

REGIONAL STUDIES

**CENTRAL ASIA AS VIEWED
BY CONTEMPORARY POLITICAL ANALYSTS
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Not so long ago it seemed that by the end of the 2000s interest in Central Asia from abroad had exhausted itself and there was nothing new to add to what had already been written about the region. The West, which paid the greatest attention to the region due to the presence of America and NATO in Afghanistan, appeared to have lost its geopolitical interest in Central Asia. Washington unofficially recognized Russia's "legitimate" interests in the region as part of the reset policy, probably in the hope that Mos-

cow's influence would be trimmed by China's increasing presence in the same region.

Now, however, everything has dramatically changed: on the one hand, the intention of Russia (led once more by Vladimir Putin, the "integrator of the post-Soviet expanse") to expedite the establishment of a Eurasian Union has given the West a scare. While on the other, Western strategists are frowning at China's mounting influence in Central Asia. The Iranian, Indian, and Afghan factors are also elements to be reckoned

¹ This article continues our earlier surveys of what has been written about Central Asia abroad (see: M. Laumulin, M. Augan, "Central Asia as Viewed by Contemporary Political Analysts," *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, Volume 11, Issue 1, 2010, pp. 80-96; M. Laumulin, "Central Asia as Viewed by Contemporary Political Analysts," *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, Volume 11, Issue 3, 2010, pp. 109-125).

with in the geopolitical struggle around the region. In short, the rivalry has in no way fizzled out, instead it is entering a new phase.

This is amply confirmed by the works analyzed below; their authors do not limit them-

selves to the geopolitics, security, and international status of Central Asia; they scrutinize the domestic problems and political and socioeconomic development of the region's individual countries.

Geopolitics and Security

The monograph *Mapping Central Asia. Indian Perceptions and Strategies*, which is the result of joint efforts of French and Indian academics, brought together veterans of Indian Central Asian studies A. Patnaik, K. Warikoo, S. Chatterjee, A. Sengupta, S. Gopal, and some others and prominent French Orientalists M. Laruelle and S. Peyrouse,² which makes it an important contribution to Central Asian studies.

The book consists of three parts.

- Part I “The Past as a Link? Reassessing Indo-Central Asian History” covers the common history of India and Central Asia; it forms a bridge between the past and the present: as close neighbors, the two civilizations and regions maintained intensive contacts in the past, which were cut short in later periods. The historical memory of the new post-colonial Indian elite about contacts with Central Asia in the past has obviously bred (albeit in confabulated form) the ideas and strategic approaches of the present. The first part concentrates on the question of whether the mechanism of historical contacts of the two regions will continue to function in the 21st century.
- Part II “Contextualizing Indo-Central Asian Relations” looks at the present period as a time of hopes, disillusion, and gradual shift to pragmatism on both sides. The authors admit that so far India cannot outweigh, geopolitically or otherwise, the other regional players—the RF, U.S., EU, and PRC.
- Part III “The In-Between Point of Tension: Pakistan, Afghanistan, Kashmir, and Xinjiang” analyzes the factors that strongly affect India's Central Asian policies. The authors are latently convinced that the “geopolitical vagueness” around Central Asia is giving India the chance to gain enough weight to join the ranks of the geopolitical “heavyweights.”

The authors make it obvious that the book was prompted by two paradoxes.

- First, in the geopolitical context, relations between India and Central Asia have become a traditional subject that has never been studied in the political, economic, strategic, and cultural contexts. Afghanistan, “a missing link between India and Central Asia” (p. 2), remains the main converging point in the security sphere.
- Second, despite the relatively high level of Central Asian studies in India, the West has consistently ignored the Indian school of political studies. It remains isolated, while everything done in India in this sphere is habitually classified as Oriental studies.

It seems that Marlène Laruelle and Sébastien Peyrouse were determined to familiarize the Western academic community with the Indian point of view. They are convinced that the book should be

² See: *Mapping Central Asia. Indian Perceptions and Strategies*, ed. by M. Laruelle, S. Peyrouse, Ashgate, Farnham, 2011, 248 pp.

regarded, first, as a classical academic effort that reflects the collective opinion about Delhi's strategy in the region and, second, it should be taken into account that, when looking at the context of Indian-Central Asian relations, the Indian authors have preserved their individuality.

The conclusions are of no comfort to the Indians: there is a wide gap between the impressive potential that can be used to build an Indian-Central Asian alliance and India's inadequate presence in the region, which became obvious by the end of the first decade of the 21st century. India stayed away from the fairly tough tussle between Russia and the U.S. at the geopolitical level and the rivalry for energy sources among Russia, China, and the United States. In fact, India has so far failed to rely heavily on economic instruments to add to its influence in the region, something which the EU, South Korea, and Japan have done.

On the other hand, India can rely on its good relations with Russia to build up its influence in Central Asia; it has heavy "democratic baggage" that will come in handy sooner or later. India and the Central Asian states would like to put an end to Iran's isolation in order to integrate it into regional developments.

The authors, however, have stated in clear terms that economically India is no rival for China.

India is primarily interested in Kazakhstan. Potentially they can become partners in space research (when Russia gets out of Baykonur), nuclear power production, and information technology. In fact, the authors suggest that India, Kazakhstan, and Russia working together can form a highly successful geo-economic triangle.

