

# Central Asia's Foreign Relations: A Comparison Between the Soviet and Post-Soviet Era

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Central Asia's pivotal geographical position allowed it to play an essential role in relations among nations of Eurasia in the Middle Ages, as the bridge between China and Europe. Yet, during the Russian and then the Soviet rule on Central Asia, the region's republics had no independent position in international community as foreign relations were formed and managed by central government in Moscow. The collapse of the Union of Soviet in 1991 made salient the geopolitical, economic, and cultural importance of the five former Soviet Central Asian republics. Accordingly, the republics reemerged as independent actors in the global interstate system and could play a role in international affairs during the last three decades. This paper aims to compare Central Asia's foreign relations in the Soviet and Post-Soviet era.

*Keywords:* Central Asia, Russia, The Soviet Union, Foreign Relations and Eurasia

## Introduction

Central Asia, consisting of five republics: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, as a geopolitical region with great civilization, has had a long history, whose legacy after three decades is still felt and continues to influence its politico-economic life and particularly its relations with the global community. Yet, for about 150 years the region history has been associated with Russian and particularly the Soviet history. Indeed, the Central Asia region had become part of the Soviet Union. Accordingly, the region's republics had no independent position in international community as they did not have relations with other countries outside of the Soviet hemisphere. Foreign relations were formed and managed by central government in Moscow.

After the demise of the Soviet Union in 1991, the situation changed. The Central Asian republics again rose to prominence in geopolitical and strategic calculations. In fact, the republics reemerged as independent players in the global interstate system and their varied histories and geographies offering many different possible opportunities and course of action. In addition to the regions geopolitical changes, some factors also contributed to expansion of the republics' place in international politics and outside powers' influence and competition in the region.

This paper aims to address the Central Asian regions position in the Soviet and post-Soviet era. It explores how Central Asia as a closed region during the Soviet period changed its geopolitical position and became an

influential actor in the global affairs. In addition the paper addresses factors which have played important role in the globality of Central Asia.

### **Geopolitics of Central Asia: Preliminary Observations**

Central Asia is part of the “Heartland” (Mackinder’s theory) and its pivotal geographical position allowed it to play an essential role in relations among nations of Eurasia in the Middle Ages, as the bridge between China and Europe (MacKinder, 1919). In the modern world, its importance grew as the great powers of the time (Russia and Britain) sought power and influence along its borders (Rahimov, 2018). Yet, the Bolshevik revolution of 1917 and subsequent 70 years of Soviet rule closed the region to influences from the outside world, and consequently the republics did not play any role in international relation. Yet, with the Soviet Union’s demise in December 1991 the Central Asian republics again rose to prominence in geopolitical and strategic calculations. Indeed, in the post-Cold War era Central Asia’s geostrategic importance and natural resource potential have made it a focus of attention in Eurasian geopolitics (for a detailed discussion see Fuller, 1994). Any consideration of its republics’ international politics has to be based on geopolitical, religious, economic, and regional realities.

In fact, the emergence of independent states in Central Asia has both literally and figuratively changed the map of Asia and affected the world, particularly the surrounding regions, notably the Middle East, South, and West Asia. The region borders Russia in the north, Iran and Afghanistan in the south, China in the east, and the Caspian Sea in the west (see Figure 1). This geographical location has made it strategically important. Furthermore, it is located at the center of Eurasia, connecting Eurasia not only from east to west, but also from south to north. More importantly, it is surrounded by four major world civilizations: Christian, Confucian, Islamic and Hindu, and Asian powers, Russia, China, and India. In addition, the region lies at the strategic juncture between four nuclear powers, Russia, China, India, and Pakistan. In the meantime, another aspect of the region’s geopolitical importance should not be overlooked, i.e., the rise of political and commercial competition over the energy resources, namely oil and natural gas, and particularly the routes for export pipelines (for a comprehensive discussion see Tokaev, 2003; Arvanitopoulos, 1997/1998).

Such a geopolitical position (see Figure 1), in fact, is a significant factor that has not only made the region attractive to the outside world but also placed it at global challenge, especially after the events of 11 September 2001. In particular, if the clash of civilizations foretold by S. P. Huntington materialises as the latest phase in the evolution of conflict in the modern world, the role this region could play is undeniable due to its special location (Huntington, 1993; for the position of Central Asia see also Kadivar, 2002).



