



The Changing Geopolitics of Central Asia

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The essence of geopolitics is how geography both shapes and restricts the range of choices available to nation-states. Over time, in turn, history and culture reflect these choices – and by doing so demonstrate geography's dynamism.

Central Asia provides a case in point. If one views a map with Central Asia at its center rather than as a distant borderland to larger powers, the changes, collisions and interactions occurring on the region's periphery—and which help shape its internal discourse—begin to come into focus.

OLD POWERS...

Russia has been Central Asia's hegemon for most of the last two centuries, but is now the posterchild for irreversible economic decline. Russia is a poor candidate to survive as a viable state long into the future. Its economy is no larger than Portugal's and comprised principally of hydrocarbons—now more abundant and cheaper elsewhere. Its vaunted educational system is in tatters, and its ability to remain in the forefront of technological development is fatally eroded. Many Russian hospitals operate without running water, and the onrush of HIV/AIDS infections, cardiovascular disease, and many pathologies associated with alcohol abuse have fueled a rampant public health crisis. Russia also faces a deepening demographic crisis: a dying countryside, rising ethnic tensions and strong regional centrifugal forces, and several hundred thousand educated Russians departing permanently every year for the promise of better futures in the West. This drain of human capital, in turn, has placed a severe strain on the Russian economy. Exacerbating these trends is an increasingly inflexible political system headed by a few kleptocrats without attachments to Russia's larger population. For Central Asians, the preeminent geopolitical reality is of a Russia in precipitous and probably terminal decline.

Closely associated with this megatrend is the rising specter of Central Asia's other large borderland player, China. Beijing is midway through an unpredictable transition from regional power to global competitor. China's own internal discrepancies raise legitimate questions about whether it is an economic superpower or a fragile construct of irreconcilable tensions and pressures. Through its decades-long one-child policy, it enshrined demographic engineering that has now backfired spectacularly on the nation's prospects for long-term growth and social and cultural cohesion. Its titanic thievery of other countries' intellectual property suggests upward limits on its inherent ability to stimulate innovation.

In some ways, China's problems mirror those of Russia – specifically its public health crisis, depopulation of the countryside, growing political restiveness and outright revolt in regional population centers and minority regions, and unresponsive political system. Meanwhile, Central Asia's markets are flooded with Chinese goods, and, increasingly, with Chinese nationals themselves, who arrive to staff the growing number of Chinese-owned businesses, manufacturers, and farms – something Central Asia's nationalistic citizens increasingly resent.

For Central Asians, China's interests in their neighborhood are rife with paradoxes. On the one hand, Beijing seeks to penetrate their domains economically along the famous Belt and Road, often with loans and assistance that cannot be easily repaid. On the other, China has targeted upward of a million Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Uighur and other co-ethnics and co-religionists for "reeducation" in newly built prison facilities just across China's border in Xinjiang. Central Asians are not blind to these geopolitical contradictions.

...AND NEWER PLAYERS

Further along Central Asia's fluid borderlands are Afghanistan and Pakistan, the former still at war decades after the Soviets invaded in 1979, and the latter careening toward becoming a failed state. While occasional signs of hope for stability and development flicker in both, neither is likely to provide near-term geopolitical strength to any vision of a consolidated Central Asia. Perhaps the best hope for Afghanistan is for Central Asian states, especially Uzbekistan, to embrace it economically and politically, with India playing a supporting role. The outlines of a more positive future are visible. Pakistan, on the other hand, will remain an unstable outlier.

India, an integral part of Central Asian civilization, is a better bet to shape Central Asia's geopolitics in a constructive fashion, although – as in most things India undertakes – the ebbs and flows in its willingness to act leave a strong odor of indecision and uncertainty. Indians of a strategic bent see China's incursions into Central Asia as flanking movements that threaten the Indian homeland. They hope that Russia, a longtime ally and supplier of military equipment, will restrain China's envelopment of Central Asia and in effect preserve what India perceives to be its own strategic sphere of influence.

Ultimately, Russia's weakness is sure to disappoint in this regard. Nevertheless, India has distinct advantages in this geopolitical competition – namely, a long tradition of friendship with Central Asia, and people-to-people ties through educational exchanges during Soviet times and intermarriage. If India can export its entrepreneurial savvy and attractive business models to Central Asia while moderating Hindu aggression against its own vast Islamic population, it should find itself highly competitive there. Moreover, its growing strategic relationship with the United States should be a net benefit in this regard, assuming the U.S. can make the strategic connection and build on it.

