ARTICLES

MONGOLIA AND THE NEW CENTRAL ASIA*

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The Soviet Union's collapse which transformed the entire geopolitical map of Central Asia has, from Mongolia's perspective, brought both challenges and opportunities for Mongolia and the former Soviet Asian republics. They can be summarized as follows:

Mongolia acquired its de facto independence while the Central Asian states acquired their de jute independence. In some instances, this change was so sudden, unexpected, and even undesirable that it will take considerable time for all Central Asian states to fully adjust themselves to the new circumstances.

The region's strategic environment has been transformed from stability into a state of great dynamism. The key questions are who will fill the current geostrategic vacuum and by what means. Although Russia is trying to reassert its control in the region, the possibility of other would-be regional players competing for influence in the new Central Asia has already become a reality.

The most challenging tasks facing the new Central Asian states are the rediscovery of their national identities and the process of nation building. In the past these tasks proved to be violent and disruptive, and the present situation in Central Asia tends to bear this out. Specifically, what is endangering public peace and private well-being is the danger of rising ethnic conflicts, resurgent nationalism, and religious fundamentalism.

THE HISTORICAL LINKS

The huge landmass we call Central Asia, stretching from the western terminus of the Chinese Great Wall at Jiayuguan all the way west to the shores of the Caspian Sea, was the historic arena of vast population movements. Three successive waves of nomadic nations swept across this region. First there were the Turks who in the mid-sixth century established an unprecedented vast empire linking Byzantium with the various states of a disunited China. The second wave was less sweeping yet historically quite significant. Caught off-guard by the Kyrgyz around 850, the Yoghurts were forced to abandon their homeland on

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the Mongolian plateau and move westward. One group settled in the western part of today's Genus province where their descendants still live and are known as the Yellow Yoghurts (Shari Yoghurt; Yogurt), while the main body moved into what today is known as Eastern Turkistan, called Xinjiang by the Chinese.

The last great nomadic invasion occurred in the thirteenth century when the Mongols established their world empire. An incident at Otrar in 1219 triggered what to this day has remained as the most sweeping military campaign in recorded history. Mongol armies smashed the huge Khwarezmian Empire which included most of the new Central Asia that this article is about, and eventually across Russia all the way to Central Europe. By 1400 the world's largest empire had disappeared, replaced in Central Asia by innumerable local entities that, more often than not, fought each other. This state of affairs remained undisturbed until the eighteenth century when two new outside powers impinged upon Central Asia, an expansionist Russia from the west and the Manchu empire from the east. In very short order, the two empires began to compete with each other for strategic advantage. The Russians moved south of the Urals to subdue the Kazakh hordes and proceeded to capture Tashkent in 1865, Samarqand in 1868, and Burkhart and the remaining major cities west, of the Tainting shortly thereafter The Manchu empire, which by that time had been greatly weakened by the Western imperialists, hastened to secure for itself the lands east of the Tainting, and in 1884 converted them into a regular province of China, called Xinjiang, or "New Frontier".

THE COMMON SOVIET LEGACY

Soviet rule in Central Asia was basically established in the period from 1918 to 1922. In order to separate the Turkic portions of the former Tsarist Empire from the rest of Central Asia, the term Srednyaya Aziya was coined and applied to the Soviet portion of Central Asia. This area included Uzbekistan and Turkmen, both receiving Union Republic status in 1924, followed by Tajikistan in 1929, and Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan in 1936.

Economic Interdependence

The main economic sectors of the Central Asian republics are agriculture, extractive industries (particularly oil, gas, coal, and minerals), and energy. There is some heavy engineering, especially in Uzbekistan, some metallurgy, including the processing of aluminum and uranium in Tajikistan, and several large petrochemical plants. In addition, one finds a number of military-industrial complexes, including the nuclear testing site at Semipalatinsk and the Beckoner space cen-

ter, both located in Kazakhstan. Most of the larger enterprises, and all military complexes, were under the direct control of the Soviet government in Moscow.

The external economic relations of all Central Asian republics were overwhelmingly with other Union republics. For example, in the late 1980s Kazakhstan's trade was 91% with the rest of the Soviet Union, and only 9% of its exports and 12% of its imports being conducted with the outside world. The lion's share of the trade, about 60% of its exports and a somewhat higher share of its imports, was with Russia. According to an IMF report, a particularly heavy mutual dependence between Kazakhstan and other Soviet republics existed in the energy sector. Before the recent decision to build an oil pipeline across the Caspian Sea, about three-fourths of the republic's oil went westward through a Russian pipeline. Kazakhstan's coal was transported from its Palomar fields to Siberia and the region west of the Urals where processing factories used this coal.[1]