Figure 1. Central Asia's geopolitical position map.<sup>1</sup>

### **Central Asia a Closed Region: No foreign Relations**

The Central Asian region has had a long history, whose legacy after three decades is still felt and continues to influence its politico-economic life and particularly its relations with the outside world. For more than three thousand years this region has been a crossroads for major ethnic migrations. Central Asia was predominantly peopled by nomadic and sedentary tribes, composed of a variety of ethnic groups. The Tajiks are closely related to the Persians, Kazaks are of Turkic-Mongol stock, and also of Turkic stock are the Uzbeks, who also spread across the then virtually nonexistent border into Northern Afghanistan; the Turkmens and Kyrgyz were also Turkic, and all could reasonably be described as “backward”, especially technologically, compared to their Russian conquerors (Baumer, 2018; Jukes, 1973, p. 35; Becker, 1968, pp. 67-83). In such circumstances it was not easy for them to develop a counterpart to European nationalism. The entire region was run as two governments, with roughly the present-day Kazakhstan being the “steppe” governorate, and the rest—“Turkestan”—under the influence of the main oasis states, namely Merv (Turkman), Khiva (mostly Turkmen and Uzbek), Bukhara (including Samarkand, a synthesis of Uzbeks and Tajiks), and Kokand (including Tashkent, mainly Uzbek). Among them, the Emirates of Bukhara and Khiva were the major political and cultural centers, and both were established in the early 16th century (Jukes, 1973, p. 35). Turkestan society was feudal, overwhelmingly illiterate, and backward in its agricultural practices. Warfare between the nomadic tribes over grazing land, and between the nomads and the settled areas was endemic. Slavery was institutional; the Turkmens

<sup>1</sup> [http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/commonwealth/caucasus\\_cntrl\\_asia\\_pol\\_95.jpg](http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/commonwealth/caucasus_cntrl_asia_pol_95.jpg).

in particular made a living by robbing trading caravans and raiding adjacent areas, especially Northern Iran, to abduct travelers and inhabitants and sell them in the slave markets of Bukhara and elsewhere. From the religious point of view, as discussed below, apart from the Pamiris, who were mostly Ismaili Shiite, the great majority of Central Asians were Sunni Muslims of the *Hanafi* School of Islamic law (*madhhab*), one of four such schools within Sunni Islam (Stacey, 2019; Jordan, 2012; Black, 2001, pp. 33-37).<sup>2</sup>

Furthermore, the region was a meeting place for the great civilizations of the ancient world and Middle Ages—Persian, Indian, Chinese, and Islamic. After the diffusion of civilization westward and eastward, the most convenient overland routes linking the Mediterranean world, India, Persia, and China led through Central Asia. As long as these routes remained the principal arteries of trade and communication among the four major centers of civilized life, Central Asia was assured a leading role in world history (Becker, 1968, pp. 3-24). The area has also long been an arena of great-power rivalry at various time involving the Persian, Arab, Mongol, Ottoman, and Russian empires, and also China along its eastern margins (Hunter, 1996, pp. 3-19).

For more than one and half centuries Central Asia was predominantly under Russian and then the Soviet rule. In fact, for most of Central Asia's history its politics have been shaped by Russia and the Soviet Union, at least as much as by internal forces. Russia has had a long history of contact with Central Asia and the cultural, social, economic, and political characteristics of the region were greatly influenced by Russian politics, economy, and culture.

Russian rule in Central Asia was based on specific strategic, economic, political, and cultural imperatives. Strategically, Central Asia became important during the 19th century. Indeed, in that period the conquest of the region took place in the context of wider international struggles (Becker, 1986). Occupation of Central Asia brought Russia closer to India, a British colony, a land of enormous economic potential, and a corridor towards the world market. This southward advance alarmed the British government, so some British politicians began to speak of a Russian threat to India, while Russia in turn characterised Britain as a real threat to its interests in the area (Boulger, 1879; Anwar Khan, 1963; Johnson, 2003, pp. 697-743; for discussion of Anglo-Russian conflict in Asia and Central Asia see Saray, 2007). This situation led both powers toward conflict. In this connection, Central Asia played a strategic role for each to counter the other's perceived threat by creating a form of strategic diversion associated with cross-border subversion; this Anglo-Russian competition was known as the "Great Game" (for detailed discussion see Hopkirk, 1994).<sup>3</sup>

The Russian revolution of October 1917 occurred within an ideological framework that opened the way for new local elites and political bodies to emerge. The Central Asians had received the revolution with mixed sentiments. Nationalist Muslims tried to use this opportunity to gain independence, but moderate Muslim groups preferred to have the support of the new Soviet regime (Morrison, 2017; for discussion of the revolution of 1917 see also Miller, 2001).