If, in the future, energy sources (gas, electricity, and, to a lesser degree, oil and uranium) are channeled from Central Asia into South Asia, India will gain more economic weight in the region. The authors, however, do not exclude a different scenario: geopolitical stagnation or unfavorable developments at the regional level. This may either turn the region into China's economic protectorate or cause Islamization of the Central Asian countries.

After investigating the present situation and all the potential scenarios in detail, the authors conclude that relations between India and Central Asia depend on outside factors and cannot, therefore, be shaped on order or controlled.

A collective monograph entitled *Religion and Security in South and Central Asia*, edited by K. Warikoo of Jawaharlal Nehru University,³ reads like a supplement to the monograph discussed above. The authors have chosen a broad international context to scrutinize the rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan, Talibanization of Pakistan, the policy and practices of Islamic terrorism in India, Islamic extremism in Kashmir and Bangladesh, and the terrorist network in the latter; they analyze the destabilizing role of Hizb ut-Tahrir in Central Asia, the role of the Muslim leaders in Tajikistan, ethno-religious separatism in Xinjiang, etc.

K. Warikoo, the project head, obviously intended to fit the Central Asian problems into the extended regional agenda by scrutinizing the situation through the prism of the growing threat of radical Islam. He proceeded from the assumption that the Islamists reject, in principle, democracy and secularism. The rhetoric of political Islam, on the other hand, can be viewed as a response to the increasingly obvious economic inequality, corruption, and political impotence of Muslim societies and the moral bankruptcy of today's Western materialist culture and its axiological system. The Central Asian countries were also exposed to this. The region is too close to Afghanistan to remain immune to instability with Islamist undertones; the same is true of Pakistan and India, writes Warikoo.

The Indian academic is quite rightly convinced that the sides involved (India, China, Russia, and its Central Asian allies) should close ranks in the face of a common threat. K. Warikoo points

³ See: *Religion and Security in South and Central Asia*, ed. by K. Warikoo, Routledge, London, New York, 2011, 217 pp.

to Sufism and, in the wider sense, the common cultural-religious legacy of the vast region that in the past included Hindustan, the Middle East, and Central Asia as a weapon to be used against militant Islamism.

In fact, the Indian scholar calls on the Central Asian region to formulate its official policy as planting moderate Islam in the form of the Sufi tradition. The recent developments in the region suggest that this should be seriously discussed.

The volume *China and Greater Central Asia: New Frontiers?* written by N. Swanström and published within the program of the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute at Johns Hopkins University looks at China's new role in Central Asia; the book continues the academic discourse started by Frederick Starr, the author's senior colleague.⁴

Frederick Starr put the term "Greater Central Asia" into academic and political circulation; his junior colleague has gone even further: the Swede does not limit Greater Central Asia to Central Asia proper and Afghanistan; for him it stretches to Pakistan, Iran, Mongolia, and probably Azerbaijan in the Caucasus.

Niklas Swanström points to the fact that China has gained much more weight in Greater Central Asia, a region of exceptional economic and geopolitical importance for the PRC. Unlike many of his colleagues, he is convinced that China has learned to successfully employ "soft power" (this is probably much more obvious in Central Asia's southern neighbors than in the post-Soviet republics).

He identifies the focal points of China's policy and strategy in Greater Central Asia: active use of the region's resources and markets in a way that will not alarm Russia and the Central Asian states. It seems that China expects that in a couple of generations Greater Central Asia will change its geopolitical preferences in a dramatic and so far unpredictable way. China's widening presence, however, clashes with the interests of the United States, Russia, and the European Union; this may either stir up a conflict or suggest cooperation.

To gain more influence and more power, China should encourage close economic ties inside Eurasia; this means that the long-term strategies of all the interested states should take into account China's expansion in Greater Central Asia: it will inevitably affect their policies and tip the balance of power in Eurasia.

The author looks at the problem from the viewpoint of European interests: the EU and China can and should create trans-Eurasian transportation routes as soon as possible to profit themselves and to improve the economic situation in Greater Central Asia. In any case, Brussels and Beijing (together with Washington) will be able to coordinate their strategies in Greater Central Asia.

What the author has written about China relying on American methods to spread its influence far and wide raises doubt; he also points out that the mounting anti-Americanism and rapidly declining American solvency add to the pro-China bias in the region.

Niklas Swanström is convinced that the main question of the near future is whether China will join the multisided structures of Greater Central Asia.

Regional and Socioeconomic Studies

Last year one of the most prominent American experts in Central Asia Prof. Frederick Starr of Johns Hopkins University gathered together an international team around the *Ferghana Valley. The*

⁴ See: N. Swanström, *China and Greater Central Asia: New Frontiers?* Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program, Washington, D.C., 2011, 84 pp.

Heart of Central Asia project.⁵ The fundamental work consists of fourteen chapters dealing with the region's history from ancient times to our day; its economy, ecology, culture, Islam, and its international status are dealt with in separate chapters. The Introduction and Conclusion authored by Prof. Starr define the conception and the main approaches.

Prof. Starr selected the valley as one of the world's most densely populated regions (12 million people); its ethnic, linguistic, and political diversity, together with the fact that it is divided among three Central Asian states (geographically, these parts are far removed from the corresponding capitals), makes it a unique corner of the world.

