



Central Asia: All Together Now

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After a quarter century of independence, the fragmentation of Central Asia is evident to all. A senior official there might justifiably complain about how each country "[is] pursuing its own limited objectives and dissipating its meager resources in the overlapping or even conflicting endeavors of sister states." He might conclude that such a process, "carries the seeds of weakness in [the countries'] incapacity for growth and their self-perpetuating dependence on the advanced, industrial nations." One can also imagine that another Central Asian official, seeking an alternative, might propose that "we must think not only of our national interests but posit them against regional interests: That is a new way of thinking about our problems."

These words were spoken not by a Central Asian but by ministers from the Philippines and Singapore at the opening ceremonies for the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 1967. Prior to the founding of ASEAN, no one considered Southeast Asia a single region. Yet over forty years ASEAN has grown from five to ten members and become a model of intra-regional cooperation and coordination. And it has done so without diminishing the sovereignty of its members.

ASEAN was not the first such regional entity on the Eurasian land mass. Back in 1953 five northern European countries formed the Nordic Council, actually a council of councils, which organized inter-parliamentary consultations on energy, labor, finance, culture, business, and legislation, among other topics. While they share many cultural values, the Nordic countries differ on important issues like membership in NATO and the European Union. Nonetheless, the Nordic Union remains a model of collaboration built on strong sovereignties.

Against this background, the absence of such a purely regional entity in Central Asia is all the more striking. Indeed, the only two initiatives that come close are the 2011 declaration by five states there of a Nuclear Free Zone and the Aral Sea initiative. But both are limited to a single topic, and the Aral Sea project has lapsed.

This is not to say that the regional heads of states never get together. They do, but always under the sponsorship of an outside power. Russia has led the parade of outsiders seeking to impose their order on the region. Its Commonwealth of Independent States, Eurasian Economic Union, and Collective Security Treaty Organization all have Moscow-based secretariats but provide venues for at least sidebar discussions of purely regional needs. In 2001 China moved to catch up by establishing the Shanghai Cooperation Organization to deal with security and economic affairs. This can be very useful, but the sheer might of the large members tends to marginalize Central Asian concerns.

Beyond these conclaves, the Presidents and key Ministers of the five former Soviet countries (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan) meet at least annually with their counterparts from Japan, the European Union, Korea, and, since 2016, the United States. They also convene at the annual United Nations meetings in New York and other venues. But there is no entity of any sort that exists solely to foster areas of intra-regional cooperation and to coordinate Central Asians' responses to the main issues of the day.

The Region That Isn't

Why does this striking gap exist in the institutionalization of a historically rich region that once led the world in trade, commerce, science, and technology? The most common explanation is to blame the famously dyspeptic personal relations among Central Asian heads of state. However, history shows us that personal relations aren't an impenetrable barrier: When Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan found it convenient to improve relations in order to develop a gas pipeline to China, their leaders quickly managed to set aside their private feuds and even five centuries of antipathy between their peoples.

Another line of explanation focuses on the narrow nationalism that postcolonial states everywhere exhibit during their uncertain first steps on the world stage. This "newly independent state syndrome" gave rise to the cult of Tamerlane in Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan's passion for its oral epic, *Manas*, and the attempt by President Niyazov of Turkmenistan to pen a compendium of national values in order to unite the diverse Turkmen tribes.

In spite of this, the five Presidents of the new states banded together in 1993 to change the name of their region from "Middle Asia" to "Central Asia." In 1996 several of them established a Central Asia Economic Union (CAEU). Turkmenistan alone held back, citing its nonaligned status. This body suffered from its members' financial difficulties, from the West's indifference, and from Russia's opposition to a regional entity it did not control. Nonetheless, the CAEU fostered serious regional dialogue on such sensitive issues as water management, drug trafficking, and security.

So successful was the CAEU that Vladimir Putin asked to be admitted as an observer and then demanded that Russia be included as a member. Unable to resist their powerful neighbor, the CAEU admitted Russia. Putin promptly disbanded the group and merged its members into what later became the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU). From that time to the present, Central Asia has been without a coordinating body of its own. Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan have joined the EEU and the other three countries are feeling great pressure to do so. The point is not that the EEU offers no benefits (although evidence for this to date is modest), but that an entity whose two Central Asian members comprise only 13 percent of its total population and in which the GDP of just one member, Russia, is seven times larger than any other member cannot be a union of equals.

