

# Perspectives

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## The Centrality of Central Eurasia

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In times of great change, an old wisdom advises, it is best not to look forward but to look back. When people find the world changing around them, when they find that events question their most common understandings, when they encounter conflict that questions their most deeply held values, wise counsel urges them to look inward rather than outward. When the formal rules and regulations of a society come to seem strangely at odds with the actual practices, it is time to look much deeper than the formalities of politics and economics to the very essence of culture itself.

Surely we live in times such as these. Globalization is compressing time and space, bringing people into greater and more frequent contact than ever before. Yet mutual understanding seems scarcer than ever. Knowledge has reached levels undreamed of in the days before the PC and internet; information moves with speeds never before thought possible. Yet wisdom seems as difficult to come by as ever. The formal structures of society, the economy and government are more sophisticated than ever before, yet many people find that these structures are often ill-suited to the things that matter to them the most. While a globalized world should know how to do things better, more efficiently, more effectively, we find that all too often this is not the case.

These tendencies are seen and felt in all societies today, but there are some places where they are particularly pronounced. Central Eurasia is surely one of these. Following the collapse of the USSR, the Central Eurasian societies that until so recently were cordoned off, isolated, and separated from much of the world, have traveled through decades of transformation in the span of just a few short years. Since the disintegration of the USSR, Central Eurasia has redefined itself, both internally and in relation to the societies around it. The countries of Central Eurasia emerged from the doldrums of communism to enter a rapidly

transforming world. Globalization tends to benefit those countries that manage it well and punish those countries that do not. The Central Eurasian countries are still in the early stages of this revolution, but clearly they have suffered from many disorienting influences of globalization while not yet fully benefiting from the prosperity, freedom and equity that globalization promises.

More recently, following the events of September 11 and the rapid shifts in geostrategic relations, the Central Eurasian countries have become the focus of the diplomatic attentions of chancelleries around the world. Competition over access to fuel resources in the Middle East has combined with Russia's growing role in the international energy trade to focus the attention of world markets on the oil riches of the Central Eurasian Caspian littoral. As countries look forward to post-Afghanistan normalization, Central Eurasia's importance looms ever larger in the great geopolitical rivalry over the shape of the future. The jockeying for position in the post-Cold War reorganization of Asia, the Middle East, and Europe has focused attention on the lands lying at the interstices of those countries — the lands of Central Eurasia. These lands have close ties to the Middle East, yet they are not the Middle East. These lands have close ties to Asia, yet they are not Asia. Much of Central Eurasia was long under the dominion of European Russia, yet it is not Europe. Neither East nor West, neither Europe nor Asia, Central Eurasia is its own region. Recent events have given a new practical urgency to understanding this ancient region that has gained such an important and growing role in contemporary affairs.

### *The Contours of Central Eurasia*

In the inaugural issue of CESR a year ago, John Schoeberlein spoke of the importance of building a scholarly consensus on the question of what constitutes Central Eurasia. John spoke of

demarcating the territory of Central Eurasia in ways that would promote better and more cooperative scholarship on the region and increase cooperation between Central Eurasian scholars and their counterparts in Asia, the Middle East, and Europe. With such an enterprise in mind, scholars could avoid unproductive struggles over definitions of "turf." Scholars could pursue their research questions in depth in a way that would do justice to the uniqueness of the region, while not losing sight of the close connections of the region with other parts of the world.

What constitutes the outlines, the contours, of Central Eurasia? In addressing this question, John noted that Central Eurasia broadly includes lands roughly contained within a perimeter ranging from points along 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. Using this physical outline as constituting the borders, broadly conceived, of Central Eurasia, it is clear that the region is "central" because it is, and has always been, in the middle. The peoples of Central Eurasia have historically been "between." Between East and West, between North and South, between China and Persia, between Islam and Christendom, between mountains and plains, between desert and oasis.

Definitions, of course, are sometimes determined as much by conventional usage as by any objective features of the subject to be defined. In the past it was conventional to include much of Central Eurasia in the Soviet communist world. The Central Asian republics, the Caucasus republics, Mongolia, and, for a period at least, Afghanistan were seen as within the USSR or at least within the Soviet orbit. After the Soviet Union disintegrated, the countries of Central Asia and the Caucasus and Mongolia quickly adopted independent and separate paths. Now, after more than a decade of national independence, it is clear that the countries of the Central Eurasian region are, and would prefer to remain, distinct in many respects from their Middle Eastern, European, and Asian neighbors.