He writes that the valley's contribution to the economies of each of the three republics is incredibly high: indeed, it is potentially the largest of the Central Asian markets and the world's second largest cotton producer. Historically, the Ferghana Valley has been and remains the successor to the ancient routes that linked Europe with China and India, which suggests that a ramified network of railways and gas pipelines can restore the valley to its former international status.

Prof. Starr has pointed out that this is enough to attract international attention, however, for over 20 years, the valley has been viewed as a sad example of persistent instability (in the Uzbek and Kyrgyz sectors in particular). He remains convinced that the valley does not deserve its reputation of being one of the most unstable regions: local developments should be sorted out with the help of sociological, political, scientific, historical, linguistic, and economic data. The American scholar is convinced that all the problems, no matter how complicated, are rooted in the border and water use issues.

The author has formulated nine questions, the answers to which will supply us with a clearer idea about the Ferghana phenomenon:

- (1) What periods and episodes of the Valley's past still echo today?
- (2) Is the Valley a center or a periphery (in relation to other centers)?
- (3) Are the history and culture of the Ferghana Valley homogenous or patchy?
- (4) Do isolation or contacts prevail in the Valley's past and present?
- (5) What is the correlation between religion and secularism in the Valley's history and its life today?
- (6) Are external or internal factors more important in the Valley's social and cultural life?
- (7) Have stagnation or accelerated changes prevailed in the last few decades?
- (8) Does governance rely on external or internal mechanisms?
- (9) What is the correlation between the centrifugal and centripetal forces in the Valley and among coordination, integration, and disintegration?

Frederick Starr argues that those who can answer these questions will acquire a better idea of the Ferghana Valley and Central Asia as a whole.

What conclusions have the American expert and his international team drawn? They offer no consolation: it is well known that the valley is steeped in numerous social, economic, and ecological problems; today, and this is most important, the valley, divided among three countries, is rapidly losing its historical homogeneity under the pressure of centrifugal trends. Soviet power (which created the administrative barriers in the valley in the first place) is not totally responsible. Together with independence, the new states acquired enthusiasm for nation-building, which inevitably affected the valley's cultural-historical homogeneity.

⁵ See: *Ferghana Valley. The Heart of Central Asia*, ed. by S.F. Starr, M.E. Sharpe, Armonk, New York, London, 2011, XX+442 pp.

Frederick Starr, a well-known trailblazer, came forward with a suggestion to set up a collective international structure he calls the Coordinating Council of the Fergana Valley in order to pool the forces of all the Central Asian countries.

A short survey under the eloquent title of *Central Asia: Decay and Decline*⁶ was written by the International Crisis Group that thoroughly investigated detailed statistics relating to health protection, education, energy production, and transport. They pointed out that in all the Central Asian countries (with the exception of Kazakhstan), the social sphere and economy are in bad shape; in each of them certain spheres are gravely ill. In Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, for example, the civilian infrastructure has declined beyond repair (energy production is still breathing). In Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, health protection and education are decaying (energy production has already undergone a slump).

The authors placed Kazakhstan in a league of its own, which is no compliment: the country is rapidly sliding down into an abyss of differentiation between health protection and education for the elite and for the ordinary people (the latter gets practically next to nothing from the huge sums allocated from the budget). In other words, schools and hospitals that correspond to the world's average standards rub shoulders with schools and hospitals that look no better than in Kazakhstan's southern neighbors. The authors nevertheless admit that, unlike its neighbors, Kazakhstan has, to a certain extent, moved forward and preserved its secular order.

Another survey called *Central Asia's Crisis of Governance* was published by the Asia Society in Washington.⁷ Its author Philip Shishkin, a former award-winning staff reporter of the *Wall Street Journal*, looks at the region in two dimensions: development of each republic and their development in the presence of the geopolitical players (Russia, China, the U.S., and the EU). The author gives succinct definitions of each of the Central Asian states: he defines Kazakhstan as a country of electoral authoritarianism; Kyrgyzstan as the land of perpetual revolution; Tajikistan as a failing state; Turkmenistan as a desert kingdom fueled by gas; and, finally, Uzbekistan as a police state of strategic significance.

The survey suggests (even though the author deliberately avoids unambiguous statements) that the region suffers from a crisis of governance at home (its state institutions and systems of governance are eroded) and at the geopolitical level (which is much more interesting).

It seems that the region will not acquire "external governance"; "the U.S.-led war in Afghanistan has been a boon to Central Asia's authoritarian regimes... But the United States is likely to disengage from the region as it winds down the Afghan campaign, with China and Russia poised to increase their influence in Central Asia" (p. 35). This will inevitably undermine the EU's position in the region and play down the geopolitical impact of the West. In theory, Russia and China might profit, but this is in no way certain. Russia is rapidly losing ground to China which, however, is not prepared to employ colonial or totalitarian methods to keep the region under control.

This means, writes Philip Shishkin, that in the near future Central Asia will be spared intensive geopolitical rivalry (according to many of the Central Asian experts, however, it has become more vigorous); the region will be confronted with receding and, therefore, inadequate external pressure. This is a paradox that contradicts the generally accepted idea about Central Asia's geopolitical importance. The paradox suggests that in the near future the Central Asian countries will suffer from a crisis of domestic political governance (that is, a crisis of their state institutions), sharper rivalry among the elites, clans, and regions, at least in some of the countries, struggle for political leadership, hereditary power, etc.

⁶ See: *Central Asia: Decay and Decline. Asia Report N°201*, 3 February, 2011, ICG, Bishkek/Brussels, 2011, III+42 pp.