Politically, republic's communist party was part of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and the republics were ruled by political and financial power of the center. None of the Central Asian Republics until 1991 have experienced sovereignty, neither these states had a background of independent nationhood. Soviet drawn boundaries and named clans for political comfort (Thite, 2020). In addition, the republics' economic

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<sup>2</sup> The other three schools of Sunni Islam are the *Shafai*, the *Hanbali*, and the *Maliki*.

<sup>3</sup> The term "Great Game" was coined by an official in the 19th-century British Indian Empire, referring to the major regional powers' competition to dominate Central Asia, where empires historically have rubbed together at the center of Eurasia. It was a struggle for dominance over land and populations whose values lay in their location between the Russian and British Empires.

structure was determined by centralized Soviet planning. In fact, the region's economy was tied to Moscow because the USSR was a single economic space, in which all Soviet republics were to a greater or lesser extent dependent on each other. Parts and raw materials for Central Asia's industries were imported from elsewhere in the USSR. The Soviet era also brought forced collectivisation and migration that deeply changed Central Asian ways of life. Soviet resettlement programs and political expulsions brought large numbers of non-indigenes to the region, while collective farming and agricultural quotas initially came close to destroying the local economies and land. However, Soviet rule of Central Asia also brought some considerable progress, including the development of agriculture and to some degree industry, and significant achievements in culture, science, education, and public health, as discussed below (see Figure 2), and in addition, provided some access to wider markets for Central Asian products (Freni, 2013; Kasenov, 1998). Askar Akayev, former president of Kyrgyzstan, had said in this respect:

Those citizens of the Central Asian countries who possess good common sense and are free from nationalistic prejudices are well aware of Russia's positive role in developing the region. The Soviet epoch was really a sort of Renaissance for Central Asia in terms of public health services, culture, education and science. (Akayev, 2003)

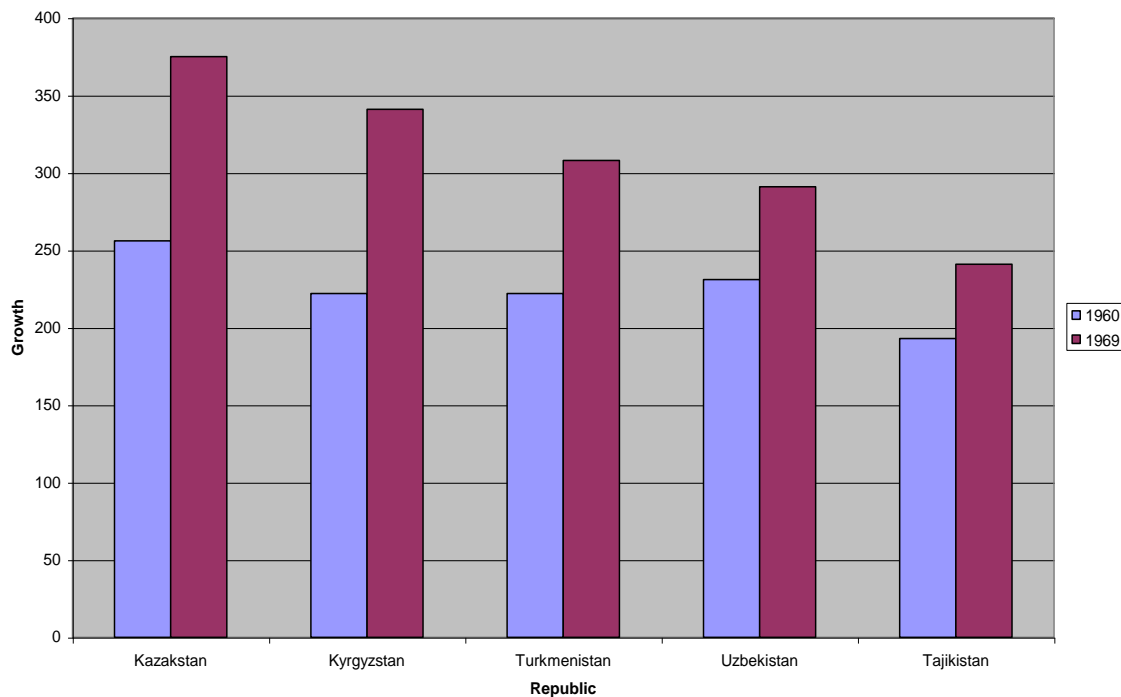


Figure 2. Growth of industrial activity in the Central Asian republics, 1960-1969 (1940 = 100) (Data source: Jukes, 1973, p. 40).

