definition of Central Eurasia: Tungusic and Turkic peoples of Siberia, Uralic peoples of the Volga Basin, Tibet, Caucasian Muslim and Christian peoples, Muslims of Eastern Europe. My answer has been: If you can find a good home for yourself among scholars of Central Eurasia, we will try to accommodate you. Part of what motivates these questions, I believe, is the sense that study of Russia is too often assumed to be study of Moscow, study of China has little room for non-Han Chinese peoples, study of the Islamic World has lost touch with what used to be an "Islamic heartland" or "Christian outposts," but now is treated only as lands of historically preserved anomalies.

The unifying characteristics of Central Eurasia are not universal, but no region is universally unified. The things which unite large parts of Central Eurasia are significant: the historical interface between nomads and settled peoples; the lands

where Turkic, Iranian, Caucasian, Mongolian, Tungusic and Tibetan peoples have proliferated; the Inner Asian territories of Islam, Buddhism and Shamanism; and the countries which have emerged with new independent significance and accompanying agendas of nation-building following the collapse of the Soviet Union. These unifying characteristics are in the domains of language, religion, life-ways, and culture, as well as of course, histories of domination, geographic proximity and ensuing economic links.

There is no question but that this is a region united by historical and cultural links, even if there has not been a strong consensus on what to call the region. We have chosen the term "Central Eurasia", while others have used "Central Asia", "Inner Asia", "Inner Eurasia", and other variations across other languages — all meant to encompass more or less the same domain. The term "Central Eurasia" has its negative as well as positive points. Perhaps the most important positive is precisely that it is a neologism which can be defined as needed, whereas "Inner Asia" is often understood not to include regions as far west as the Caucasus, "Central Asia" is sometimes construed very narrowly to include only the lands surrounding the Gobi Desert or only the former Soviet republics between the Tien Shan-Pamir Mountains and the Caspian Sea, etc. Without wishing to displace other terms or champion one interpretation, we have chosen "Central Eurasia" as it seems to signify what we mean, for most people, better than other terms.

So what exactly does it signify? An inexact effort to stake out this term would include lands from the Iranian Plateau, the Black Sea, and the Volga Basin through Afghanistan, Southern Siberia, and the Himalayas to Muslim and Manchu regions of China and the Mongol lands. Scholars who feels that their object of study is marginal in this circumscription are welcome to help us build a society in which their own regions are strongly represented. Ultimately, all useful definitions will be historically contingent — the shape of the world *did* change enduringly, for example, when Chinggis Khan's armies conquered much of the known world, and again when Communist governments sought isolation from lands beyond their borders. We must take account of the overlapping categories that make up Central Eurasia in historically appropriate ways. Under this rubric, scholars can gather, because it provides terms of commonality and a field of comparison which are meaningful for their particular studies.

Why Form a New Society?

A society — strange as it may seem to remind us — is a social entity. The lack of a society implies the absence of social interactions, which are essential for scholarship. Communication has suffered in the field of Central Eurasian studies for several reasons, including scholarly fragmentations, political rifts and lack of a unifying medium for communication, and these factors have served as obstacles to forming a society for the study of the Central Eurasian region.

Central Eurasia has seldom been treated as a field of scholarship in its own right. Parts of Central Eurasia have been attached to other area studies domains, no matter how weak the connections or how low the priority they receive in that context. For example, in North America, the entire northern tier of Central Eurasia has been claimed by a society whose name and orientation feature "Slavic Studies" — for the simple reason that this territory has been under Russian domination. Scholars who are interested precisely in that Russian domination may find a home in Slavic studies, but others in both Slavic studies and Central Eurasian studies find the connections too tenuous to be meaningful. Scholars of China, Japan and Korea typically see little of interest in Mongolia, Tibet and Turkistan, though these regions are attached in North American scholarship to "(East) Asian Studies", at the same time as being largely ignored in this context. When I decided I would focus my anthropological research on the area surrounding the Tien Shan-Pamir Mountains in the early 1980s, I came to understand that depending on which way I turned — or really, where chance events would allow me to do research — I would be expected to find a home among one of three virtually non-overlapping communities of scholars: Islamic/South Asian studies, East Asian studies or Soviet studies. Divided between these area studies domains, what is central to Central Eurasia was treated as peripheral to everything else.

Furthermore, because Central Eurasian scholarship has been divided and peripheralized, it has been impossible to develop the critical mass that is essential for strong scholarship. When a historian of Daghestan or Turkistan publishes before a Russian studies audience, there is simply unlikely to be the depth of feedback that would prompt healthy critical exchange and the ultimate improvement of scholarship. I've heard many scholars of Central Eurasia complain that at most of the conferences they would have the occasion to attend, they have to spend the first half of their presentation explaining

where their topic is situated and what it is all about. Anthropologists of Central Eurasia are hard pressed to find a body of literature on which to teach a course on the subject. Few theoretical arguments have been elaborated in a developed scholarly exchange focused on this region, which is a tremendous obstacle to the development of social sciences with a focus on this part of the world.