An analogous situation is found in Kyrgyzstan where as late as the early 1990s 96% of its imports and 88% of its exports were still conducted within the territory of the former Soviet Union, with its largest trading partners being, in the order of importance, Russia, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Ukraine. The country's economy is obviously not self-sufficient. 70% of its consumer goods are imported; oil comes from Uzbekistan, and steel and industrial equipment from Ukraine, and most technological and manufactured goods from Russia. Aside from war-torn Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan has suffered the most from the sudden termination of the old Soviet economic ties. The 1993 IMF report on that country states that "the highly specialized division of labor practiced under the central command of the former Soviet Union has resulted in Kyrgyzstan's serious reliance on the trade with the other republics"[2]

Much of the same can be reported about the other Central Asian countries. Uzbekistan has to import 45% of all industrial consumer goods, and an astonishing 90% or more of its raw cotton has to be exported for lack of domestic processing facilities. Tajikistan buys half of its manufactured consumer goods and industrial raw materials from other countries, while two-thirds of needed industrial consumer commodities are imported into Turkmen. These few figures suggest that the impact of the USSR's disintegration has perhaps been heavier and more protracted in Central Asia than elsewhere.

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[1]IMF, Economic Reviews. "Kazakhstan", 1993.
[2]IMF, Economic Reviews, "Kyrgy7. Republic", 1993.

Cultural Vacuum

As one Russian analyst recently observed, the official Communist ideology in the former Soviet Central Asian republics had only affected the transparent and superficial layers of society. Traditional institutions, having had a pervasive influence in everyday life, remained largely intact. Soviet power was encouraged to adjust itself to this basic reality, and in fact in the mid-1980s it gradually declined,' parallel to a growing social openness which generated popular appeals to return to historical, cultural, and religious roots.

The same author also points out that the emergence of Islamic parties in Central Asia, such as the Islamic Renaissance Party in Tajikistan, has been strongly bolstered by the growing influence of "unofficial" mullahs among both rural and urban populations. He acknowledges that the official clergy, with the exception of those in Tajikistan, emphasizes that the time for Islam's political comeback has not yet come, and that the main objective today is "to let Islam reemerge as a belief Yet he predicts that, due to the nature of the situation in Central Asia during the many decades of Soviet power, the next step may well be an increased Islamic involvement in the realpolitik of the region.[3]

It is true that everywhere in Central Asia one can see a more accommodating attitude toward Islam. New mosques have opened and informal religious classes have been set up in many areas. Islam has turned out to be a ready replacement for Soviet ideology. While in urban areas Islam has been accorded a more modest place in the cultural and ceremonial spheres of life, in rural areas, especially in the Ferghana Valley, a more extremist form of Islam is reportedly taking hold.

This does not mean, however, as some Western observers have been prone to believe, that every Muslim is a fundamentalist, especially of the kind who is attracted to the Iranian leadership. Tajikistan's most powerful religious leader, its quid Akbar Turajonzoda, in an interview with a German newspaper maintained that Iran could not possibly be a paradigm for Tajikistan:

> The conditions are completely different. In Iran there was never a Communist Party in power. The seventy-year predominance of atheism has had an effect on our country... Today the people are afraid of an Islamic regime, and why should one make the people afraid? ... The people understand religion in their own way: they do not want the women to wear the chador

[3] M.Konarovsky, »Russia and the emerging geopolitical order in Central Asia», »Tile New Geopolitics of Central Asia and its Borderlands*, ed. by Ali Bauuami and Myron Weiner (Bloomington: Indians University Press, 1994), 240.

> [veil] again and to sit at the hearth, they reject polygamy, and they are afraid that human rights will be restricted if Islam comes to power. This is at least what they have been taught. Psychologically, they are not ready to support an Islamic state[4].

Another highly politicized issue is the question of scripts, i.e. whether to retain Cyrillic or to replace it with the Latin or Arabic script. At first the Arabic script was favored because it was seen as representing the sharpest break with the Soviet past, but soon it was pointed out that such a move would send to the West the wrong message of an Islamic and possibly even fundamentalist orientation. As a result there has been a campaign to adopt the Latin alphabet. For example, in Tajikistan the 1989 language law called for a return to the use of the Arabic alphabet. Three years later, it was estimated that only one percent of Tajikistan's population was literate in it. The vast majority of Tajik-language publications are still in the Cyrillic alphabet.