Then there is Iran. As the strategist Robert D. Kaplan recently noted, Iran “is economically, culturally and demographically suited to be at the crossroads of Central Asia.”¹ But that country, encumbered by its entrenched 1970s revolution, is now “a pauperized and lonely nation” whose rich civilization has been reduced to “a bleak lumpen proletariat.” In truth, the story should be very different. Iran’s population is large and highly-educated, and its culture is transcendent. Its enviable geography abuts Eurasia, the Middle East, the Indian sub-continent, and even Europe. In short, Iran possess key assets that should make it the fulcrum of Central Asia’s geopolitics. But with an economy a fraction of what it might have been without its current theocracy, and which conspicuously trails its more dynamic neighbors like India and Turkey, Iran’s geopolitical impact on Central Asia will be a function of the future, not the present.

Meanwhile, Turkey is realigning itself with new objectives, new partners, and new suitors. Turkey’s historic, ethnic, and linguistic ties to Central Asia explained the draw a number of its elites felt to the prospects of a pan-Turkic movement in the decades following the creation of the Turkish Republic. That drive, which lasted until at least the 1960s, was intended to include most of the Soviet Union’s Central Asian Turkic peoples. But political opponents in Turkey thwarted these efforts, believing them too risky for the nation. Much later, in the 1990s, following the breakup of the USSR, Turkey again disappointed hopes in the U.S. and Europe that its fusion of moderate Islamism with secular democracy could provide a model for Central Asians to promote de-Sovietization and Western values.

More recently, Turkey has launched a series of efforts to deepen its position in Central Asia through investment and trade. Turkish investments in energy and telecommunications now amount to several billion dollars in Kazakhstan alone. The country is the largest investor in Turkmenistan, and has growing positions in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. Turkish-funded universities, high schools, and cultural institutes are prevalent throughout the region. Turkish-language media are available most places. Large historic and contemporary diaspora communities of Central Asians live in Istanbul and other large Turkish cities, and traders from their states enjoy special markets within them.

Turkish leaders today are frequently accused of neo-Ottomanism, a desire to recover Turkey’s dominant position in historic Ottoman lands. Yet in truth, Ankara’s efforts in Central Asia today are more focused, and tactical. Even so, whether Turkey under its powerful president, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, can pull off even a diminished sphere of influence in Central Asia remains to be seen.

Central Asia’s geopolitics will of course include other actors possessing different objectives and strategies to achieve them. Middle Eastern actors, particularly the Saudis, have been players for some time through a combination of investment and Islamic outreach. The European Union has a special ambassador for Central Asia, but as in most of its foreign policy the EU postures and promises to little effect. It is unlikely to be a significant geopolitical actor in Central Asia in the future.

U.S. policy is dealt with elsewhere in this collection, so suffice it to say here that it seems to be waking from a long and deep strategic slumber. Washington has taken steps to identify American interests in this region and to organize its thinking on them, but in truth America is still a sleepy player in Central Asia. It may yet fully wake when other actors with immediate interests in Central Asia pursue them more explicitly.

LOOKING OUTWARD

The most striking feature of Central Asia’s geopolitical universe—contrary to most expectations—is the stability at the center. The region has not exploded in civil war or anything more than episodic conflict. Efforts to consolidate a distinct Central Asian strategic perspective have made headway, with efforts to design and implement policies that reflect this worldview becoming more evident, although it would be taking liberties to suggest that Central Asia is at the moment a strategic actor in its own right. For now, at least, the geopolitics of Central Asia is destined to be largely driven by its edges.

Edge geopolitics has several features. First, stability along Central Asia’s borderlands is nowhere to be found. The significant players are either failing, realigning, asserting themselves aggressively, or flirting with revolution. Several states exhibit combinations of these dynamics. Central Asians will not remain isolated from this churn, and some of them may be swept up in it.

Second, the forces just described are likely to be highly interactive and reinforcing. It is hard to imagine Russia weakening, Iran revolting, Turkey shifting defense or pursuit of its interests from West to East or North, or China proving less robust, without those trends having an effect on Central Asia itself.

Third, despite all the current talk of a new age of Great Power competition, the reality is that none of Central Asia’s edge players is sufficiently powerful by itself to change the shape of this competitive landscape. Possessing nuclear weapons in this environment confers few advantages because all the key players—Russia, China, India, Pakistan—are either already nuclear capable or can be so fairly quickly (think Iran and Turkey). The question, therefore, is not who is a great power, but who is a “great enough” power to pursue interests while stymieing other actors in pursuit of theirs. Aligning with resource-rich, geographically-central, and militarily-capable states in Central Asia could prove to be decisive here.

All of this suggests that the contest to shape Central Asia will be intense and the contestants numerous. American planners have never been convinced that their interests, let alone Americans’ vital interests, are joined to Central Asia. As the geopolitics of Central Asia evolve, these interests will come into sharper focus. Understanding how to think about the range of probable scenarios involving – and emanating from – the region should be a high priority for strategic thinkers and policymakers in Washington.

ENDNOTES

Robert D. Kaplan, "Coronavirus and the Tragedy of Iran," Wall Street Journal, March 1, 2020.

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