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Projections from the Heartland

TASHKENT, Uzbekistan

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By Adam Smith Albion

TAMERLANE VS. VASCO DA GAMA

At the turn of this century, two authoritative yet diametrically opposed theories were proposed relating geography to power. More specifically, they set out to compare the relative advantages of seapower and landpower. U.S. Admiral Alfred Thayer Mahan was the eloquent apostle of the former. With his eye firmly on the Empire-building role of the British Royal Navy, he propounded in 1900 his thesis that whoever controlled the sea lanes could command the world. Navies moved more swiftly than armies; they could project their power farther. They could dominate commercial shipping and strangle a country's trade at will. These were obvious conclusions to draw at a time when maps showed three-quarters of the globe under Britannia's sway. To be sure, Mahan pointed out that seapower was meaningless unless complemented by strategic bases on land, but landpower was only a means: naval supremacy was the goal. Mahan's ideas were not lost on First Sea Lords John Arbuthnot Fisher (1904-10) and Winston Churchill (1911-15) or on Admiral Alfred von Tirpitz (1897-1916), whose competition to build Dreadnought super-battleships helped precipitate the First World War.

A striking counter-argument to Mahan's came out of Oxford four years later, when the geographer Sir Halford MacKinder put forth his concept of a global "pivotal area." This was later known as the theory of the "heartland," which he situated in the Eurasian steppes (*i.e.* modern-day Central Asia). Here, he contended, the core area of world power was to be sought and found. With no major navigable rivers and no outlets to the oceans, the heartland was impenetrable to sea power. Moreover, its extreme isolation rendered it attack-proof by land. It was, in a word, an impregnable fortress. (Air-bombing from balloons did not seem a feasible proposition in 1904.) Rich in resources, free to develop its strength in total security, the heartland was the world's greatest geostrategic prize: an invulnerable spot from which to dominate the Eurasian landmass — and consequently the world. The "World Island," he called it.

Thus two starkly contrasting theories set out the cases for seapower versus landpower. It must be admitted, MacKinder's heartland theory sounds rather extravagant today. His identification of poor, neglected Central Asia as the pivotal spot on the planet may warm the hearts of area specialists and enthusiasts such as myself, but is no longer taken very seriously by students of geostrategy. In contrast, Mahan's notions still enjoy wide currency among military-security

¹ As Research Associate in Security at the Institute of EastWest Studies in Prague (1991-94) I attended conferences where Mahan's concepts were frequently invoked, whether to discuss deployment of the US Sixth Fleet, modernization of the Royal Navy, or even the touchy subject of possible missions for a Japanese navy. Incidentally, the original popularization of Mahan's ideas owed a lot to the vocal advocacy of a certain Professor Robert Albion, in his day a well-known naval historian at Harvard — a relative of mine.

experts as one of the starting-points for thinking about naval power in the modern age.¹

Sir Halford's insights need not be dismissed wholly out of hand, however. The word "heartland" has passed into common usage because of him. He provides a conceptual tool for analyzing the strengths of the Mongol and Timurid empires — their realms were heartland powers *par excellence* — although the theory is less useful when we seek the reasons for their decline and fragmentation. If we turn to contemporary history, the Soviet Union's "defensive depth" certainly *did* play an important role in its victory in World War II. Because of its isolation from the front, Central Asian factories could continue to churn out armaments and supplies after the German armies had decimated the USSR's industrial base in the west. Hundreds of thousands of Russians, Byelorussians and Ukrainians were evacuated to an unvanquishable Soviet "heartland" from which to carry on the war effort. (Many of them and their descendents live in Central Asia still.)

And in a sense, MacKinder's thesis that world power would be the prerogative of a rich landmass secure from attack and plunder *has* been borne out. Although no territory can be considered impregnable in the age of rockets, North America is *relatively* invulnerable. Certainly it conforms more closely to MacKinder's description of an unstormable fortress than does Central Asia.

The preceding paragraphs have been introduced as a prelude to discussing the *geopolitics* [see below] of Central Asia's newly independent states. The glory days of the Silk Route, when Eurasia's major trade routes passed through their territories, are long gone. If Tamerlane is the hero who made Central Asia (temporarily) the cynosure of the world, his contemporary Vasco da Gama is the villain responsible for its decline. By circumnavigating Africa, the Portuguese seaman demonstrated the feasibility of trading with India — and, by extension, China — by ship; the long, cumbersome land routes became obsolete. From the sixteenth century on, Central Asia became less of a heartland and more of a backwater, *pace* MacKinder.