⁷ See: Ph. Shishkin, *Central Asia's Crisis of Governance*, Asia Society, Washington, D.C., 2012, 40 pp.

Political Models in the Central Asian Countries

Prof. Eric McGlinchey of George Mason University gave his book the pretentious title of *Chaos, Violence, Dynasty. Politics and Islam in Central Asia*.⁸ What is found between the two covers does not fully correspond to the title: the author concentrates on the problems of authoritarian rule, taking Central Asia as an example.

The first chapter deals with authoritarianism in the broad international context with digressions into aspects conducive to various authoritarian models and affecting geopolitics, the economy, religion, etc.

Chapter 2 “The Soviet Origins of Post-Soviet Autocratic Variation” tells nothing new: the subject has been substantially researched by political science.

Chapters 3, 4, and 5 deal with the three models of the Central Asian regimes as the author sees them: he designates the Kyrgyz model as “chaotic,” the Uzbek as “violent,” and the Kazakh as “dynastic” (meaning the continuity of power). Prof. McGlinchey puts political instability in Kyrgyzstan (the events of the early 1990s and the years 2005 and 2010) at one pole and Uzbekistan’s excessive stability at the other. Stability in Uzbekistan, writes the author, is rooted in the repressions of the 1990s and suppression of the Andijan riot in 2005. Kazakhstan, in which the dynastic tradition of state power might undermine the regime, is found between the two poles.

The author believes that three key factors were responsible for the diversity of authoritarian models in Central Asia: the degree of Moscow’s involvement in local development; abundance or shortage of economic (natural) resources; and different levels of Islamic impact.

He concludes that, on the whole, diversification of the regimes and their stability/instability were caused by several, rather than one factor: the strong party and administrative machine inherited in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan; the excessive dependence on foreign aid (Kyrgyzstan); the unfolding vulnerability of the ruling class; the shortage of economic resources, which suggests violence or decentralization; clan regionalism (Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan), etc. The author deems it necessary to point out that natural riches (Kazakhstan) allowed the regime to avoid the decentralization/violence dilemma.

Prof. McGlinchey also looks into the problems associated with political instability and resource deficit: when coupled with the strong historical traditions of Islam-oriented societies they unavoidably make Islam a factor of social and political gravitation. This is not a breakthrough: since the early 1990s, Western political science has been aware of Islam’s transformation into a political force.

It should be said that the book contains numerous diagrams and tables designed to graphically demonstrate how different the development levels of the three Central Asian republics are.

In his relatively short *Flirting with State Failure*,⁹ Johan Engvall offers a conceptual analysis of the causes behind the consistent failures to build an efficient state system in Kyrgyzstan.

The author supplies a positive assessment of the first years of Askar Akaev’s presidency, but points out that the instruments (the government and state institutions) the first president of Kyrgyzstan used to carry out the reforms proved inadequate. “He ruled through a heterogeneous government,” writes the author, “unable to implement these ideas in real life, leading to chaos and minimal levels of governance” (p. 5).

⁸ See: E. McGlinchey, *Chaos, Violence, Dynasty. Politics and Islam in Central Asia*, Pittsburgh University Press, Pittsburgh (Pa), 2011, XIV+216 pp.

⁹ See: J. Engvall, *Flirting with State Failure: Power and Politics in Kyrgyzstan since Independence*, A Joint Transatlantic Research and Policy Center, Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program, Washington, D.C., 2011, 101 pp.

“Starting in the second half of the 1990s, Akaev embarked on an increasingly authoritarian path.” Johan Engvall writes that unfortunately “the president and his family increasingly approached the state and the economy as personal fiefdoms, which increased popular dissatisfaction with the incumbent leader. This culminated in the so-called Tulip Revolution that unseated Akaev” (pp. 5-6). The hopes for democracy proved vain. President Bakiev and “the new ruling family created a full-scale kleptocracy” (p. 6) which eclipsed everything that had been done by the Akaev regime. Bakiev was deposed in 2010.

Johan Engvall concludes that “political power in Kyrgyzstan is a battle between personalities, not organized group interests. Elites compete for power not through formal institutional channels, but by means of competing informal patron-client pyramid networks” (p. 6).

The author points to three very important features of the political order in Kyrgyzstan: “A first striking component is the dominance of personalized influence games. In this system, success is dependent on proximity to the president and his family circle; a second pillar of political power is the redistribution of rents; finally, the state itself is organized as a marketplace” (p. 7). Any political system organized in this way requires regular privatization of public property; setting up all sorts of funds, companies, etc. to redistribute resources and rechannel financial flows. A change in regime starts a new round of repossession and redistribution.

The author obviously has doubts: “Against this background, is a fresh start likely in Kyrgyzstan, and could a parliamentary system serve as a vehicle of change? First of all, political change in Kyrgyzstan cannot be measured by changes in the formal framework of governance” (p. 7). More than that, during the years of independence, the criminal community, previously barely organized, developed into several well-organized criminal syndicates which control state enterprises, agriculture, the light industry, and drug trafficking “(of all the drugs originating in Afghanistan, experts estimate that about 15-20 percent is smuggled through Kyrgyzstan)” (p. 47). Naturally enough, this assured the advent of criminal figures to official politics.