Russian and Soviet rule in Central Asia widely affected the region's culture, economics, and politics, and created a relationship of strong dependency between the local nations and the Russian/Soviet state. The region's politico-economic and social structure was shaped in a centrist manner. Accordingly, during the Soviet era, the Central Asian republics never gained the status of independent actors in international relations. Foreign relations were directed by the central government, and the central leadership determined foreign policy goals and priorities. Therefore, one can assume that Central Asia was in fact a closed region, with no position and no role to play in

international relations. Accordingly, the region's republics had no access to the outside world as the foreign relations were shaped by central government in Moscow.

### **The Post-Soviet Central Asia: A Move Towards Global Connectivity**

The collapse of the Union of Soviet in 1991 made salient the geopolitical, economic, and cultural importance of the five former Soviet Central Asian republics. As a result, Central Asia, a closed and hard-to-reach region of Eurasia, once again achieved a significant position on Eurasia's map, with increased geopolitical and strategic weight of the region. The independence of the republics and Russia's partial withdrawal from Central Asia changed the geopolitics of the region from a closed area to one opening up to other interested foreign actors. Accordingly, as mentioned earlier, a region that in the Cold War era remained in the background of international politics after independent Central Asia attracted the attention of the global and regional powers. On other hands, the Soviet Union's breakdown changed the geopolitics of Central Asia, placing it firmly in a new geopolitical and geoeconomic context. Accordingly, it started to gain prominence in the strategic objectives and politico-economic ambitions of many outside powers (Anceschi, 2014). Indeed, Central Asia's new situation, its strategic location and enormous natural resources made it an area where some other states, such as the Russian Federation, China, Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, India, Saudi Arabia, Japan, Israel, and the European Union (EU) also vie for influence.

The republics became free to "pursue their own individual policy lines towards religion, politics, the economy and anything else for that matter" (Olcott, 1994, p. 6). Geopolitically, Central Asia is important due to its strategic position. Economically, as mentioned earlier, some of the republics, notably Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and to some extent Uzbekistan, sit on vast natural resources, notably oil and gas, as well as gold and uranium are also present (for oil and gas reserves of the region see Table 1). These two important characteristics have impelled regional and international powers to seek roles in the region's republics, and exploit their economic and political problems to gain influence. Consequently, these republics have become new fields in post-Cold War international politics and economics (Ze, 1998). Under the new circumstances, the countries found themselves in the interest zone of many regional and global powers, attracting widespread attention because they have emerged at a point where the political, economic, and security interests of various powers converge.

Table 1

*Caspian basins proved and probable reserves (U.S. Energy Information Administration, 2012)*

Country	Crude oil and lease condensate (billion bbl)	Natural gas (Tcf)
Azerbaijan	8.5	51
Iran	0.5	2
Kazakhstan	31.2	104
Russia	6.1	109
Turkmenistan	1.9	19
Uzbekistan	(s)	7
<b>TOTAL CASPIAN</b>	<b>48.2</b>	<b>292</b>

Independence brought the formal establishment of foreign embassies along with rapid development of communication between the republics and the Middle East, South Asia, East Asia, Western Europe, and the

United States. Rivalry between various forces in the region added to friction and historical grievances within the CIS (BBC Monitoring Former Soviet Union, 2004; Gladkyy, 2003; Menon, 2003; Hunter, 2003).

The Central Asian republics' orientation to the outside world greatly affects the power and national security planning of neighbouring and other interested states, principally the United States, Russia, China, Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, India, and Pakistan. How these actors have acted in Central Asia can influence geopolitical alignments in the region. It is also important to grasp how these states and others whose interest is acute though less direct (for example, the EU, Japan, Israel, and Saudi Arabia), position Central Asia into their strategic thinking (Bharti, 2020). In fact, the initial power vacuum created by the collapse of the Soviet Union has pulled regional states and some international actors into an intensive competition for power and influence in the area. Obviously, each has had specific objectives and the competition has economic, political, ideological, and religious dimensions.