Central Asia will remain a backwater if it fails to finesse its geographical disadvantages. Ironically, MacKinder throws them into sharp relief, although his intention was to tout the region's strong points, especially from a defensive perspective: its distance from other centers of military-industrial power; its dearth of navigable rivers; its lack of access to the ocean. We may add to this catalogue of woes: vertiginous mountains to the east and south (the Tien-Shan and Pamir ranges); deserts to the west; vast empty steppes to the north and northwest; and two inland seas, the Caspian and the Aral, which must be either crossed or circumvented. While these facts of geography may be desirable in areas where the inhabitants are traditionally committed to avoiding contact with the outside world (Tibet or Bhutan come to mind), such terrific isolation is not particularly splendid for the new sover-

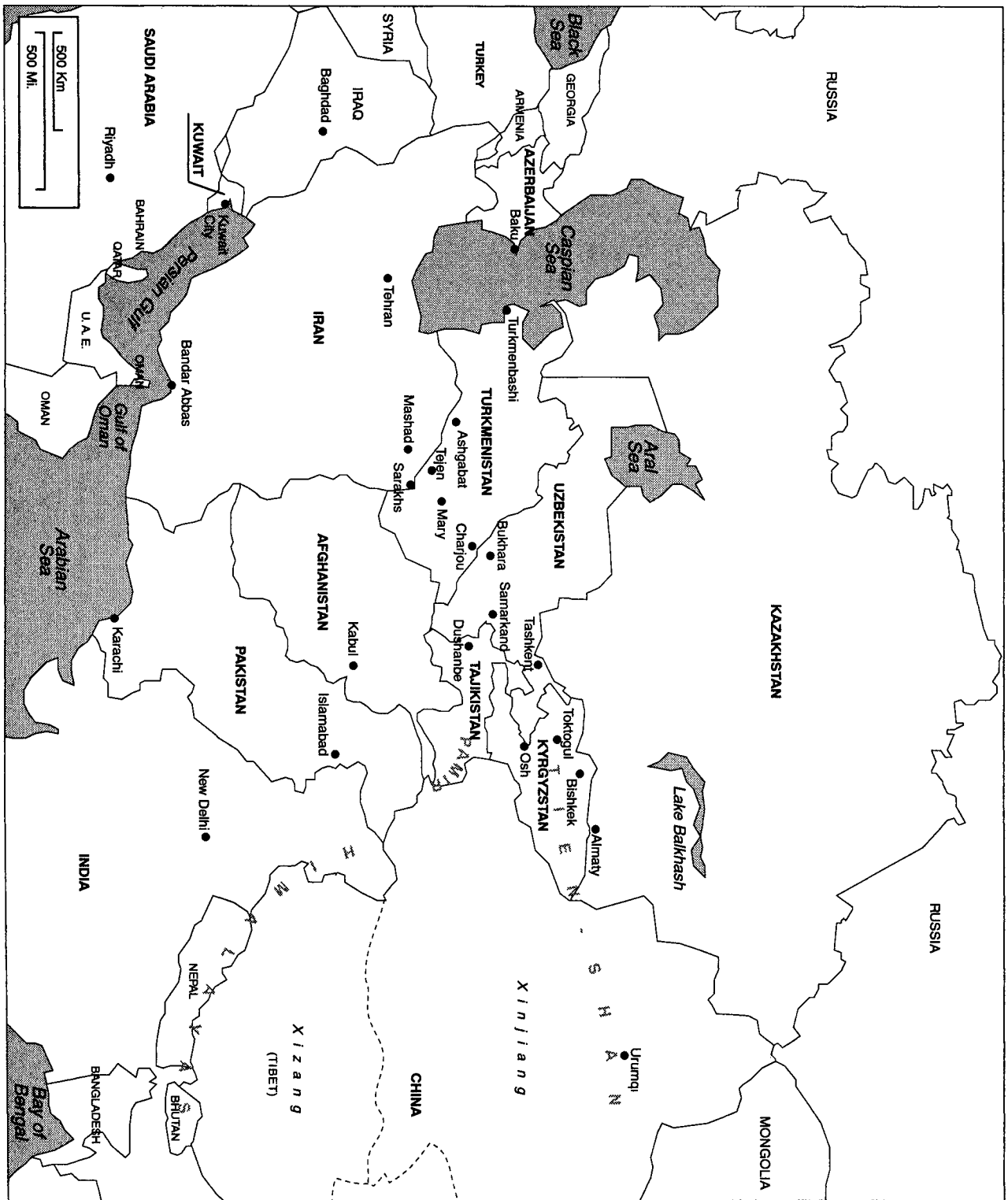
eign countries of Central Asia with ambitions to do the opposite.

Sir Halford did consider these problems, albeit by poring over maps in his Oxford study rather than surveying the terrain first-hand. He recognized that the heartland would wield no power if it were merely a superb defensive citadel. It would require the ability to *project itself outward* in ways that could counterbalance the mobility and long-distance striking power of ships. He found his answer in railroads. These, he maintained, would shift the balance of power back to land. The speed and efficiency of trains would more than compensate for the historical advantages of sea-borne forces.