The author describes the republic as “Central Asia’s unorganized island of democracy” (p. 18) and concludes by saying: “Thus, the critical question is whether the semi-parliamentary system can work out in practice and lead the political elite away from the past” (p. 101).

The recent book by Sébastien Peyrouse called *Turkmenistan. Strategies of Power, Dilemmas of Development*¹⁰ is a valuable addition to the body of writings about Central Asia. It is a sequel to his earlier book *Turkménistan. Un destin au carrefour des empires*¹¹ published in 2007. The two books have much common, especially at the conceptual level.

In his first book, the author presented his conception in the form of questions. Was the future nation the author of its own history? Can an advantageous geopolitical situation impart political and cultural importance to the nation? How can the great historical moments and the great historical figures related to the entire region be divided among its countries and how can they be fitted into their national treasure-troves? What place should be assigned to the Russian-Soviet heritage which, while being reviled, still survives? What role will Islam play? How will the division into clans and regional and national minorities affect the country’s future? (The author seems to be sure that the formation of the Turkmen nation retarded by the radical social and political processes initiated and carried out by the Soviet regime makes it hard, if at all possible, to talk about national identity.)

In his recent book the author tries to answer these questions. The book consists of three parts and ten chapters. Part I describes geography, history, and nation-building, the contents being geared to the Western reader. Much attention is paid to the Russian and Soviet period. The French researcher pro-

¹⁰ See: S. Peyrouse, *Turkmenistan. Strategies of Power, Dilemmas of Development*, M.E. Sharpe, Armonk, New York, 2012, 248 pp.

¹¹ See: S. Peyrouse, *Turkménistan. Un destin au carrefour des empires*, Edition Belin, Paris, 2007, 184 pp.

ceeds from the assumption that Turkmenistan is a state that can and should occupy a niche of its own in the 21st century because of its past and geographic location, which will also stir up great interest in it.

Part II “Post-Soviet Technologies of Power” covers all the aspects of the Niyazov regime. The first decade-and-a-half of independence was closely associated with the late president’s ambitious personality. He was responsible for the political institutions and cultural life, while the negative repercussions of his activity have not yet been fully disclosed.

This brings the reader to President Berdymukhammedov, who inherited power from Niyazov. When seeking an answer to the question “Was there a thaw?” he asked in his previous book, the French scholar concludes that the early stage of Berdymukhammedov’s presidency was an “illusion of a Khrushchevian thaw.”

Part III “Development Challenges and Strategies” deals with the economy and foreign policy dilemmas. The author tries to explain the paradoxes and U-turns in Turkmen policies: the very specific Russia-Ukraine-Turkmenistan gas triangle; restraining Moscow through Tehran; the great interest in TAPI; and the recent turn toward China and EU. Peyrouse does nothing to bypass the most sensitive issues: Turkmenistan as a hub of drug trafficking from Afghanistan and “the growing Sinophilia of Turkmen foreign policy” (p. 207).

The French scholar writes that Turkmenistan’s foreign policy is mainly determined by its hydrocarbon resources and by the place its leaders are seeking on the international arena. As an enclave, the country should master the art of good relations with its neighbors, irrespective of their political regimes.

The country has already achieved what looks like integration with Iran, its closest neighbor, and with Turkey and China. Relations with Russia remain fairly complicated: the regime is still nursing a grudge against the “elder brother” that infringed on its independence, while letting Moscow control its gas exports.

The regime change in 2006 provided Ashgabat with a wider leeway: while fulfilling its old obligations and softening its isolation, the country found a place in the regional integration structures and resumed contacts with the West.

The author writes that the country has essentially restored its relations with the United States and European Union, two great powers, as well as with international and post-Soviet structures. What is more, Turkmenistan has preserved its economic contacts (far removed from the “democratization” agenda) with its large regional neighbors.

Sébastien Peyrouse has further written: “Today’s energy Great Game has promoted a revival of interest in Turkmenistan. It puts the four major international actors—the United States, the European Union, China and Russia—in competition with one another as well as with the new 21st century regional powers: India, Iran and Turkey”; in his opinion “Central Asia is a strategic region where the powers involved test out their strength and their alliances” (p. 219). Let’s hope, writes the author, that being involved in this far from simple game Turkmenistan will seize the chance to secure its strategic aims, something which is highly important for its long-suffering people.

Claude Salhani, American observer and journalist, member of the International Institute of Strategic Studies, called his book *Islam without Veil. Kazakhstan’s Path of Moderation*, which was the result of his six-month trip to Kazakhstan in 2010 as a *Washington Post* correspondent. Written in a publicist style, the book reads like a piece of journalism.¹²

The author has chosen the Islamic context to discuss the country’s recent history: Islam and modernization; religion and democracy; the Salafi impact on Kazakhstan society; and possible convergence—cultural and civilizational as well as political and economic—between the Middle East and Central Asia.

¹² See: C. Salhani, *Islam without a Veil. Kazakhstan’s Path of Moderation*, Potomac Books, Washington, D.C., 2011, XV+203 pp.

Significantly, it was in 2011 that the author asked himself whether Kazakhstan society would be confronted with Islamic terrorism any time soon. Claude Salhani pays particular attention to security issues relating not only to the threat of terror, but also to Kazakhstan's OSCE chairmanship. He places geopolitical issues in the same context: the impact of the Afghan developments and spread of radical Islam. The author fits his view of the specifics of the reforms in Kazakhstan into a succinct formula "the economy first" (p. 107). This means that economic reforms should be completed before political reforms are launched.