Further fragmentation of the scholarly community stemmed from political cleavages. The tightly closed political systems of the Soviet Union and China imposed severe isolation on scholars of this region working in those countries. Constraints of politics and poverty limited the development of scholarship in Afghanistan and Iran, both within the countries and in cooperation with scholarship in other countries. Even in the countries with better resources and fewer political constraints, scholarship developed in enclaves that sometimes had limited interaction with one another — in Europe, North America, Japan. Some of these barriers have come down now with the end of the Cold War and the opening of China. But new constraints limit linkages — for example, what was once a quite unified scholarly domain in the Soviet Union has now fragmented into as many independent countries, between which scholarly exchanges have been reduced to very near nil.

The fact that Central Eurasia has not been a unified political space has practical, linguistic implications for the study of the region. We can compare our situation with Latin American studies: when one knows Spanish, one can exchange ideas with virtually the entire community of Latin Americanists. Africa is not unified by a single language, but it is very nearly unified by the history of domination by three countries, and English and French enable one to engage scholarship across the region. But the information space of Central Eurasia is divided among Russian, Chinese, Turkic and Persian, plus a plethora of more localized languages. Despite the dreams of "pan-Turkists" and the dwindling proponents of Russian as a world language, there is no more plausible *lingua franca* for regional scholarship than the entirely exogenous English language, in which far too few scholars in the region are proficient.

Linguistic fragmentation does more than inhibit information exchange: it complicates the development of scholarly resources for the study of the region. There are very few satisfactory introductory texts for students to read. Only in the last decade have teaching materials in English begun to be available for some of the main Central Eurasian languages, but in most cases we cannot point to adequate textbooks, grammars, readers and dictionaries. This, in spite of the fact that for scholars to be well trained in many fields, they must have a knowledge of at least two or three difficult languages. There is a lack of key reference resources such as encyclopedias and bibliographies. There are few translations of major contributions to culture or scholarship. There are few institutions where a student can get a comprehensive foundation in the study of any part of Central Eurasia. Fewer still that are prepared to teach many of the key languages.

Critics and skeptics of our efforts to build a community and improve scholarship may argue that all of these obstacles have hindered previous efforts to establish societies seeking to represent scholarship on Eurasia. A century ago, the Royal Central Asian Society was founded in Britain, but by the 1970s the focus was almost completely lost and the society was reorganized as the Royal Society for Asian Affairs. The Central Asian Studies Society in London has for some decades produced an important journal — *Central Asian Survey* — but appears not to have a membership. Two North American societies appeared in the 1980s, the Association for the Advancement of Central Asian Research (AACAR) and the Association for Central Asian Studies (ACAS), perhaps in part because they occupied the same space, both organizations lost momentum before long and have appeared largely or entirely lifeless for most of the last decade (with the important exception of the *Journal of Central Asian Studies*, which is still associated with AACAR). More hope might be pinned on the European Society for Central Asian Studies, which has successfully organized biannual conferences for a decade, though the life of this organization seems confined to the conferences and the ensuing conference volumes.

Where CESS Can Make Its Mark

Given the obstacles, what can a new society do that others could not? The answer is: our Society can put its energy into building the infrastructure — the community, the institutions, the resources — lacking in the past. When this infrastructure is in place, it can help foster higher standards of scholarship. These are the goals of CESS.

Two years ago, a group of people — motivated by both frustration at the lack of development of this field and by inspiration that we

have a real opportunity now — began to lay the foundation for the Central Eurasian Studies Society. The moment of conception was a meeting at the University of Wisconsin organized by Uli Schamiloglu, the Fourth Annual Workshop on Central Asian Studies. Here, an informal "temporary executive committee" was formed to get the ball rolling. I remember Marianne Kamp, who was drafted as chair and main motivator of the committee, saying that at the end of a year, we'll know whether it is going to fly. Thanks to her great ability to set reachable goals and to elicit the energy and focus in others needed to meet them, it is flying.

In fall 2000, we held our first annual conference. In winter 2001, we held the first elections, in which the membership elected a dedicated and diverse board. In the time since I was elected as President, our focus has been on laying the institutional foundation and building two key activities: the annual conference (under Uli Schamiloglu and Steve Sabol's leadership) and the publication, the Central Eurasian Studies Review, with Virginia Martin as Editor-in-Chief leading a strong committee of section editors and correspondents.