Central Asian nations pay a heavy price for the lack of cooperation and coordination among them. Five quite different bodies of commercial law, rules on currency, and visa requirements discourage foreign investors. They have long failed to address several excellent, mainly regional opportunities for cooperation like water, opening regular air links between capitals, and coordinating tariff regimes. Instead of intra-regional synergies there are disincentives. But regional cooperation would not threaten Russia, nor would it challenge national identities within the region. Rather, it would enable small countries to secure their identities in a regional context, and to gain the economic benefits of regional cooperation.

Because its constituent states have not forged a collective identity, Central Asia remains dramatically under-institutionalized. Indeed, by the standards by which regions are defined in the world today, it barely exists. This invites external powers to propose their own solutions and to advance them through divide and conquer strategies.

Further hampering the re-emergence of regionalism in Central Asia is the fact that most international agencies and even some Central Asian governments treat neighboring Afghanistan as if it belongs to another universe. Yet nearly half of the Afghan population belong to the same ethnic groups and speak the same languages as their neighbors to the north, and for 3,000 years Afghanistan was a major contributor to the culture of Central Asia as a whole. It also has the largest population in the region, is richly endowed with natural resources, sits at a major continental crossroads, and boasts a talented and worldly rising generation. The other Central Asian countries know this and will be quick to embrace Afghanistan once it is stabilized.

In fact, this is already happening. Within the past six months the Foreign Ministers of both Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan have journeyed to Kabul, and President Ashraf Ghani has visited all Afghanistan's northern neighbors. Turkmenistan is forging ahead with the TAPI gas pipeline across Afghanistan to Pakistan and India, and Uzbekistan, which already provides Kabul with electricity, is planning a second phase of railroad construction in Afghanistan. In the same spirit, the World Bank's CASA 1000 project will soon be sending electricity from Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Beyond these germinating economic links, Afghan students are already studying at universities in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkmenistan, and popular music flows in both directions across the Amu Darya (Oxus) River.

A new spirit of regionalism can be felt in every country of Central Asia. Many trace this to the greater openness of Uzbekistan's new President, Shafkat Mirziyoyev, who, as a long-serving Prime Minister, was a shoe-in for the presidency. Nevertheless, in a very public campaign prior to the elections, he reopened regular flights to the Tajik capital (after 21 years) and sent his Foreign Minister Abdulaziz Komilov to Bishkek to patch up relations with Kyrgyzstan. He also took steps toward making Uzbekistan's currency more convertible, which would remove a major impediment to intra-regional trade. Of course, these trends can change. But the fact that Mirziyoyev gave such wide publicity to this new course suggests that he is prepared to rise or fall with the success of regionalism. Meanwhile, the presidents of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan have held a series of meetings, and Turkmenistan has become the key driver of one of the region's major projects, the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India Pipeline (TAPI).

President Nazarbayev of Kazakhstan is outspoken about the importance of Central Asia as a region with its own identity and interests. In a recent published speech before the Astana Club, he strongly affirmed the importance of Central Asians' common history and values, their shared cultural and scientific achievements during its Golden Age a millennium ago, and the great relevance of these and other commonalities for the present. He is equally forthright in including Afghanistan as part of the region, and in calling for greater coordination among all six countries.

Leaders who may still tread cautiously about regionalism in the present do not hesitate to glorify it in the past. Two years ago President Karimov of Uzbekistan convened a conference of more than 300 participants from forty countries to discuss the heritage of such world-renowned Central Asian thinkers as Ibn Sina (Avicenna), Al Farabi, and Biruni. In his opening speech Karimov referred to these great minds as "OUR Ibn Sina, OUR Al Farabi," and so on. Lest anyone think he was claiming them for Uzbekistan, he added that, "They're ours, all of ours; they are our common heritage." Even before this, President Berdymukhamedov of Turkmenistan had built a new park in Ashgabat featuring statues of these and other giants of Central Asia's past. He, too, has insisted, "These great minds are our common heritage." Many in the West dismiss both of these leaders as authoritarians. But when Afghanistan's more democracy-minded President Ashraf Ghani uses the same language, one can be sure that something new is afoot.