After independent the Central Asian leaders had strongly believed that they were part of a Eurasian superpower, geographically in Asia, but culturally, politically, and economically part of Eastern Europe, and realised that they needed to redefine their identity when the USSR ceased to exist, in order to position themselves in the global community and develop their relations with it (Ayoob & Ismayilov, 2017; also for a more comprehensive account of identity in Central Asia see Jo-Ann, 1992).

To further these objectives they needed to strengthen their independence, maintain sovereignty, and give high priority to national consolidation and security (Vassiliev, 2001, pp. 31-37). Accordingly, their priorities have appeared to be regime survival and economic restructuring, with foreign policy considerations relevant only if they support these objectives (Tulyakov & Khakimov, 2021). Their poor economic performance, particularly in the early years of independence, progressively convinced them that they needed help wherever they could get it (Qazi, 2015). Furthermore, securing foreign investment to develop their oil and gas industries was an important foreign policy issue, particularly for Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan. In fact, to overcome their economic problems and reduce politico-economic and military dependence on Russia, they opened their doors to interested foreign states (Kakharov, 2004; Kliashtorniy, 2003; Anderson, 1997). In this connection, former Uzbek President Karimov had stated: "Relying on their internal resources and possibilities, [the republics] are searching for a solution to these problems with the support of interested parties in the world community" (1997, p. 29). At the same time, the region's economic and market potential has attracted the outside world's attention, especially the energy resources of the Caspian Sea, on which Kazakstan and Turkmenistan have coastlines. Olcott in the early 1990s pointed out:

Now the outside world could be let in, and each of the leaders saw the arrival of the international community as his salvation. Foreigners would help generate the capital that economic development required, through the purchase of energy and other valuable raw materials, through international funding (in part through joint ventures) Soviet-era plans for resource extraction as well as through the further expansion of these projects, and through the use of foreign aid, international credits, and joint ventures to reform agriculture and to modernise and expand the industrial base. (Olcott, 1996, p. 5)

Since 1991 the Central Asian states have established diplomatic relations with many countries. In 1992 they all joined the UN, the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), and the Economic Cooperation Organisation (ECO), while Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan also joined the Organisation

of Islamic Conference (OIC), with Kazakstan and Uzbekistan following in 1995.<sup>4</sup> In 1994 all joined the NATO Partnership for Peace (PfP) (see also Table 2) (Akiner, 2000).<sup>5</sup>

Table 2

*Participation of Central Asian Countries in Organisations for Regional Cooperation, 2002 (European Commission, 2002, p. 5)*

Country	SCO	EEC	CSTO	CICA	ECO	CACO	PfP
Kazakstan	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Kyrgyzstan	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Tajikistan	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Turkmenistan*					X		X
Uzbekistan	X			X	X	X	X

*Notes.* SCO: Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (with Russia and China); EEC: Eurasian Economic Community, ex Customs Union (with Russia and Belarus); CSTO: Collective Security Treaty Organisation; CICA: Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (with Afghanistan, China, Egypt, Iran, Israel, India, Pakistan, Palestine National Administration, Russia, and Turkey); CACO: Central Asian Cooperation Organisation, ex Central Asian Economic Community. \* Due to its policy of neutrality, Turkmenistan has participated in few regional organisations such as PfP Partnership for Peace (with NATO).

However, during the last three decades the close link between the individual states' domestic policies and foreign relations has also led each down different paths in international relations. For example, Kazakhstan's long border with Russia (6,846 km) and large Russian population, and Tajikistan's dependence on Russian military assistance during and after its civil war, have resulted in considerable interaction with Russia. Instead Uzbekistan has tried to distance itself from Russia, and Turkmenistan has pursued neutrality (Gusev, 2019). Nevertheless, the republics have devoted, and continue to devote considerable effort to forming and implementing their foreign policies. And, for various reasons, Central Asia has been also of increased importance to a considerable number of regional and extra-regional powers.

Indeed, for the post-Soviet Central Asian republics, one of the most important issues was to form their foreign relations (Bremmer, 2006). Immediately after independence they were concerned to establish a positive image in the eyes of the global community, and to promote their self-identity in the international arena, attain membership of regional and international organisations, particularly the UN, establish relations with the outside world, and gain political and financial support to consolidate their independence and reconstruct their economies.