Power, as the word has been employed so far, has implicitly referred to military power, but the argument will serve just as well if we think in terms of projecting not troops but *commodities* across large distances. Central Asia's biggest headache today is not how to conquer the world, but how to launch its goods onto the world market. The region is landlocked: in fact Uzbekistan is the only country on earth both landlocked and sharing all its borders with landlocked neighbors. How to overcome such unfortunate geography? How to redress the balance against economic competitors who enjoy easy access to the sea? These are problems of the greatest strategic import for Central Asia. Can the region's land-based resources be mobilized efficiently enough to pose a serious challenge to those conveyed by sea? Cast in economic terms, the question is closely allied to the equations of power that Mahan and MacKinder set out to solve.

MacKinder believed that landpower would come to have the upper hand in Eurasia because of the expansion of the railway network. Although he was making a normative statement about the superior potential of railroads from a military-logistical point of view, we can recast it as a prediction about infrastructure development. As I proposed above, let us imagine MacKinder was talking about moving the sort of bulky goods that Central Asia has to sell instead of soldiers and equipment. How do the economics of land transport across Eurasia compare with the journey by sea? (Air cargo is omitted from this discussion on the grounds that it accounts for a relatively small portion of Central Asia's exports.) and is impractical for transporting inconveniently bulky cargoes like cotton, or petroleum.

The recent connection of the Lanzou-Urumqi railway to the Turkestan-Siberian line has made it possible to convey freight along the whole length of the "World Island" by train — ten thousand kilometers from Lianyungan on the Yellow Sea to Rotterdam. Transit takes 30 days (ten days through China alone), with two days lost for the change of bogies (wheel-sets) at the USSR's borders, since Soviet gauges are incompatible with all other countries' gauges except Finland's. Meanwhile, average shipping time from Lianyungan to Rotterdam (both are ports as well as rail termini) is 43 days. Thus ships take longer,



BUT the cost of cargo works out much cheaper per kilogram. As a result, it makes economic sense to move all low-value commodities not requiring speed by ship. Trains are faster BUT more expensive. They are best suited to carrying decomposable products, or else very high-value ones that the sender needs to deliver promptly because a large sum of money is tied up in them.

My comparison of land versus sea routes is admittedly unnuanced, but it helps bring Central Asia's fundamental transport problems into focus. The region exports low-value replaceable commodities, primarily cotton, that should go by ship in an economically perfect world but are forced by geography to go more expensively by train. As a result, profits must be sacrificed to make prices attractive to consumers. At the same time, the region faces competitors with no such difficulties: it will be recalled that the Mississippi river, a fitting symbol for the region's main cotton rival, debouches directly into the Gulf of Mexico. Labor costs in Central Asia are low, it is true, but not lower than in Southeast Asia, which can turn out clothes and machine parts more cheaply — and which, too, enjoys the advantage of proximity to the ocean. Once again, Central Asia's low-value goods have to be sold even less expensively in order to compete on world markets.

One solution would be to cut the costs of the railways themselves. Railroads in Central Asia are nationalized, of course, poorly maintained by all accounts, and with high overheads (more precisely, fixed terminal costs, as a transport economist would say). All the states, barring war-torn Tajikistan, are talking about converting those sections of the network under their control from diesel to electrified rail. Although the switch would save money in the long run, the initial investments are too steep for their cash-strapped governments to afford without help.² Accordingly, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development is considering implementing a \$150 million loan to Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan in order to help improve the lines, repair rolling stock (especially dry-cargo cars for cotton) and upgrade passenger cars. This loan, however, has not yet been approved in full, although at time of writing the bank looks set to go ahead with at least initial two tranches of \$30 million each.

Central Asia's remoteness from the sea is also making it difficult to capitalize on its most lucrative export, oil. Most pipelines presently carrying Kazakh crude to the West transit Russia and the route is of course subject to tariffs, not to mention an undesirable measure of political control by Russia. Some oil gets transported by ship

across the Caspian from Aktau to Baku in Azerbaijan, from where it may have to cross (depending on routes; new pipelines have to be built) the territories of two more countries before reaching the Mediterranean through Turkey. How complicated and expensive! Compare the easy circumstances in which the Gulf States find themselves. Kuwait or Saudi Arabia are situated on the sea; they load their oil directly onto tankers with an ease that makes the Kazakhs green with envy. The Uzbeks are in an even worse fix: plans to shunt their oil (reserves are modest compared to Kazakhstan's) through a pipeline from Turkmenistan to Pakistan are on hold as long as the route is blocked by conflict in Afghanistan. Turkmen hydrocarbon resources are similarly blocked to the south. Turkmenistan's gas, though, is scheduled to begin flowing this year westwards through Iran, and its oil may follow [see below]. Central Asia is really singularly ill-fated. In addition to the geographical obstacles with which it must contend, Providence has chosen to endow it with cotton and oil. Fortune's gift to the region's new nations is proving a mixed blessing. While better than nothing, these happen to be commodities that competitors can pick or pump almost as cheaply, transport more effectively and sell more profitably.

DEEP FORCES VS. THE VIEW FROM THE SURFACE

Nowadays we regard geographical knowledge as an essential part of knowledge in general. By the aid of geography, and in no other way, do we understand the action of great natural forces, the distribution of population, the growth of commerce, the expansion of frontiers, the development of States, the splendid achievements of human energy in its various manifestations.