On the whole, it seems that the author has discerned a special Kazakhstan road both in the economy and in politics: the road of moderation, gradual reforms, and tolerance. There can be no arguing with this.

The new book by British author Jonathan Aitken *Kazakhstan. Surprises and Stereotypes. After 20 Years of Independence* is a logical sequel to his previous work, *Nazarbayev and the Making of Kazakhstan*. It seems that all the information, ideas, and impressions the author gained while in Kazakhstan proved too copious to fit into one book. Let's look inside both of them.¹³

In 2009, the author posed himself the task of introducing the foreign reader (mainly in the West) to the architect of the most successful of the Central Asian states. The book is based on the author's long talks with Nursultan Nazarbaev, in which the president of Kazakhstan shared his reminiscences and ideas. These confidential talks and the author's unlimited access to the state archives make the book a treasure-trove of useful and, most important, hitherto unknown information. The author has not only described the road his hero covered before he rose to the summits of power, but also revealed the circumstances and personal qualities that brought him to power and made him father of the nation and "the builder of modern Kazakhstan" (p. 15).

In his *Kazakhstan. Surprises and Stereotypes. After 20 Years of Independence*, Jonathan Aitken develops the subjects and ideas of his previous effort while moving away from the personality of the country's leader. Contemporary Kazakhstan, which has covered a 20-year-long road of independence, is the central character. Fully aware of the fact that the West, and the rest of the world, knows pitifully little about Kazakhstan, the author writes: "Nevertheless there is a growing understanding that a new powerhouse is coming of age on the Steppes. At this strategic crossroads where Chinese, Russians, Central Asians and Western civilizations converge, Kazakhstan has arrived as a stable and significant nation state" (p. 2).

The British author believes that the mechanism of state governance and the political processes underway in Kazakhstan deserve closer scrutiny; the Western media and political scientists, meanwhile, should abandon their favorite stereotypes and clichés about dictatorship, a police state, and harsh authoritarian regime.

He writes that even though it is endowed with bounteous natural riches, the country's main resource is its people with their talents, traditions, ambitions, and strong historical memory. The author argues that anyone wishing to understand the country's past and present should keep in mind that "three themes are surprisingly important: Suffering, Survival and Success" (p. 3). He is convinced that knowledge about the trials that befell the republic in the 20th century puts its future in the 21st century into bolder relief.

Jonathan Aitken looks at the emergence of the young and ambitious middle class as a guarantee of the country's stability and economic growth; at the same time, he makes no effort to pass over numerous problems in silence, among which he counts Soviet legacy, the one-party system (the book was written before the December 2011 elections), the high level of corruption, and the low level of the judicial system, as well as limited media freedom. Full-scale democracy is still beyond the horizon, yet real progress in most spheres is obvious.

¹³ See: J. Aitken, *Kazakhstan. Surprises and Stereotypes. After 20 Years of Independence*, Continuum, London, New York, 2012, 200 pp.; idem., *Nazarbayev and the Making of Kazakhstan*, Continuum, London, New York, 2009. IX+256 pp.

The author was puzzled by the fact that whereas in the West the public is mainly cynical and tends to mistrust the government and political leaders, the trends in Kazakhstan are opposite.

He describes the rejection of a referendum on extending the president's term in office for another six years scheduled for the spring of 2011 as the main political intrigue and "a victory for New Kazakhstan over Old Kazakhstan" (p. 15). The rejection of the referendum was a defeat of the old elite clinging to the status quo that guaranteed its continued existence within the system and under the presidential umbrella. The decision pushed the social groups the author describes as "new Kazakhstan" (the liberal intelligentsia, progressive-minded businessmen, and officials, students, the youth, and ordinary people in general) onto the president's side.

On the whole, the author covers a wide range of problems relating to the country's domestic and foreign policies. The author is obviously a friend of Kazakhstan who wishes it well despite the pages of objective, just and, therefore, constructive criticism. As such, it does not irritate but suggests that the shortcomings should be removed and problems addressed.

The Russian-German collective monograph *Politicheskii protsess v Tsentralnoy Azii* (Political Process in Central Asia), the third in a series,¹⁴ is a fine addition to Central Asian historiography; it was published in 2011 as part of a joint project implemented by the German Rosa Luxemburg Foundation and the Institute of Oriental Studies, RAS. The international group of authors analyzes the political processes in the Central Asian countries, the specifics of their social and economic development, and the dramatic changes obvious in all spheres of public and social life.¹⁵

In their introductory article, Arne C. Seifert and Irina Zvyagelskaya point out that authoritarian systems have demonstrated sustainability in all the Central Asian states as a fairly specific type of clan-bureaucratic capitalism that serves tiny groups of the chosen few and as a very complicated intertwining of the traditions of modernity and the stronger religious impact on society.

The authors point out that the political process underway in the Central Asian states reproduces a non-Western model (or its elements) determined, on the whole, by the form of personal social relations, while power, authority, and influence mainly depend on social status. This explains why a political struggle is being waged around sources of influence rather than political alternatives.

The co-authors go on to say that the conservative political culture is responsible for the fairly specific principles governing the functioning of political institutions. The multiparty system that replaced the Soviet one-party system which faded out in the newly independent states was exposed to the impact of strong public ties. Political parties are not based on ideologies; they are based on regional, clan, and tribal interests. Most of the parties and movements are not national—they are fighting for higher statuses for their tribesmen.