Although independent itself could change the geopolitical map of the region and opened the republics to the outside powers, some other factors also contributed to expansion of powers influence and competition in the region. These factors include:

1. The region enormous of oil and natural gas, as mentioned earlier, particularly in Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan and to some extent Uzbekistan. Because of the energy wealth, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan have got a prominent space on the global hydrocarbon map. Kazakhstan has proven reserves

<sup>4</sup> ECO is an inter-governmental regional organisation, which was established in 1985 by Iran, Pakistan, and Turkey for the purpose of sustainable socio-economic development of the member states. For more information see <http://www.ecosecretariat.org/>; the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC) was formed in 1969 after the burning of the al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem, with the idea that Islamic governments should "consult together with a view to promoting close cooperation and mutual assistance in the economic, scientific, cultural and spiritual fields, inspired by teachings of Islam". The recent name is Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, consisting of 57 member states.

<sup>5</sup> Tajikistan joined the program in 2001, the 27th country, and last former Soviet republic, to sign up for NATO's Partnership for Peace program in a ceremony on 20 February 2002, RFE/RL, Prague, 25 February 2002.

estimated at 30.0 thousand million barrels (3.9 thousand million tons) of oil and proven natural gas reserves of 35.0 trillion cubic feet (1.3 trillion cubic meters), which constitutes 1.7% and 0.5% of global proven reserves with a reserve to production ratio (R/P) of 42.7 years and 40.7 years respectively. Turkmenistan has proven reserves estimated at 0.6 thousand million barrels (0.1 thousand million tons) of oil and proven natural gas reserves of 688.1 trillion cubic feet (19.5 trillion cubic meters), which constitutes 0.05% and 9.9% of global proven reserves respectively with a reserve to production ratio (R/P) of 7.4 years and more than 316.8 years respectively. Uzbekistan has proven reserves estimated at 0.6 thousand million barrels (0.1 thousand million tons) of oil and proven natural gas reserves of 42.7 trillion cubic feet (1.2 trillion cubic meters), which constitutes 0.05 % and 0.6% of global proven reserves respectively with a reserve to production ratio (R/P) of 25.4 years and 21.4 years respectively (Wani, 2020).

With the region's great natural and human resources and its central location in the rapidly integrating Eurasian economic space, all neighbouring countries, but also Europe and the US, share common interests. Nonetheless, interests also diverge, for example, intense attention is now focused on developing and creating access to the energy resources of the region, especially the oil and gas reserves of the Caspian Basin. Russia is interested in maintaining its transport monopoly and preferential access to Central Asia's oil and gas. The EU and the United States want to see more diversified energy transport routes towards the West. China has been looking to develop the pipeline infrastructure towards the East, and India and Pakistan are eager to tap Central Asia's energy resources towards the South (Linn, 2017). Such interests and competition over the region's energy have made Central Asia a new hub for global integration. On the other hand, with agreements on oil and gas extraction, production and export, the Central Asian countries have succeeded in gaining political visibility on the international stage, and in improving their position in the global economy.

2. Tajikistan civil war: In May 1992 political and social tensions in Tajikistan escalated to a devastating civil war (Epkenhans, 2016). Indeed, in 1992, Tajikistan was engulfed in civil war, with different interest groups vying for control of the state. The civil war lasted for about five years until June 1997. Russia considered Tajikistan's civil war a direct threat to Russia's national security, and intervened in it. To the press and public, Moscow's officials spoke of fears that an opposition victory in Tajikistan would lead to the spread of instability all over Central Asia. Accordingly, in order to prevent the spread of civil war to the rest of the area, Russia became directly involved in the conflict, believing that if Russia were to "pull out from Tajikistan, a wave of destabilisation may sweep through the whole of Central Asia, which [was] the underbelly of Russia" (FBIS: FSU, 1996, p. 17; Jonson, 1998, p. 54). Furthermore, the Kremlin was worried about Tajikistan's long border with Afghanistan (1,206 km), and accordingly signed an agreement with the Tajik government, by which Russia would provide border guard in Tajikistan.

3. Central Asia as a part of the Islamic World: When the Central Asian republics became independent, it was widely expected that their isolation from the Islamic World would end, and they would rapidly develop relations (Voll, 1994). But it soon appeared that, although the region's states have sought to expand relations with some Islamic countries, they have not tried to play the "Islam card" in their foreign relations (Mirovalev, 2020; Akiner, 2000).

