



# MIDDLE EAST INSIGHTS

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MIDDLE EAST INSTITUTE, NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF SINGAPORE

## WHY CENTRAL ASIA COUNTS

BY S. FREDERICK STARR

Both Asia and the West have failed to come to grips with Central Asia, and both are now paying a price for this failure. True, it's easy to ignore a region that until recently appeared only on the western fringes of maps of Asia, the eastern fringe of maps of Europe, or the southern fringe of maps of Russia. But as we start to view the Eurasian landmass as a single continent, Eureka! There is Central Asia, square in the centre!

This is how Central Asia was perceived for 3,000 years: as the only part of Eurasia that was in direct and intimate contact with all the great civilizational centres around its edges: India, China, Europe, and the Middle East. It was Central Asians who set up and ran the so-called Silk Roads connecting these economies. And thanks to the stimulation provided by that commercial contact, it was also Central Asians who led the world intellectually in fields as diverse as mathematics, medicine, philosophy, and astronomy a millennium ago. For five centuries prior to the Mongol invasion, Central Asians did more to create modern science than all those other centres combined.

Soviet rule did much to isolate Central Asia from the world. For seventy years all its roads (and railroads and air routes) led to Moscow, and for a like period all profits from its rich mines, manufactures, and agriculture flowed also to the imperial centre.

Now all this has changed. Six independent states—Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and, however fitfully, Afghanistan—enjoy sovereignty and self-government, and maintain relations with scores of other countries worldwide. Thanks to new roads, railroads and airline routes, the products of this landlocked region, whether oil, gas, cotton, uranium, fruits and vegetables, or manufactured goods, flow to eager foreign buyers. International investors are pouring billions into the region in the expectation of future profits.

All of this has been noticed by the major world powers. China's One Belt One Road project depends on the cooperation of Central Asian states. To assure it, China is fast becoming the region's largest purchaser of energy and its largest external investor.

Russia, which ruled all of the region except Afghanistan for 127 years, still dreams of converting the area into what it calls a “zone of privileged interest” and promotes this goal through a chain of military bases there and through its “Eurasian Economic Union.” Meanwhile, Europe and the United States are still the largest external investors, thanks to their support for hydrocarbon development, while Japan, Korea and India all maintain important trade and diplomatic ties with the regional states.

How do the Central Asians manage this skein of competing claims on their resources and loyalty? The key to their diplomacy is the principle of *balance*. Thus, they use their ties with China to balance Russia and their links with the West to balance both Russia and China. Over the millennia, many of Central Asians’ closest foreign ties have been with India. These links are weak today, but are steadily being renewed, and are bound to grow as the so-called Southern Corridor between the Indian sub-continent and Europe is re-opened. As this happens, and as these links extend to all of Southeast Asia, the Central Asians will have a fourth element that they can bring to bear as they balance external forces affecting them.

To be effective, such *balancing* requires a high degree of cooperation and coordination among Central Asian countries themselves. During the first two decades of independence, there were few intra-regional ties, since each country was focused on consolidating its newly-won sovereignty. Now this is changing. Regular consultations are being held in many fields and intra-regional trade and contacts are fast expanding. Russia long opposed such intra-regional links, preferring instead regional organizations of which it is a part and which it can control. China, however, considers them normal, and does not seek to interfere; nor do the European Union and United States.

Provided that external powers do not interfere, the future of intra-regional cooperation among the six countries of Central Asia is bright. They themselves have studied the models represented by ASEAN and the Nordic Council. While not diminishing sovereignties, such cooperation will create a regional market in place of the current discrete national markets, and will enable regional governments to speak with a single voice on matters of common interest.

Will the countries of Southeast Asia grasp the actual and potential significance of Central Asia? The cost of not doing so could be high. For this is the only world region surrounded by nuclear powers (Russia, China, India, Pakistan). With nuclear states in Europe and America closely engaged there as well, the potential for bumping heads there is high. By fostering constructive relations within the region, Southeast Asian countries can reduce that possibility. Efforts to impose stability and security on Central Asia from the outside have not only failed but invariably led to isolation, instability and economic uncertainty. By contrast, a self-governing and prosperous Central Asia would be the best neighbour for superpowers and the best partner for more distant countries.

Beyond helping to avoid the geopolitical dangers that can arise from economic breakdown or external hegemony in Central Asia, ASEAN countries have political, economic, and

cultural interests in successful developments there. Politically, the rise of prosperous and sovereign states in Central Asia is the best assurance that major powers will be content to coexist with them as good neighbours. In economics, the region offers natural resources and, increasingly, modern skills that are relevant to ASEAN countries. Culturally, Central Asia, while one of the historic centres of Islam and the site of its greatest intellectual flowering, is a region of *secular states, secular laws, secular courts, and secular education*. This arrangement assures the rights of believers of all faiths and equally, of non-believers.

As such, Central Asia offers a potential model for the Muslim world generally, and an alternative to the theocratic models of governance.

The key to Central Asia achieving its full potential lies in the kind of intra-regional cooperation and coordination developed by ASEAN countries and the Nordic Union. Such intra-regional ties are not against anyone. By fostering development and harmony, they serve the interests of all, both within the region and beyond.

**S. Frederick Starr is the founding Chairman of the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute. His research on the countries of Greater Central Asia, their history, development, internal dynamics, as well as on US policy towards the region has resulted in twenty-two books and 200 published articles. He has also written extensively on Russian History and current affairs. His most recent books are “The Ferghana Valley: The Heart of Central Asia” and “Lost Enlightenment: Central Golden Age from the Arab Conquest to Tamerlane”. Dr. Starr is a frequent commentator on the affairs of the region, and the author of numerous articles in journals including Foreign Affairs, Foreign Policy, The National Review, Far East Economic Review, and op-eds in various leading American and international newspapers including the New York Times, Wall Street Journal, Washington Post, International Herald Tribune, Christian Science Monitor, Los Angeles Times.**