

THE NEW FACE OF CENTRAL ASIA

An Essay

by Ambassador (ret.) Michael W. Cotter*

Abstract

For the first time in centuries, the region from Western China to Iran and from the Steppes of Russia to Northern India can and, this essay argues, should be viewed as an entity. Possessed of significant natural resources, and forming the backyard of five important world powers, the region has great possibilities for economic development, but it also contains the potential for conflict among nuclear-armed neighbors. One of the great challenges of the 21st century will be to ensure that the region becomes an engine for growth, not for conflict.

Keywords: *Central Asia, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran, India, Russia, Turkmenistan*

Introduction: Who Rules the Heartland Rules the World

In the complicated world that has emerged since the end of the Cold War, many developments that will have a significant influence throughout this century have gone virtually unnoticed by both professionals and the public at large. The re-emergence of Central Asia as a key region is one such development.

In 1904, Sir Halford Mackinder submitted a seminal article to the Royal Geographic Society expounding his “Heartland” theory. He summarized the theory in an oft-quoted statement: “Who rules East Europe commands the Heartland; who rules the Heartland commands the World-Island; who rules the World-Island controls the world.”¹ He predicted that control of the heartland by any one power could be a springboard to world domination. Mackinder’s theory was much derided at the time because the heartland of Euro-Asia was divided between then-imperial powers. A century later Mackinder’s theory bears rethinking. Eastern Europe is now largely integrated into the European Union, but the true heartland of Asia, the region extending

* **Michael W. Cotter** served as U.S. Ambassador to Turkmenistan from 1995 to 1998. A career Foreign Service Officer, he had prior assignments to Chile, Zaire, Turkey, Ecuador, Bolivia and South Vietnam in a career spanning over 30 years. He currently lives near Chapel Hill, North Carolina, where he lectures and writes on international issues. He is the President and Associate Publisher of *American Diplomacy*, an online journal devoted to foreign affairs.

¹ Mackinder, Sir Halford John, “*The Geographical Pivot of History*,” Royal Geographic Society, London (1904)

from Iran in the West to the Xinjiang region of China in the East and from the Russian steppes in the North to Northern India in the South, is once again in play for the first time in centuries.

The New Paradigm: Viewing Central Asia As An Entity

The re-emergence of Central Asia as the keystone of the “World-Island” began with the disappearance of the great European empires, the independence of the Indian sub-continent, and the reappearance for the first time in a millennium of a unified Persia. With the demise of the Soviet Union, the entrance on the world stage of independent republics in the Caucasus and Central Asia, the emergence of China and India as political and economic powers, and the resurgence of the Russian Federation, the new political landscape of the heartland is complete. And at the center is Afghanistan, for centuries the focal point of conflict between regional powers seeking dominance of the continent.

Academic and popular analyses of geo-political change since the end of the Cold War have largely dealt with developments in Asia in discrete contexts. The former Soviet republics in the Caucasus and Central Asia are viewed in terms of their own conflicts and their efforts to strengthen their political and economic independence. Russia is analyzed with reference to its relationship with Europe and the U.S. China and India are usually considered individually as economic powers or perhaps in terms of the potential competition between the two. Focus on Pakistan concerns its internal political trials, its connection to the ongoing conflict in Afghanistan, and its relationship with India. Iran is considered, in the U.S. at least, a Middle-Eastern country. Unfortunately, there has been little analysis of the current and potential interplay of those countries to either achieve dominance over the heartland or to avoid dominance by another power.

The Key: Competition for Access to Resources and Control of Trade Routes

On one level, there are significant economic issues at stake. The region is divided quite evenly between countries possessing significant hydrocarbon resources (Russia, Iran, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan) and countries that sorely need access to those resources (India, China, Pakistan and the other Caucasus and Central Asian republics). Given the intense current and prospective world demand for raw materials, the region’s significant known mineral deposits, and undoubtedly even greater deposits that await only modern exploration and development technology, are increasingly in demand.

The ability to move relatively freely across the region for almost the first time since the demise of the Silk Road opens other economic possibilities. All told, these countries are home to probably half of the world’s population, much of which is only now aspiring to become consumers of more and better products. The demands of trade bring with them demands for improved communication. Old divisions still prevent railroads from crisscrossing the region, but that will happen. Road transportation is now open, but only over highways that are often

rudimentary and still subject to blockages and significant bureaucratic delays. Electricity is already flowing from Turkmenistan to Turkey via Iran, and the region's hydrocarbon and hydroelectric resources mean that potential for greater trade in that commodity is enormous.

The Dominant Players

Politically the equation comes down to whether any of the more powerful countries in the region will be able to dominate it. This competition has not yet really begun, and all of the regional powers appear for the time being more intent on ensuring their place at the table in order to prevent any other power from achieving such dominance. China covets the region's resources, but fears that the spread of independence will serve as a powerful attraction to many in its remote Xinjiang Province. India, too, needs those resources, and remains concerned lest increased Pakistani influence in the region changes the still-volatile strategic balance between those two countries. Russia, still redefining its national identity, has the resources which the others covet, resources often located thousands of miles from its European power center, and fears the potential for unrest among its large, often poorly assimilated ethnic minorities. And Iran also is rich in resources but still engaged in its internal revolution.