The Muslim world's interests in Central Asia can be divided into three categories: political, ideological, and economic (Robins, 1994). The motivations of Muslim countries in exploring the potential for new relations with the Central Asian republics are mainly political, though Central Asia's potential as a market and its resources of oil and gas have also played a part. Some Islamic states have attempted to deal with the region through their own

ideological model; and there has been a kind of ideological competition between their political establishments, Turkey emphasising its secular model, Saudi Arabia supporting strict *Wahhabism*, and Iran showing little interest in political Islam (Robins, 1994).

The leading Muslim countries vying to maximise their influence in the region are Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey, and to a lesser extent, Pakistan, and Afghanistan.

4. The events of September 2001 and the war on terror: The events of 11 September, the subsequent anti-terrorist campaign in Afghanistan and US military deployment in Central Asia, had given a new geopolitical and geostrategic importance to the region. Although Washington was attempting to extend its military influence in the region long before 11 September, it became a strategic platform for the projection of US military power in “Operation Enduring Freedom” elevating its strategic significance in the new post-11 September security paradigm (Giragosian & McDermott, 2004).

Indeed, one can assume that the events of 11 September and subsequent war in Afghanistan brought the world’s attention to Central Asia. These events had a significant effect on the political landscape of the Central Asian states, which to varying degrees became Washington’s allies against Taliban rule in Afghanistan and the Al-Qaeda terrorist network. The US military presence in the “heart of Asia” has renewed interest in its geostrategic importance (Mackinnon, 2021). Accordingly, Washington identified vital national security and economic interests in the region. Meanwhile, the region’s geopolitics are further complicated by stationing of US military near the borders of China, Russia, and Iran. The war led to the establishment of two US military bases in the region: Khanabad in Uzbekistan and Manas in Kyrgyzstan.

5. Attending regional organizations and programs: Regional organizations are established to foster mechanisms of cooperation among states willing to develop their common belonging to a geographical space, a geopolitical entity, or an economic bloc and enhanced their global position (Laruelle & Peyrouse, 2012, p. 5). The Central Asian republics since independent have been and still are member of number of the regional organization, including: Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) created in 1969, the Economic Cooperation Organisation (ECO) established in 1985, the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) established in late 1991, the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) signed in 1992, the International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea (IFAS) established in 1993, NATO Partnership for Peace (PfP) Programme in 1997, the Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsEc) established in 2000, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) established in 2001, Central Asian Cooperation Organisation (CACO) established 2002, Central Asian Nuclear Weapon Free Zone (CANWFZ) signed in 2006, the Eurasian Development Bank (EDB) established in 2006.

Under the framework of the above organizations a fundamental step towards Central Asia globality has been taken. Indeed, the membership of these organizations has provided an opportunity for the region’s republics to shore up their legitimacy on both the domestic and international fronts (Moylan, 2013).

6. The role of globalization: Globalization, especially in last 30 years with the collapse of the Soviet Union and combining with the world-wide socio-economic and political improvements, has accelerated. In particular, under the leading nature of economical, technological, and cultural components, globalization has increased gradually mutual interdependence between world nations and countries (Council for European Studies (CES), 2018; Elma & Gurbanov, 2012). In the late 1990s, observers believed that globalization could offer the Central Asian republics “numerous benefits” in terms of economic, social, political, and international developments (Jafalian, 2020). Globalization, indeed, has provided better opportunity for the Central Asian republic to integrate to the regional and global affairs.

To sum up, the demise of the Soviet Union and the independence of the Central Asian republics led to the end of the Soviet control on the region. Consequently, the region opened up to the international politics. This situation provided an opportunity for the region's republics to gain a position in the international arena and set up relationship with most of the world countries. In addition, they became a member of many regional and global organizations. Such membership has provided the republics with a gold opportunity to get politico-economic help and assistance in order to resolve their problems. At the same time, due to Central Asia's geopolitical and geostrategic position and its enormous energy resources, the region has gained a vital place in many regional and global power's foreign policy, which led them to a competition known as a new great game. The New Great Game refers to the conceptualization of modern geopolitics in post-Soviet Central Asia. This is characterized by the competition between regional and global powers in Central Asia, and involves countries such as Russia, the United States, China, India, EU, Iran, Turkey, Pakistan, and some other states (see Figure 3).