To be sure, the countries of the region share many common cultural, economic, and political features. The five former Soviet republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan lie adjacent to one another and have long traditions of close cooperation, but frequently find themselves at odds with one another over such issues as water, energy, transportation and relations

with the Great Powers. Across the Caspian Sea, the Caucasus states of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia have close historical linkages with the other former Soviet Central Asian countries and with the countries of the Middle East. Afghanistan and Mongolia have historical linkages with the other Central Eurasian countries due to Soviet era commercial and cultural relations. Xinjiang Province of the People's Republic of China has historically been separated politically and economically from the post-Soviet Central Asian states but has close cultural ties to them, particularly to Kazakhstan. Some other republics, particularly Bashkortostan and Tatarstan, both constituent republics of the Russian Federation, have close cultural, linguistic, and commercial ties to Central Asia and are usually thought of as being part of a larger Central Eurasian community. This list is by no means exhaustive; it does not include everything that should be counted as within Central Eurasia, nor does it exclude everything that should be left out.

There are reasons to stress commonality within Central Eurasia and there are reasons to see important areas of difference and uniqueness among the cultures of the region. Political leaders and scholars frequently point out that the Central Asian states possess many common elements. Traditions of language, culture, practice, and perspective are shared throughout the region. But there are important differences. No single language is spoken everywhere in the region. The area is broadly Muslim, yet no single religious tradition is practiced throughout the region. Moreover, although all of the states have ancient social traditions, none of the contemporary states of Central Asia ever existed with its current borders as an independent state prior to the Soviet period. The contemporary borders therefore do not have legitimacy gained through long historical precedent. There are many economic complementarities in the region, but these are much less important than complementarities with countries outside the region. International trade, over the last decade, has tended to overshadow intra-regional trade.

It is an accident of political history that many of the frontiers of Central Eurasia were defined by the interaction of great foreign empires. The Russian Empire defined Central Eurasia's northern boundaries; the eastern boundaries were defined by China; the western boundaries were defined by the Ottoman empire and Persian empires; the Durand line forming the southern boundary of the former USSR was defined by the 19th century confrontation

between Russia and Great Britain. The influence of the external frontiers of Central Eurasia has been magnified by the passing of time. Many modern universities in Europe and the Americas until quite recently continued to conceive of the world in terms of major geographical regions of Africa, Asia, Europe, the Middle East, and the former Soviet bloc. These conceptual divisions were merely abstract. They were replicated in terms of institutional divisions of departments, centers, and other research programs. Major governments too divided up the world in terms of these same areas. Central Eurasian states did not fit well into any of these categories. As a consequence, the countries of Central Eurasia were relegated to a secondary status in the often fierce and uncompromising competition for institutional resources within the western world's complex bureaucracies.

The collapse of the USSR and the rising tides of globalization have made it possible to redefine the institutional and conceptual divisions that we use. The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe has expanded its activities into the Central Eurasian states, not deterred by the fact that the states are not in "Europe." Two of the world's most important multilateral lending institutions, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development and the Asian Development Bank, solved the problem of whether the countries were in Europe or Asia. The banks came to the Solomonic decision that the countries were in both Europe and Asia. Both regional development banks started and have maintained active development programs in the countries throughout the Eurasian region, making Central Eurasia the only region in the world where two multilateral development banks simultaneously share mandates.

#### *The Uniqueness of Central Eurasia*

The foundation of the scholarly enterprise is the effort to simultaneously understand a phenomenon in terms of its unique features as well as its place in more general patterns. Knowledge proceeds on the basis of developing generalizations that contribute to our common knowledge in a way that makes it possible for us to understand and appreciate uniqueness and difference. Modern society, driven by the homogenizing forces of globalization, commercialization and conceptual standardization, runs the risk of losing sight of the individual and the important for the sake of the common and the general. In the Anglo-Saxon world in particular, the triumphant role of the English

language as the medium of computers, the internet and the language of international diplomacy, science, and commerce has reduced the ability of many scholars to appreciate social, historical and cultural phenomena that only an "area studies" approach can adequately comprehend. Many students, quite naturally, seek to avoid the substantial time and energy that language and detailed area study require.