We recognize geography as the handmaid of history... Geography, too, is a sister science to economics and politics...³

Thus Lord Curzon, addressing the Geographical Society in London in his capacity as the society's president. If the claims he makes for the utility of geographic knowledge are a little too sweeping to be wholly truthful (is there really no other way of appreciating human achievements save through geography?) one should remember he was preaching to the converted. Yet he was on to something. The concept he was casting around to describe in 1912 has been formalized today into the discipline — bolder voices than mine would say the science — of geopolitics. A definition of geopolitics is the influence of geography on the political character of states, their history, institutions, and especially relations with other states. Although Lord Curzon would not have recog-

² The Uzbeks have made a start. The Cabinet of Ministers adopted a series of resolutions in 1993-94 "On a General Program of Electrifying the Central Asian Railroad," calling for conversion of 3,000 kilometers of track; to date 540 km have been electrified (*Pravda vostoka*, 3 September 1997).

³ George Nathaniel Curzon, *Subjects of the Day: Being a Selection of Speeches and Writings* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1915), pp.155-6.

nized himself as such (doubtless the crusty aristocrat would have found modern academic jargon ghastly), he was in fact one of Central Asia's original geopoliticians.

Writers since Aristotle and Strabo have tried to demonstrate that differences between communities could be accounted for by studying their geography. Since this insight is the starting-point for the study of geopolitics, they deserve to be classed as the first two geopoliticians, although they and too many of their successors propounded a kind of naive geographical determinism. Clearly it is unjustifiable to believe that the development of human polities is conditioned exclusively by their surroundings. It is equally futile to ignore the role played by geographical factors altogether, for sometimes their role can be significant indeed. In exceptional circumstances, such as extreme climates, the necessity to adapt to one's environment can become a paramount consideration, witness the Lapps or the Kalahari bushmen. If we widen our perspectives from those of the anthropologist to those of the geopolitician, it becomes apparent that geography can put severe limitations on the choices available to whole countries.

A case in point is Central Asia. I have already sketched the geographical difficulties the region must overcome to reach the outside world. To surmount those obstacles is the single greatest challenge the region faces. Therefore I do not believe I am falling into the determinist trap if I say that the physical geography of Central Asia is supremely important for an understanding of its future political, economic and social development.

I should advise any reader who accepted the last sentence as a truism couched in rather broad terms to read it again. I am expressing an opinion about the future of the region that flies in the face of almost every study of contemporary Central Asia that I have seen. Other writers consistently make prognostications using a very different kind of reasoning. The scholarly analyses I have in mind rely on less tangible factors than steppes, mountains or the lack of rivers. Rather, they display a profound knowledge of *forces, trends, movements and influences* operant in Central Asia. On closer examination these forces and trends often turn out to be not facts *per se*, but sophisticated theoretical constructs *derived from* facts, elaborated

at an impressive level of abstraction. They are "models" that are applied to delve beneath the surface of events and elucidate their real import.

I acknowledge that many analysts are asking themselves different questions than I am, so they use more abstract forms of reasoning to frame their answers. Yet I wonder nonetheless whether my colleagues are not falling prey to a pernicious trap. Intellectuals since Plato have been seduced time and time again by the conviction that there simply must be underlying ideas and historical forces whose direction determines the fates of human communities. "Our thirst for world-historical romance — for deep theories about deep causes of social change," is how Richard Rorty once put it.⁴ The most egregious recent example of this sort of thinking is the "Clash of Civilizations" thesis that has gained a large following since the end of the Cold War. It identifies three blocs of civilizations, Christian, Muslim and Buddhist, as the new organizing principles of global society that are likely to come into conflict in the future. Its scope is as wide as it is deep; it posits a model for interpreting socio-cultural-political forces across the whole planet.

The questions that Central Asia scholars tend to ask about the region seem to me to fall under the "world-historical romance" heading. They are shot through with the assumption that developments have deep meanings.⁵ Here are some examples: Under what sphere of influence is Central Asia predisposed to fall? Extrapolating from the area's history, what principles of development can we discern or postulate? Are the ideas and forces latent in the region driving it toward Turkey's "secular model" or Iran's "Islamic model"? Will ties of blood and language draw its disparate peoples into a pan-Turkic collective? Or will the stirrings of age-old ethnic rivalries prove irresistible?⁶ What trajectories, most likely violent ones, will the various countries trace under the impetus of nationalism? Is the region destined to veer towards the democratic West or the Muslim East? "Islam or Nationalism?" — "Marx or Muhammad?" ask two recent authoritative books on Central Asia.⁷

It is not my intention to turn this newsletter into a polemic. None of these questions can be dealt with in summary fashion, but I can at least allude to the reasons for

⁴ See Richard Rorty, "The Intellectuals at the End of Socialism," *The Yale Review* (Spring, 1992).