The authors touch upon a very important issue: there are two versions of the region's configuration which presuppose alternative ideas of its history, cultural, and political interests. One of the alternatives is called Central Eurasia, the other, Greater Central Asia. The new names are explained by the desire to move away from the old "Central Asia" (*Sredniaia Azia* in Russian) stamped with Russian and Soviet geopolitical and geo-economic definitions.

In the post-Soviet period, Soviet heritage is gradually fading away to be replaced either by new geopolitical configurations or older and much more fundamental cultural, linguistic, and religious relations. Those who favor the new names for the old region believe that Central Asia should be enlarged to include other countries of the same region or some areas of them and treated as a geopolitical whole inherited from the past. The expert community has accepted this argument; the new names are freely used for all sorts of communities, undertakings, and departments.

¹⁴ See: *Pyatnadsat let, kotorye izmenili Tsentralnuu Aziu (1991-2006)*, TsSPI, Moscow, 2006, 270 pp; *Gody, kotorye izmenili Tsentralnuu Aziu*, TsSPI-IV RAN, Moscow, 2009, 331 pp.

¹⁵ See: *Politicheskii protsess v Tsentralnoy Azii: rezul'taty, problemy, perspektivy*, IV RAS/TsSPI, Moscow, 2011, 406 pp.

The authors, in turn, have pointed out that the new names and new boundaries of their cultural-geographic construct (for them the difference between Central Eurasia and Greater Central Asia being of secondary, stylistic importance) are too vague. There is a more or less concerted opinion that Afghanistan should be included in the new region together with the Central Asian states; the rest is left to personal preference: some authors see Mongolia, Xinjiang, the eastern parts of Iran, and north-western parts of Pakistan within the bounds of the new region; others look even further to Western Siberia, the Southern Urals, the Volga Area, the Southern Caucasus, and the Crimea.

This suggests the conclusion that typologically the methods employed to describe Central Asia are too varied to produce a single idea of the region (which is hardly possible anyway); this explains the present diversity of opinions and approaches. It all depends on the point of view of any specific expert, the interests he defends, and the methodological instruments he employs.

Arne C. Seifert, who contributed an article called "Political Islam in the Political Process in Central Asia," does not look at Islam as a conflict-prone factor. There is no reason to believe, he writes, that Islamists might seize power, while he warns that the situation might change if believers, the clergy, and those who represent Islam in politics are confronted with suppression. Violence is known to have bred conflicts and religious wars in the past.

So far, no such situations have emerged: the regional and local elites rely on Islam as a handy instrument used every time that interests need to be protected or when the conflict potential must be quenched.

Prof. Seifert has formulated a conception of horizontal evolution of Islamization and politicization of the religious milieu and has identified its three factors:

- (1) social problems;
- (2) deeper religiosity (Islam "nationalizes itself");
- (3) politicization (political Islam strengthens its position up to and including the demands to set up an Islamic state).

In fact, wider and deeper religious feelings as a response to poverty and social dead ends have been present in all countries at all times. In Central Asia, however, the people are exposed to two, out of the three, factors: unresolved social problems and, therefore, explosive social situation and rapidly "self-nationalizing" Islam. Together they form a mighty flow which adds dynamism to all the socio-political processes, particularly in the religious sphere. In countries where there are practically no social-oriented left movements, parties, or trade unions able to mold general dissatisfaction into alternatives and struggle for social justice, the situation becomes even more hazardous.

The German scholar has pointed out that time has come to specify the idea of political Islam: the answer to the question about the watershed between the aims and intentions of any specific party, politicians, and activists (who practice political Islam) is found in the context of their attitude to the Muslims' religious feelings, on the one hand, and their possible employment for political purposes, on the other.

Prof. Seifert is convinced that Europe might be determined enough to establish relations based on trust and confidence with Central Asian political Islam if and when the West pulls its military out of Afghanistan (he has written this repeatedly elsewhere). In these conditions, the OSCE will be assigned the special role of moderator between secular power and political Islam so that their latent conflict does not slide into antagonism to be exploited by external forces in their interests. He deems it necessary to stress that Europe should finally accept the Islamic political movements in the Asian part of the OSCE as a strategic constant rather than a variable.

He argues that today the European politicians and the ruling regime in Central Asia have so far failed to grasp the key idea that democratic treatment of the "Islamic factor" is much more important

and valuable than merely a constitutional element in the young national states. This interferes with improving the relations between Europe and Central Asian political Islam and leaves many basic problems pending. We should admit that peaceful coexistence between secularism and Islam in Central Asia is a vitally important aspect of stabilization inside the Central Asian countries and of the relations between them and secular Europe.

A Muslim majority does not mean that the state should become an Islamic state, yet Europe should learn that the secular elites cannot guarantee the secular nature of their states ad infinitum. Hence the conclusion that as long as the question of the sociopolitical orientation of the Central Asian countries remains unsettled (that is, whether they remain secular or become Islamic states), the Islamic factor will continue to occupy a central position in the political struggle in the region. Its outcome will largely depend on whether the relations between secular power and Islam can be mutually adjusted to the extent that both will learn to look at the state as their common social and political homeland.