The controversies surrounding the use of language are potentially very divisive in societies with large Russian minorities, like Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. As Martha Olcott pointed out:

> Both Nazarbaev and Akaev are more sensitive than the other leaders to the fact that they rule multi-national societies, and that they must strike a balance between the aspirations of local nationalists with the sensibilities of Russians and other minority populations. One problem is that neither community views the situation wholly rationally ... Kazakhs demand that their language be recognized as the sole official language; Russians demand that both languages have identical legal status.[5]

The magazine "The Economist" recently reported that the countries of Central Asia are rediscovering their old heroes. Kazakhstan recently celebrated the 150th anniversary of the birth of Abai, the father Kazakh literature, and Kyr§yzstan marked the millennial anniversary of an epic poem about a warrior called Manas. Next year Uzbekistan will toast the 680th anniversary of the birth of Timur, better known as the Mongol conqueror Tamer lane. The same magazine wrote that in Uzbekistan, the country which has kept most completely the Soviet authoritarian style of government, Tamer lane has become an official hero, promoted by the state much as Lenin and Marx once were.[6]

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[4] Komsomol'skaya Pravda, October 4, 1991.

[5] Martha Brill Olcott, »Emerging political elites*, The New Geopolitics of Central Asia and its Borderlands, 58-59.

[6] The Economist, September 23, 1995.

Ethnic Problems

Each Central Asian country contains, apart from its titular nationality, literally dozens of other nationalities, including Russians, other Central Asians, and nationalities from other parts of the former Soviet Union, especially from the Caucasus. Only 73 percent of Uzbekistan's population is Uzbek, while the Kazakhs comprise only 40 percent of Kazakhstan's population. The presence of large numbers of Russians in each Central Asian country is the most difficult of all ethnic problems. Excluding the special case of Kazakhstan where 6.3 million Russians live, there are at present in the other Central Asian republics no fewer than 3.2 million Russian residents. They are concentrated mostly in urban areas; in fact, they account for more than half of the urban population in both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Yet very few Russians have a good command of the official languages of their host countries; in Tashkent, e.g., less than 6 percent speak Uzbek fluently and 69 percent speak no Uzbek at all. As a result, Russians are increasingly faced with job insecurity.

Kazakhstan. The Kazakhs have been exposed to European influences more than any other Central Asian people, and they constitute only one-third of Kazakhstan's population, with Russians and other nationalities accounting for a full 60 percent. The Kazakhs seem to be deeply anguished by their position as a minority in their own country. They feel that while their political control over the state is growing, they lack basic control over the state's industrial, agricultural, and market forces which are in the hands of Russians, Koreans, and other Central Asian nationalities.

At the same time the Kazakhs confront another geopolitical reality, namely, that vast tracts of northern Kazakhstan and much of the areas containing the bulk of its industrial and other resources are overwhelmingly populated by Russians. As N. Masanov, a professor at Kazakh State University, recently wrote, Kazakhstan can be divided into five autonomous parts: western, northern, southern, southeastern, and eastern. Each part is isolated geographically from the others, and unevenly populated and developed, with the northern and western parts strongly oriented toward Russia. In his opinion, if extreme ethnic conflict should ever break out, Kazakhstan with its weak, underdeveloped center could easily disintegrate into five parts.[7]

Uzbekistan. The country has some very severe ethnic problems both within and with all of its neighbors. The most serious problem involves the Tajiks of

[7] N.Masanov, »Natsional'no-gosudarstvennoe stroitei'stvo v Kazakhstane: analyze I prognosis*, Vestnik Evrazii (Moscow), 1995, No.l, 124-127.

whom fully 20.5 percent live in Uzbekistan where they even constitute the majority in the city of Samarkand. Not surprisingly, Tajik residents of Uzbekistan have increased their demands for greater autonomy. At the same time, 1.5 million Uzbeks, or about 7 percent of all Uzbeks, live in Tajikistan where they are concentrated in the northern part and exert considerable influence within the Tajik government. As pointed out by Martha Olcott:

> Potentially the most contentious dispute is between the Uzbeks and the Tajiks. Central Asia's two main Persian-speaking cities, Samarkand and Bukhara, were included in Uzbekistan, leaving the Tajiks with the backwater town of Dushanbe as their republic capital. For their part, the Uzbeks have periodically staked a claim to all of the Freehand Valley, which includes Kyrgyzstan's Osh oblast and a part of the Khojent (formerly Leninabad) oblast in Tajikistan. The Uzbeks also argue that parts of southern Kazakhstan and eastern Turkmenia (the Turkestan region of pre-revolutionary times) rightfully belong to them as well. The republics of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan disagree about where their border should be, and briefly came to blows over this question in 1989[8]

Tajikistan. The Tajiks constitute about 60 percent of the population in Central Asia's most unstable country. Despite having a majority, Tajiks are torn apart by a protracted conflict between northern and southern tribes that has escalated into full-scale war. The Tajiks are the only non-Turkic nationality in former Soviet Central Asia. Being part of the Persian world, they have closer historical, cultural and traditional ties with Iran and Afghanistan. Nevertheless, many Tajiks, especially the better educated ones, oppose any close relations with these two countries who are presently in the grip of Islamic fundamentalists. It is the moderates' conviction that only Russia can offer protection against fundamentalist designs on Tajikistan and at the same time serve as a stabilizing force within the country.