⁵ I hope I am not being too uncharitable if I note that scholars have a vested interest in Deep Meanings, since only they are fully qualified to explain them. The result is a kind of epistemological circle: by monopolizing the accredited knowledge required to answer their own questions, they confirm their authority and relevance.

⁶ Since the Balkans disaster, ethnicity has become a favorite lens for analysts sleuthing the causes of conflicts everywhere from Eastern Europe to East Asia. But one of the clearest lessons to emerge from the war in ex-Yugoslavia is that our commentators' harping on "age-old ethnic rivalries," supposedly making conflict inevitable, was off the mark. Post-mortems of the war belatedly suggest that other, more prosaic factors — political ambition, political miscalculation, personal jealousies, monstrous greed — played crucial roles in precipitating it, and it was *not* inevitable. See the booklet I wrote for the Woodrow Wilson Center, *The Economic Roots of Ethnic Conflict* (Washington DC, 1994).

⁷ Ahmed Rashid, *The Resurgence of Central Asia: Islam or Nationalism?* (Zed Books: London, 1995); and Dilip Hiro, *Between Marx and Muhammad: The Changing Face of Central Asia* (HarperCollins: London 1994).

my frustration with them. At first, when I arrived in Central Asia two years ago, I tried to orient myself by looking out for the issues emphasized in the books and articles purporting to describe what I would find. My agenda reflected the preoccupations of the specialists. But where *was* the evidence of Turkish influence in its much-vaunted role as big brother to the fledgling Turkic states? Barely discernible, then as now. Where was the feverish explosion of strong Islamic identification? I recently advised an Istanbul-based journalist, eager to report on resurgent fundamentalism in Central Asia, not to bother coming. Where was the movement for a united Turkestan? A damp squib that never had a hope of igniting among the disparate peoples of the region. Where were the ethnic hatreds and jealousies roiling through Central Asia? Yes, they exist. But they are considerably less virulent than in France, Canada or Rwanda; they are almost always a secondary or tertiary phenomenon hinging on something else, and they are regularly projected by Western observers who are *looking for* ethnic tensions but are usually *looking at* something else.

Around Osh in the Ferghana valley, for example, supposedly a hotbed of fundamentalism and nationalism, what is most on people's minds are not ethnic tensions but problems of land distribution. Do works on Central Asia mention this? The biggest bone of contention between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan is NOT the rights of ethnic Uzbeks across the border — a subject invariably discussed in the literature — but the amount of water the Kyrgyz are releasing from the Toktogul dam for Uzbek irrigation purposes. It is a conceivable *casus belli*. Does anyone mention this? While analysts are fixated on Russia's role in Central Asia, the dragon is stirring on its eastern borders. The markets of Osh and Almaty are awash in Chinese goods, and Kazakhstan is doing pipeline deals with Beijing. China is set to be more important to the region than Europe or the United States. Does anyone mention this? And the list goes on. The town halls in Samarkand and Bukhara are less worried about Tajik revanchist claims on their cities than the lack of textbooks for their schools. The local ethnic Tajik populations, in all my dealings with them, have struck me as largely indifferent to resounding nationalist appeals; their daily lives are filled with more banal concerns. Nevertheless, one of Central Asia's astutest observers claims otherwise: "a reawakening of Tajik national and cultural consciousness could have posed [a threat] to Uzbekistan's territorial integrity and regional ambitions... this development would have frustrated Uzbekistan's project of recreating Turkistan...."⁸

Commentators on Central Asian current affairs seem to have a clearer strategic vision of "where Central Asia is going" than the people of the region themselves. Of course, prognosticators by definition must be ahead of the curve; their task is to extrapolate from today to tomor-

row. But I think the search for trends and forces defining developments in the region has gone astray because Central Asia *is not predisposed to go in any particular direction*. This is not to say that its countries are *tabulae rasae*. I mean that it is unproven that any of them (again, Tajikistan's civil war makes it a special case) have yet plotted courses that intersect with the conceptual frameworks that scholars have imagined for them. One looks in vain for dominant social movements, strong public opinions, guiding state ideologies, notions of historical mission or statesmen with firm principles. Instead one finds: opportunistic leaders willing to make any alliances that will secure them in power; apathetic populations hungrier for bread than for big ideas; widespread ignorance of the region's history and culture, supposedly important factors conditioning people's thinking today; widespread curiosity about religion, counterbalanced by a general lack of knowledge of even the basic tenets of Islam.

If there is a dominant concern detectable among the countries of Central Asia, it is to improve their economic situation. The reason for the all-pervading fascination with America, gripping the masses from the Tashkent sophisticate to the Turkmen camel-herder, is that it is rich.⁹ I have encountered very few, save the *nouveaux riches*, who prefer the glory of living in sovereign states to the relative affluence they enjoyed under the USSR. Despite the governments' paeans of praise to themselves, independence for most represents a necessary evil that would happily be traded for a return to the economically secure Brezhnev days. A more appropriate slogan than "Marx or Muhammad?" to capture the mood of the region would be "Marx and Money."