In conclusion, the German scholar deemed it necessary to sharply criticize the capitalist system and its practical implementation in Central Asia; he suspects the Western elites of intentions to wipe out the socialist alternative to liberal capitalism and states that the West has successfully applied its strategy of transformation to uproot the political and economic foundation of society of the Soviet type.

At the same time, writes he, the West has so far failed to set up political systems in its own image and likeness, while regional developments show that some of the states have already left the stage of transit behind: they have acquired fully consolidated political regimes of a “new type” which have very little in common with what the West sees as transit.

Arne C. Seifert has summed up the region’s international and geopolitical prospects by writing that the rivalry of the main geopolitical players (Russia, the U.S., and China) affects the political processes unfolding in the region. He is absolutely right. Indeed, the economic, military, and political capabilities of the region’s states will hardly allow them to copy the tactics employed by more independent geopolitical players. This means that they should not side with any of the players involved, but should stick to the principle of equidistance from all of them and avoid unambiguous support of one of the sides.

This fundamental work is not free of shortcomings and contradictions. The chapters dealing with individual republics should be treated as independent studies.

There is, however, a conceptual element clearly seen in the three pieces contributed by Arne C. Seifert. The German scholar, very much like his Western colleagues, operates with the well-established opinion about the authoritarian nature of the local regimes; unlike them though, he tries to analyze the reasons for and discern behind the authoritarian façade the possibilities and alternatives conducive to sustainable and effective development. As distinct from Western experts (mainly Anglo-Saxon) who criticize the Central Asian realities from the right, he criticizes them from the left (which is quite logical for someone who represents the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation).

Prof. Irina Zvyagelskaya (Institute of Oriental Studies, RAS), who contributed, together with Arne C. Seifert, to the Introduction to the monograph discussed above, authored one of the chapters in *Vneshnepoliticheskiy protsess v stranakh Vostoka* (The Foreign Policy Process in the East). She places the foreign policy process in the Central Asian states in the context of the region’s development in the last decade and the role of external players in it.¹⁶ She deems it necessary to point out that the local regimes have acquired many common features (the closed nature of decision-making being one of them) and that their political cultures share certain specific features (a combination of contemporary and traditional elements such as the role of social status, groups of solidarity, etc.). She also

¹⁶ See: *Vneshnepoliticheskiy protsess v stranakh Vostoka*, ed. by Prof. D.V. Streltsov, Aspekt Press, Moscow, 2011, 336 pp.

mentions that what is going on outside the region in many ways influences the situation in the region, as well as the foreign policy of the Central Asian states.

The reader is invited to bear in mind that what the West is planning and has programmed for the Arab East (with the pragmatic aim of gaining access to its resources) viz., replacement of the elderly leaders, reorientation of foreign policy, structural and economic changes, etc., will happen sooner or later in Central Asia: forewarned is forearmed, concludes the author.

Indeed, some of the Central Asian leaders have remained in power as long as Mubarak, Ben Ali, Saleh, and Qaddafi, who set up authoritarian imitations of democratic regimes very similar to what we can see in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, or Tajikistan. In other words, these post-Soviet regimes have grown old and worn out very much like their architects. Back in 1991, these regimes could stir up half-hearted enthusiasm, in stormy 2011 they relied on fear, stagnation, apathy, and post-Soviet conformism. The author concludes that a peaceful and well-organized transfer to democracy in some of the Central Asian republics is complicated by the fact that none of them has yet succeeded in accomplishing it.

The monograph *Aziatskie energeticheskie stsenarii* (Asian Energy Scenarios), an IMEMO publication,¹⁷ looks at the problems of energy production and the role of Central Asia in the world's export of energy resources. The authors point out that Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Azerbaijan have found their niches in the international division of labor as fuel exporters thanks to their oil, gas, and uranium resources. So far, they have failed to pour money into modernization of the energy and transportation sectors, which means that very soon their export potential will falter under the pressure of high power consumption.

Tsentrlnaia Azia segodnia: vyzovy i ugrozy (Central Asia Today: Challenges and Threats) published in a series of monographs by the Kazakhstan Institute of Strategic Studies (KISI, Almaty) is a fundamental work that deserves special mention. This is the most profound discussion of the region and its problems offered by Central Asian authors. I invite critics from other regions to form their own opinion of it.¹⁸

Conclusion

We have surveyed a vast range of opinions, conceptions, and theories related to the present and future of the Central Asian countries. There is more or less unanimous agreement that the region's relatively comfortable existence in the system of international relations, which coincided with the end of George W. Bush's presidency and Barack Obama's first term as U.S. president, is coming to an end. Today, when the West has successfully destabilized Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Arab East, it will turn its attention to Iran and Pakistan.

In this context, neither the U.S. nor Russia needs a neutral Central Asia. The course toward a Eurasian Union Vladimir Putin outlined in September 2011 means that Russia has finally parted with its fairly inconsistent foreign policy of the past and that the era of "multivectoral" foreign policy of many of the Central Asian states is moving toward its end.

This is what many of the works quoted above have either stated plainly or implied in less direct terms.

¹⁷ See: *Aziatskie energeticheskie stsenarii 2030*, ed. by S.V. Zhukov, Magistr, Moscow, 2012, 336 pp.

¹⁸ See: *Tsentrlnaia Azia segodnia: vyzovy i ugrozy*, ed. by Prof. K.L. Syroezhkin, KISI, Almaty, 2011, 456 pp.