In the end, the scholarly community appreciates that there are no shortcuts to understanding. I think that this explains the excitement that the establishment of the Central Eurasian Studies Society has generated. It is a testimony to the fact that many scholars, particularly younger scholars, appreciate the intrinsic importance of understanding peoples in the full historical and cultural context in which they live. There may also be another factor at play here. Many scholars of Central Eurasia, both citizens of the region and citizens of other countries, from a broad range of disciplines including the arts, humanities, sciences, social sciences and policy sciences, have found themselves influenced by a special regard for the peoples, cultures, history, and promise of the region. I think that it is accurate to say that many scholars of Central Eurasia consider their work to be driven by considerations higher than mere vocation — they are studying Central Eurasia out of a sense of what can only be described as respect and affection for the peoples of the region.

It is natural that some beginning scholars feel a certain amount of trepidation at the prospect of the great commitment that an area approach demands. Language, history, and culture are not cursory undertakings — they require a substantial commitment of a scholar's time, energy and dedication. In today's highly competitive academic world there will always be detractors for any approach or orientation that does not seem to offer quick solutions and early "bottom line" returns. The desire for easy knowledge and instant expertise has led some scholars in the past to criticize area studies approaches as too eclectic, too contextual, and too descriptive to be systematic and fully "scientific." Yet such superficial criticism is increasingly being overcome by the urgency of understanding the world in truly empirical terms, that is, in a way that does justice to reality rather than to the preconceived notions of the researcher.

Geography has always been a dominant feature of Central Eurasia. Central Eurasia has been

defined by mountain and plain. At the center of Central Eurasia was the Pamir Knot, the great confluence of mountains that linked Central Eurasia's five great outward radiating ranges — the Himalayas extending southeast; the Karakorum extending southeast; the Hindu Kush extending southwest; the Tian Shan extending northeast; and the Kunlun Shan extending east. The snows and glaciers of these mountains fed the rivers and valleys below. The mountains also fed the groundwater reservoirs that sustained the region's desert oases. The livelihoods of Central Eurasia's nomads, pastoralists, agriculturalists, and traders have always been shaped by the region's geography. In turn, the livelihoods have shaped the culture of the peoples of Central Eurasia. Culture refers to a people's way of life, especially the general practices, customs, attitudes, and beliefs of a people. Culture is the distilled experience of the past, the wisdom of passed generations. Culture is multifaceted, malleable, and evolving. There is no single, comprehensive list of all critical aspects of culture. Understanding culture requires understanding it in its full complexity. Only an area studies approach can make it possible to understand Central Eurasia in its own terms. The Central Eurasian Studies Society has a role to play in making it possible for the rest of the world to appreciate the uniqueness of Central Eurasia.

### *The Shape of Things to Come*

What is Central Eurasia in the fast changing world? It is probably fair to say that the definition of Central Eurasia is evolving. It is the job of the scholar to seek to understand, interpret, and pass on knowledge about what people value and create, how they behave, and how they interact with one another and with the natural environment around them. It is perhaps a bit presumptuous to assert that it is the job of the scholar to "define" Central Eurasia. The world may offer us definitions that we as scholars find less than satisfactory. Reason does not always determine the course of human affairs. But the Central Eurasian Studies Society has an important contribution to make. Many, perhaps most, ideas of politicians and government officials are little more

than the shadows of concepts and ideas that were learned in classroom lectures and discussions many years before.

Particularly after September 11, many national governments began revising their thinking in terms of Central Eurasia as a region of strategic importance. Caspian oil and gas resources obviously play an important role in such reassessments. In a development that would have seemed implausible just a few years ago, American troops are stationed at Gansi airbase in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, cooperating in anti-terrorist activities with Russian Federation troops stationed at the Kant airbase just a few miles away. In deference to the importance of understanding Central Eurasia in its own terms, many major American universities have recently started research programs devoted to the region. We as scholars can serve our discipline best by taking advantage of the new-found importance of the region by incessantly pressing forward in our own institutions and countries with new proposals for programs, projects, and studies developed with an area approach. We must continue to impress upon administrators, politicians, and our colleagues the importance of Central Eurasia.

In his address in the inaugural issue of CESR, John Schoeberlein raised the issue of the definition of Central Eurasia by leaving the demarcation of the region open to the energies and intelligence of the scholars who labor in the field. John argued, "any region — and especially one which is situated amidst so many others, as Central Eurasia is — requires connections and comparisons in many directions." Following that advice, it is important that Central Eurasianists — both those who live in the region and those who live in other parts of the world — work collaboratively with our scholarly colleagues in Asian, Middle Eastern, and Slavic studies to define the frontiers of our area in a way that does justice to the centrality of Central Eurasia.

*Professor Gleason and the editors of CESR invite reader response. Is there a definition, or set of definitions, of Central Eurasia that CESS should promote?*