In a way, this picture is depressing. I can sympathize with the wish of Western specialists' to believe that the region is animated by ideas more intellectually exciting than the craving for a car and sausages. One hopes these will emerge in time. For the present, Central Asians are looking to their leaders to make them richer. By comparison, the fanfare about independence, the celebrations commemorating ancient cities, the erection of new museums, the publication of Korans and the works of nationalistic writers suppressed by the Soviet regime, the recasting of textbooks, the proclamation of new language policies — these are giddy sideshows. So are the conferences where Central Asian deep thinkers swap ideas with our deep thinkers about history and teleology, with an afternoon break to take a turn in the bazaar and an evening program of traditional folk music. Local intellectuals are utterly marginalized at the moment. Intellectual and cultural life in the main is not flourishing. It is too impoverished and waits on the success or failure of the drive for prosperity.

The preeminent illustration of a "big idea" sacrificed on the altar of economic expediency was the "sell-out" of the

⁸ Shireen T. Hunter, *Central Asia Since Independence* (Praeger: Westport, 1996), pp. 97-98.

⁹ I discuss local perceptions of America in ASA-21, "Talk of the Town," 1 November 1996.

Uighurs in Shanghai on 26 April 1996, when the Central Asian countries signed a good-neighborly treaty with China. In exchange for the promise of trade agreements, each of the region's presidents in turn committed to stand firm against any threats to China's territorial integrity and fight separatist movements (Kazakhstan "supports all measures taken by the Chinese government for maintaining national unity," said President Nursultan Nazarbayev). Implicitly, they pledged to help quash Uighur nationalist aspirations in Western China, putting paid to the fiction that Turkic unity rooted in shared faith, blood and history, could ever outweigh economic exigencies.¹⁰ Nazarbayev's reward came in September 1997, when China signed agreements worth \$9.5 billion to purchase Kazakh oil and help to build a 3,000-kilometer pipeline into Xingjiang province.

Nazarbayev's "betrayal" of the Uighurs was a hard-headed, economically-motivated and immensely profitable decision based on geopolitical calculations. It unambiguously highlights the twin pillars supporting Central Asia's Realpolitik: economics and geography. Policy is shaped—and there is no reason to think this should change in the foreseeable future—free from the sort of considerations that muddy the waters in the United States, where debate can be highly partisan, about the desirability of trading with pariah nations that support terrorism or countries with poor human rights records (a category into which the Central Asian states fall themselves). These states will cooperate—they must—with anyone who will aid them in their goal to overcome their landlocked isolation. In sum, the business of Central Asia is business, to paraphrase Calvin Coolidge. Ethnic, religious, nationalistic, historical and moral factors are trampled under Central Asia's hell-bent drive to get its commodities to hard-currency markets.

Can we not eliminate the notion of "deep forces" impelling these countries in mysterious directions, like ships under the action of underwater currents? Once the implications of Central Asia's economic imperatives are grasped, its surface geography stands out as the surest pointer to gauge its future orientation. Geography is already shaping choices far more decisively than ethnic or historical factors. A century ago Turkmen tribesmen terrorized Iran's outlying districts, flooding the market in Bukhara with Persian slaves. Today Turkmenistan has warm bilateral relations with Iran, on which it relies as

the export conduit for its estimated 21 trillion cubic meters of natural gas. Turkmen President Saparmurad Niyazov cut the deal in a way that almost deliberately snubbed the ethnic big-brother, Turkey.¹¹ The rest of Central Asia's leaders are equally pragmatic, free of "world-historical romance" when it comes to seizing the main chance.¹² Russia alone, as the ex-colonial power, provokes suspicion and mistrust, but all the countries still rely on its infrastructure to one degree or another and consequently have remained cordial. (But their interests in maintaining cordial relations diminish proportionately as they open new routes that circumvent Russia, especially to the south and west. Nazarbayev is reported to be "increasingly assertive" toward Moscow in the wake of the pipeline deal with China.)¹³

Uzbek President Islam A. Karimov has masterfully manipulated a credulous West (especially the United States, unfortunately, with its knee-jerk reaction to the word "fundamentalism"), justifying his repressive domestic policies and his interventions in the wars in Tajikistan and Afghanistan on the grounds that he is battling Islamic extremism at home and abroad. Yet this concern has not prevented him from making friendly diplomatic demarches towards Iran, which is Uzbekistan's gateway to the Persian Gulf. In all likelihood Karimov will cooperate just as happily with whatever governments emerge from the wreckage in Tajikistan and Afghanistan—warlords, nationalists, Pushtun moderates, the Taliban or any other brand of Muslim militants—if they can guarantee law and order. As long as the territories south of Uzbekistan are in turmoil, its commerce/communications corridor to Pakistan, India and the Arabian Sea is blocked.