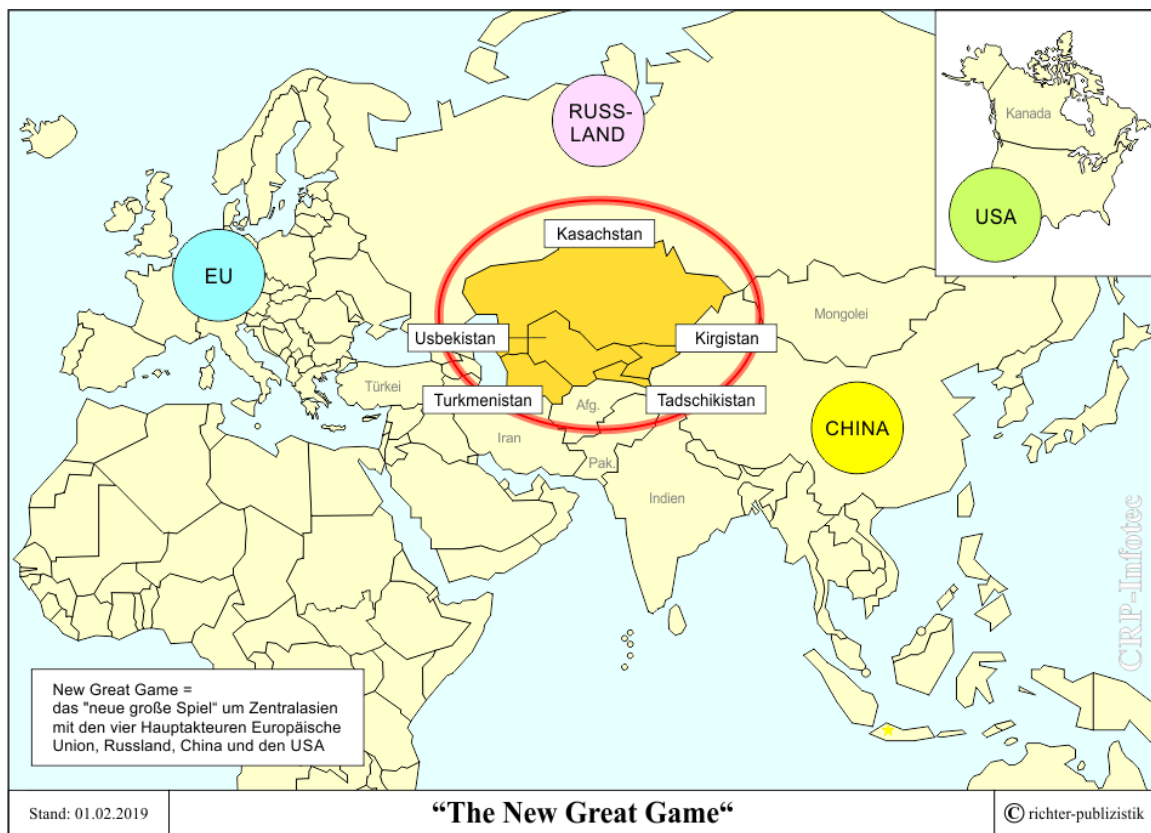


Figure 3. The New Great Game map.<sup>6</sup>

## Conclusion

This paper demonstrated that during the Soviet Union the Central Asian republics never gained a chance to establish relationship with the outside as the foreign relations was led by the central government in Moscow. More importantly, Central Asia was a closed region and had no place in the Eurasia geopolitical map. Yet, the Soviet Union's disintegration provided the Central Asian republics with opportunities to establish their own foreign relations. The paper argued that, in the post-Soviet era, due to the need for nation-state-building,

<sup>6</sup> <http://crp-infotec.de/asien-geopolitische-paramete>.

international legitimacy, technical and economic assistance and security, the states have been attempting to join the international community through establishing relationships with a broad spectrum of countries and joining international and regional organisations.

In addition, the growing international attention to the area shows that it has gained considerably in geostrategic importance following the collapse of the Soviet Union. The paper also explored how the region's geopolitical importance, energy resources, economic and political problems have caused the outside world to pay attention to it and rush to establish relations with the independent republics during the last three decades. As a result, Central Asia has become a field of geopolitical competition for regional and international powers which is known as the New Great Game. This has contributed to the globality of Central Asia in the post-Soviet era. In addition, as a result of the Soviet breakup, Central Asia became a place where several regional and global powers engage simultaneously and for a variety of reasons. Therefore, Central Asia which once was closed and an unreachable region opened up and integrated to the international community.

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