From the outset, the CESS initiative has had grand ambitions but modest goals. Given that for the foreseeable future, we will have to rely exclusively on volunteer effort, we must methodically build our capacity to do great things. We must prove to our members that it is worth their support and active engagement. In time, we can hope to unite the lion's share of scholars in North America and worldwide who focus on Central Eurasia — to become the conference that all feel drawn to attend and the periodical that all can benefit from reading. But for now, I am greatly heartened by the tremendous interest and support we have received from a rapidly growing membership — already over 700 members, the majority in North America, and many also in other parts of the world, in over 50 countries, including all of the countries of Central Eurasia.

There was a deliberate decision to focus on building our foundation in North America at the same time as welcoming participation of scholars throughout the world. Eventually, we will have the capacity to organize more activities in other parts of the world, but for now we are setting our stakes on building a solid core, to avoid becoming spread too thin.

As an area studies society, we are determined to encompass all fields of humanities and social science scholarship. Where area studies organizations are often dominated by particularists and thus by historians, philologists, and scholars of culture, we feel that the support of area studies would be missing an important purpose if it did not also build a base for the grounded knowledge of generalizers, such as anthropologists, political scientists and comparative historians. While we are concerned about scholarship at the cutting edge of international research at the top rank institutions, we are also anxious to help scholars in all parts of the world to partake of the process of building high international scholarly standards.

In this goal we will build on the momentum growing in the field since the early 1990s, when it suddenly became imaginable for many to devote themselves to the study of the newly opening countries. It may be that more dissertations were written in North America on Central Eurasian politics in the decade of the 1990s than in all time previously. In all disciplines, there was a tremendous influx of young blood into Central Eurasian studies, and now a number of these people are finding faculty positions in North American universities. The rise of the region in Europe, by comparison, has been less precipitous, and in Central Eurasia itself, scholarship has suffered greatly from the loss of state patronage. Yet overall the field is gaining considerable momentum.

A few people have asked what their CESS membership can offer them, and it is a reasonable question, but more people have been asking what their volunteer efforts can contribute to our Society. This is our greatest resource. And our most urgent task is to develop the capacity to make good use of all the energy and creativity that our members have to offer.

CESS as a Cyber-Society

With all that is dividing us in terms of geography, practical constraints and divergent scholarly traditions, we have some key tools that enable us to build a community across the disparate terrain of Central Eurasian studies. It was a wonderful thing to get together at the CESS Second Annual Conference this past October with many scholars whom I had never met, but had known of for years. Nothing can fully replace face-to-face familiarity and the opportunity for exchange "in true life."

But it has been equally wonderful to see how much we can build through interactions via electronic connections. In working with CESS, I

have developed relations of tremendous respect and admiration with people whom I've met either never, or only once or twice in passing. After our first Board was in place following last winter's elections, we quickly composed a set of committees to further our key activities. And their work has proceeded with great energy, primarily through the exchange of views and information via e-mail. Were we reliant on traditional communications, we would have had so much less substantive exchange with our members, because our time and capacity would have been exhausted by stuffing envelopes and licking stamps.

Our goals, meanwhile, are focused on the concrete. I am very grateful for the conference and its concrete interactions, and it is one of our key priorities to strengthen this event so that as many people as possible are able and inclined to attend. Though we will make our publications available via the world wide web, we will also put great weight on producing paper editions, as we recognize that libraries, readers, and tenure granting departments still work that way.

Another dimension of the new shape of the world under the influence of the internet was manifest when we received literally hundreds of notes expressing dismay and concern following the September 11 attacks in the U.S. Our members and supporters all over the world — including some countries seriously devastated by war such as Afghanistan, Chechnya and Tajikistan — showed that there is a powerfully connected community in our Central Eurasian Studies Society, facilitated by this new ease and immediacy of communication across the globe.

A Better World at Stake

Another thing that has been driven home to many of us by the events following the September 11 terrorist attacks is that our Society has urgent responsibility to communicate its knowledge to the world. I had no suspicion when I visited Uzbekistan the first time nearly two decades ago — or even when I was there this past summer — that this would be a place where my country's troops might operate. How many of those soldiers even knew last summer that there was a country called Uzbekistan? How many of the policy-makers and pundits who are devising plans for the future of Afghanistan knew names like Massoud, Mullah Omar and Hamid Karzai a few months ago? Currently, without the world knowing Central Eurasia, whole cities are being annihilated in Chechnya, Armenia is being virtually depopulated of youth, Uyghurs of Xinjiang are being drowned in an ocean of Chinese and responding with violence, bombs are falling in Abkhazia. These events are only the starkest demonstration that there is a need to better understand Central Eurasia for the sake of the world.

And it is not only violence and tragedy which should render this region worthy of our world's attention. Each of us has our own store of rich experiences from our engagement with the cultures and peoples of Central Eurasia, whose real human aspirations, strivings and accomplishments are there to be told to the world.