Turkmen officials forthrightly admit they will work with *anyone* who can bring political stability to the area. Peace is a moral good in itself, of course, and the government in Ashgabat likes to present itself as the region's peacemaker, having hosted a number of international conferences addressing the region's intractable civil wars.¹⁴ Lurking beneath the humanitarian do-gooding, however, are solid geopolitical motivations. Peace in Afghanistan would give the green light to an ambitious project, developed by the U.S. company Unocal and Saudi Arabia's Delta Oil, that would bring Turkmenistan revenue and jobs. The consortium plans to build a pipeline from the Dauletabad gas field near Mary 1400 kilometers across Afghanistan to reach consumers in

¹⁰ For a fuller account, see ASA-18 "The Warriors for Uighurstans," 31 August 1996.

¹¹ For a description of the meeting, see ASA-4, "Playing Geopolitics in Central Asia: The Turkmenistan-Iran-Turkey Gas Pipeline Project," 27 January 1997.

¹² Their opportunism is hardly surprising when one considers that they all climbed to the top as communist party secretaries—save Kyrgyzstan's President Akayev, who was nevertheless an important party member,

¹³ *The Economist*, 11 October 1997.

¹⁴ Interviews at the Turkmen Foreign Ministry, Ashgabat, September 1997. A typical comment from a Turkmen newspaper: "Embodying, in its own way, the movement for peace common to all humankind, [Turkmenistan] aims to be a new peacemaking center, so crucial in our disturbed Asia, and has already succeeded in doing a lot towards regulating regional conflicts" *Neutral Turkmenistan*, 24 September 1997. I spoke to one official who opined, "Our president deserves the Nobel Prize."

Pakistan, with a possible extension to New Delhi. An oil pipeline from Charjou has also been tabled (Turkmenistan has an estimated 6.8 billion tons of oil), through which Uzbek and even Siberian crude could travel to a new port terminal near Karachi. And on the table these projects will remain, until that unlikely day when the Afghans sink their differences and order is established.¹⁵

Turkmenistan is Central Asia's most avowedly unprincipled country, in the sense of eschewing any principles guiding state policy beyond economic opportunism. The state doctrine is enshrined in the non-doctrine of "permanent neutrality" (originally "positive neutrality," but upgraded to "permanent" by a special resolution of the UN General Assembly in December 1995). Despite being repeated like a mantra in President Niyazov's speeches and faithfully echoed by government officials, no one is too sure what the phrase means. With the disappearance of military blocs, and Austria a likely contender for NATO membership, neutrality has become a concept drained of meaning, a Cold War anachronism. One might understand Turkmenistan's neutrality as a pledge to remain "non-aligned." In reality, it gives the country a free hand to be aligned with anybody who can further its interests, its relations unencumbered by considerations beyond the bottom line.

The most signal achievement to date of the Turkmen Foreign Ministry — situated, appropriately, on Neutral Turkmenistan Street in Ashgabat — has been its rapprochement with Iran. During the Soviet days, Turkmen had no direct access to Iran; all relations were conducted through Moscow and the border was firmly sealed. Now crowds of Turkmen women besiege the foreign ministry's visa department daily, seeking permission to

conduct their "suitcase trade" across the border, usually by bus.¹⁶ While the United States slaps sanctions on Iran, and thunders at the Old World immorality of Europeans who do business there anyway, Turkmenistan cloaks itself in "permanent neutrality" and forges ties. Iran is probably the country's closest ally on the world stage today, politically and economically.

A new railway costing \$216 million was opened in May 1996, linking Tejen (in Turkmenistan) to Mashad (in Iran) via the frontier town of Sarakhs, which has the status of a free-trade zone. Cotton that used to travel by train to the Caspian port of Turkmenbashi — thence by ferry to Baku, thence by train across the Caucasus to the Black Sea, thence by cargo ship — now is transported directly to the port of Bandar Abbas on the Persian Gulf. In the opposite direction come consumer goods from Iran or Dubai, as well as Korean and Japanese cargoes heading for Western Russia (previously these were loaded at Nakhodka, a port in Russia's Far East, and had to make the whole journey by train).

The railway has been trumpeted by Ashgabat as the new Iron Silk Road, and even billed it as the panacea to the country's woes. In fact, the line suffers from a number of drawbacks. As Iran's rail gauge is not compatible with Turkmenistan's, expensive new cranes had to be installed at Sarakhs for changing the bogies. Moreover, the railway on the Iranian side does not lead straight to the sea but makes a long detour via Tehran. Nevertheless, the rail connection represents Turkmenistan's most significant infrastructural advance to date. Together with the gas pipeline to Turkey, it reflects Turkmenistan's dependence on Iran if the country is to escape its geographical isolation and hook into a wider economic network. □

¹⁵ Geopolitically-minded journalists in Central Asia like to speculate, over a bottle of vodka, that Pakistan's support for the Taliban — military (training and supplies) and diplomatic (Pakistan has officially recognized their government in Afghanistan) — is linked to Islamabad's interest in Central Asia's oil and gas. The Taliban until recently appeared the likely victors in the war. Toward the bottom of the *second* bottle of vodka, the conspiracy theories begin to arrive, postulating CIA covert assistance to the Taliban on behalf of Unocal, an American hydrocarbon giant. Washington's open endorsement of the fundamentalist Taliban would be politically embarrassing, doubtless, but to my knowledge CIA support of the Taliban remains an unproven rumor.