As of now, these signs of an emerging regionalism remains inchoate. Even in their present form, however, they pose the question of whether the countries of Central Asia are on the cusp of creating some new kind of entity to reflect their common heritage and shared interests. Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan could provide the kind of leadership that France and Germany gave the European Union in its early days. We don't know if or when they will seize this opportunity, but one thing is certain: that this is a matter for the Central Asians countries themselves to decide.

Central Asians are actively grasping toward giving the new spirit of regionalism some kind of institutional expression. This is the larger purpose behind Uzbekistan's proposed region-wide initiative to devise a comprehensive water treaty that the UN can embrace and ratify. The Foreign Ministers have also met recently in order to plan a gathering of the Presidents, without outsiders. At that meeting, expected soon, the Presidents will chart out their future course of action. They are studying examples of regionally based consultative organizations elsewhere. ASEAN, the Nordic Council, the Arab-Maghreb Union, the Association of Caribbean States, and the East African Community are but a few of the possible models. A group of analysts in Kazakhstan has already called for such a regional approach, not in opposition to the many larger entities like the EU, SCO, or the EEU, nor as an alternative to the existing national states, but as a kind of second-story on the national houses that have successfully survived their first quarter century.

But key questions have yet to be answered. For example, will the new entity be purely consultative, or will it put forward programs of common action? If the former, will it have a permanent secretariat in one place or will it convene on a rotating basis in all the capitals and practice decentralization? Who will participate in such interactions: ministers and other senior officials, elective bodies and their various committees and commissions, non-governmental organizations, or some combination of all three? What fields will be covered: economics, security, social conditions, information, education, culture, or several of these together? Further, whatever topics the new body decides to address, will its actions take the form of recommendations or of binding commitments and joint programs? Finally, will such an entity permit non-members as observers and, if so, under what conditions?

Work with Central Asia, Not Around It

No one can say how the countries of Greater Central Asia will respond to these and other questions pertaining to their common interests. But the likelihood is strong that in the coming period such questions will rise to the forefront of regional discussion and debate. If that happens, it will pose an important challenge to major powers with which Central Asians maintain important relations, any one of which might perceive it as a significant challenge to their national interest. First among these will be Russia, and also China, the United States, and Europe, as well as such partners as Japan, India, South Korea, Iran, and the Gulf states. The worst scenario would be that they will be tempted to employ political, economic, or covert tools to influence the outcome of such deliberations, or even to prevent them from starting in the first place, as Putin has done over the past 16 years.

This should not happen. The major powers should stand aside and overcome the urge to intervene in self-organized cooperation among Central Asian countries. Earlier attempts to thwart the countries of Central Asia from identifying and discussing common concerns and interests failed. The Central Asia Union of the 1990s is no more, but the impulse that gave rise to it has revived and is stronger than ever. The major powers should understand that cooperation and coordination among the states of Central Asia is not against anyone. It is for Central Asia itself - its stability, and its peaceful development. Ultimately, it is also in line with the core interests of all the great powers. External powers should not seek to join or to attend meetings as observers. To the extent that the Central Asians themselves seek it they should be prepared to work with them as a collectivity, and in accordance with the rules they set for their joint activity. They should work with the Central Asians as a group, not around them.

All of the six countries of Greater Central Asia seek good relations with China, Russia, the United States, and the European Union. To this end they have embraced some form of balance as the key to such relations. If the six countries together affirm this principle, as is likely, then the big powers should accept it as a reality and should desist from interfering directly in the Central Asians' regional deliberations.

It may be too much to expect external powers to abstain from interfering in the process of regional self-definition that is going forward today in Central Asia. Nonetheless, it would be wise for them to do so: A greater degree of cooperation and coordination across the region is a positive way to foster economic and social progress and to prevent such negative phenomena as drug trafficking, criminality, and radical Islamism. Above all, it has the real potential of promoting stability, which all major external powers profess to be their goal.

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