Critical to this equation is the fact that four of the large regional powers – Russia, China, India and Pakistan – possess nuclear weapons, and a fifth, Iran, appears determined to acquire nuclear weapon technology. In fact, much of the analysis of Iran's apparent desire to acquire nuclear technology focuses, incorrectly in my view, on the implications of that development for the U.S. and Israel. I would argue that Iran is motivated at least as much by its awareness of developments in Central Asia and its status as the only non-nuclear power in the region. After all, the heartland of the continent is Persia's traditional power base, and all Iranians are aware of their country's history of dominance in much of that region.

The Smaller Players and the Region's Diversity

The smaller countries in the region differ significantly from one another, but share an important common interest: ensuring that they remain politically and economically independent. For many of them political support and economic assistance from outside the region have been critical to their independence to date, assistance which is subject to vagaries outside of their control. All of them also must pay particular attention to their relationships with the regional power to which they are closest geographically. Thus the Caucasus countries are more concerned about relations with either (or both) Russia or Iran. Turkmenistan also is most concerned about its relationship with its southern neighbor. Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan on the other hand border on China and have more to gain or lose from that propinquity. And, of course, Afghanistan continues to suffer from its location at the epicenter and from the centrifugal forces caused by its ethnic diversity.

In fact, Afghanistan is a microcosmic reflection of the extraordinary ethnic and religious diversity in Central Asia that serves both to bind the region together and to divide its inhabitants. Farsi-related Urdu is the dominant language in Afghanistan, but Turkic languages dominate in the north. Conservative, Sunni Islam as practiced by rural Pashtun tribesmen conflicts both with Shi'a Hazara ethnic group and the more liberal Sunni practices of the formerly nomadic Uzbek and Turkmen peoples.

These differences pervade the region. Turkic languages are spoken in much of the north and east, from Azerbaijan to Xinjiang; while Farsi and associated dialects dominate in the south and west, from Iran to northern India. Although Islam dominates, as noted in the case of Afghanistan, it serves more to differentiate between ethnic groups than to unify them. Central Asian Islam continues to reflect syncretic influences from Zoroastrianism to Sufism, and ranges from the extraordinarily conservative practices in rural Afghanistan to mainstream forms of both Shi'a and Sunni branches in the major cities.

Outside Players

Two significant countries outside of the region have played and will play important roles in developments there. Turkey has worked assiduously to exploit its cultural ties to Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan to its own advantage, seeking both to acquire raw materials and expand the market for its technology and manufactures. It also has an interest in preventing ancient rivals Russia and Iran from dominating the region and cutting it off from resources. As long as Turkey sees its future in the West, and in membership in the European Union, its interest in Central Asia will remain limited. Should Europe shut its door to Turkey, the Turks will have little choice but to become more engaged in the competition for influence in Central Asia.

The other key player has been the United States. The U.S. was one of the first countries to recognize the new states born from the ashes of the USSR and has played an important role in shoring up their economic and political independence. With its military involvement in Afghanistan, the U.S. is also playing an active, if unrecognized, role in shaping political dominance in the region. Some American commentators have suggested that the U.S. will play an important long-term role in the region. I suggest that this is unrealistic. Central Asia is far from the U.S. and beyond its determination to eliminate Al Qaeda, America has few vital interests in the region. Hydrocarbon or mineral resources are largely fungible, and while those from Central Asia are unlikely to find their way to America, their addition to world supplies will free up others for consumption here. Politically it is becoming clear that the world of the 21st century will not be uni-polar, dominated economically and militarily by the U.S. Rather, the emergence of other important countries, perhaps not on a par militarily with the U.S. but still capable of dominance in their own regions, suggests that this century will be characterized by a balance of power. In the heartland of the "World-Island," that balance will be among the emerging Asian powers with the U.S. playing at best little more than a supporting role.

Conclusion

The process of evolution that is underway in this reborn heartland of the Asian continent will play itself out over decades. Given the ethnic, linguistic, religious differences, and the sheer diversity of size among the political entities that inhabit it, how Central Asia will develop is uncertain. The global demand for limited resources ensures that the competition for comparative advantage will be intense. The possession of nuclear weapon technology by the major regional powers can be a matter of concern, but can also serve to ensure that power sharing remains balanced. As long as that remains the case, the competition will play out in more positive ways.

Europeans learned to live, although often not peacefully, with a balance of power among competing states. The states of Central Asia, many of which have existed in their current form for less than half a century, are now facing a similar challenge. For them to meet that challenge peacefully, the international community must develop new, equitable standards to ensure that the competition for influence in Central Asia remains peaceful and contributes to improvement in the human condition.