¹⁶ The traders are 90 percent women, interestingly. I asked one group why their menfolk, often unemployed, don't participate. "Because Turkmen males are lazy," I was told. "They rely on us to do everything." Another, anti-intuitive reason is that single women can travel more safely than men. They are *less* subject to attack by bands of thieves and to shake-downs by customs officials. "We can charm them," one lady said. "We remind them of their mothers."

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Fellows and their Activities

Adam Smith Albion. A former research associate at the Institute for EastWest Studies at Prague in the Czech Republic, Adam is studying and writing about the republics of Central Asia, and their importance as actors within and without the former Soviet bloc. A Harvard graduate (1988; History), Adam has completed the first year of a two-year M. Litt. Degree in Russian/East European history and languages at Oxford University. [EUROPE/RUSSIA]

Christopher P. Ball. An economist, Chris Ball holds a B.A. from the University of Alabama in Huntsville and attended the 1992 International Summer School at the London School of Economics. He studied Hungarian for two years in Budapest while serving as Project Director for the Hungarian Atlantic Council. As an Institute Fellow, he is studying and writing about Hungarian minorities in the former Soviet-bloc nations of East and Central Europe. [EUROPE/RUSSIA]

Chenoa Egawa. An enrolled member of the Lummi Indian Nation, Chenoa is spending two years living among mesoAmerican Indians, studying successful and not-so-successful cooperative organizations designed to help the Indians market their manufactures, agricultural products and crafts without relying on middlemen. A former trade specialist for the American Indian Trade and Development Council of the Pacific Northwest, Chenoa's B.A. is in International Business and Spanish from the University of Washington in Seattle. [THE AMERICAS]

William F. Foote. Formerly a financial analyst with Lehman Brothers' Emerging Markets Group, Willy Foote is examining the economic substructure of Mexico and the impact of free-market reforms on Mexico's people, society and politics. Willy holds a Bachelor's degree from Yale University (history), a Master's from the London School of Economics (Development Economics; Latin America) and studied Basque history in San Sebastian, Spain. He carried out intensive Spanish-language studies in Guatemala in 1990 and then worked as a copy editor and Reporter for the *Buenos Aires Herald* from 1990 to 1992. [THE AMERICAS]

Marc Michaelson. A program manager for Save the Children in The Gambia, Marc has moved across Africa to the Horn, there to assess nation-building in Eritrea and Ethiopia, and (conditions permitting) availing and unavailing humanitarian efforts in northern Somalia and southern Sudan. With a B.A. in political science from Tufts, a year of non-degree study at the London School of Economics and a Master's in International Peace Studies from Notre Dame, he describes his postgraduate years as "seven years' experience in international development programming and peace research." [sub-SAHARA]

Randi Movich. The current John Miller Musser Memorial Forest & Society Fellow, Randi is spending two years in Guinea, West Africa, studying and writing about the ways in which indigenous women use forest resources for reproductive health. With a B.A. in biology from the University of California at Santa Cruz and a Master of Science degree in Forest Resources from the University of Idaho, Randi is building on two years' experience as a Peace Corps agroforestry extension agent in the same region of Guinea where she will be living as a Fellow with her husband, Jeff Fields — also the holder of an Idaho Master's in Forest Resources. [sub-SAHARA]

John B. Robinson. A 1991 Harvard graduate with a certificate of proficiency from the Institute of Kiswahili in Zanzibar, John spent two years as an English teacher in Tanzania. He received a Master's degree in Creative Writing from Brown University in 1995. He and his wife Delphine, a French oceanographer, are spending two years in Madagascar with their two young sons, Nicolas and Rowland, where he will be writing about varied aspects of the island-nation's struggle to survive industrial and natural-resource exploitation and the effects of a rapidly swelling population. [sub-SAHARA]

Daniel B. Wright. A sinologist with a Master's Degree in International Relations from the Nitze School of Advanced International Studies of the Johns Hopkins University, Dan's fellowship immerses him in southwest China's Guizhou Province, where he, his journalist-wife Shou Guowei, and their two children (Margaret and Jon) will base themselves for two years in the city of Duyun. Previously a specialist on Asian and Chinese affairs for the Washington consulting firm of Andreae, Vick & Associates, Dan also studied Chinese literature at Beijing University and holds a Master of Divinity degree from Fuller Theological Seminary of Pasadena, California. [East Asia]

Teresa C. Yates. A former member of the American Civil Liberties Union's national task force on the workplace, Teresa is spending two years in South Africa observing and reporting on the efforts of the Mandela government to reform the national land-tenure system. A Vassar graduate with a juris doctor from the University of Cincinnati College of Law, Teresa had an internship at the Centre for Applied Legal Studies in Johannesburg in 1991 and 1992, studying the feasibility of including social and economic rights in the new South African constitution. [sub-SAHARA]

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