Kyrgyzstan. Despite its good fortune of possessing the only democratic government in Central Asia, Kyrgyzstan is quite mountainous, somewhat isolated, and with limited economic prospects. At present, the Kyrgyz make up more than half of their country's population, with Uzbeks accounting for another 15 percent, and Russians and Ukrainians comprising the remaining 35 percent. The country has already had one serious ethnic clash with Uzbekistan in 1990 in the Osh oblast in the Ferghana Valley and regularly expresses fears of "Uzbek expansionism".

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[8] Martha Brill Olcott, »Central Asia's post-empire politics*, Orbis (Spring 1992), 256.

Turkmenia. The two million Turkmen in Turkmenia are separated from another one million of their brethren in Afghanistan, Iran, Turkey, and Iraq. The country is quite isolated from the other Central Asian countries by a vast desert expanse, has the lowest population density and is one of the most underdeveloped countries. Perhaps its sole major asset, which it may well use in future bargaining with other Central Asian countries, is its geopolitical advantage of sitting astride the only land corridor leading into Iran and on to the Persian Gulf and Turkey.

MONGOLIA'S RELATIONS WITH THE NEW CENTRAL ASIA

Mongolia established diplomatic relations with Kazakhstan on January 22, 1992, followed by Uzbekistan on January 25 and Kyrgyzstan on April 22 of the same year. Priority was given to Kazakhstan which is not only the biggest country in Central Asia but also is almost a neighbor of Mongolia. Another important factor in making Kazakhstan Mongolia's most important Central Asian country relates to the 150,000 Kazakhs living in Mongolia's northwestern province of Bayan Olgij and who constitute about 7.4 percent of Mongolia's population.

Kazakhstan also plays an important role in Mongolia's economy. Crude copper ore, which is extracted at Erdenet in northern Mongolia by a Mongolian-Russian joint-venture company and which accounts for more than half of this country's hard currency income, continues to be shipped to Kazakhstan and processed in the Balkhashmed refinery. In 1994 alone, about 40,000 tons of Mongolian copper ore were processed in Kazakhstan.

A Treaty of Friendly Relations and Cooperation was signed with Kazakhstan during President N. Nazarbaevs visit to Ulaanbaatar in October 1993. A similar treaty was signed with Kyrgyzstan when President A. Akaev visited Ulaanbaatar in July 1993. High-level Mongolian delegations reciprocated. N. Bagabandi, the chairman of Mongolia's parliament, visited Kazakhstan in September 1993 and established relations between the two countries' parliaments. Prime Minister P. Jasrai followed in late November and early December 1994 and settled legal issues pertaining to voluntary immigration and job assignments by contract of Mongolian citizens who had gone to Kazakhstan. In 1991 about 12,300 Mongolian Kazakhs had left, with another 26,900 in 1992 and 14,700 in 1993 for a total of over 50,000 Mongolian citizens.

Contrary to earlier expectations, the volume of trade between Mongolia and the new Central Asia has been modest. As Table 1 indicates, Kazakhstan is by far Mongolia's most important trade partner in Central Asia, and is in fact the

fourth largest worldwide. This is due almost entirely to the large amounts of copper ore discussed earlier. Among future economic activities are the construction of a highway between Bayan Olgij, the capital of the province by the same name where most of Mongolia's Kazakhs live, and Almaty, and of a modern airport in Bayan Olgij. Mongolia is also very interested in purchasing oil and oil products from Kazakhstan for use in the western part of the country. This would allow Mongolia to discontinue the purchase of extremely high-priced oil from Siberia.

Table 1.

Mongolia's Trade with Central Asia
(Unit=US $ 1000)

Country	1993		1994	
	Export	Import	Export	Import
Kazakhstan	54353.5	394.4	40729.0	147.2
Uzbekistan	1434.0	52.2	320.0	385.4
Kyrgyzstan	54.4	32.8	-	175.6

Source: State Statistical Office, Government of Mongolia.

Conclusion

As this brief report shows, the breakup of the Soviet Union has brought about a new geopolitical situation to Central Asia, replete with the new dangers of ethnic and religious strife but also containing some major opportunities. Mongolia has taken the first steps in the direction of forging new relationships with the post-Soviet republics in Central Asia. Much more can and will be done in strengthening Mongolia's role in the new Central Asia. The currently small amount of trade will multiply once transportation links are improved. Beyond economics, Mongolia's lead in declaring itself a nuclear-free zone could be emulated by the Central Asian states which would be a significant contribution to global and regional peace. Mongolia and the new Central Asia could also increase their cooperation on the international diplomatic stage, as in the United Nations and other organizations.