

A Global Crossroads Reemerges in the Twenty-first Century

An Introduction to Central Asia

By Reuel R. Hanks

The Where and Why of Central Asia

As a scholar of Central Asia, I have frequently been asked two questions by students and colleagues over the course of my career: Where is Central Asia, and why is it important? Strangely, the first question is often more difficult to answer precisely than the second. The terms “Central Asia,” “Inner Asia,” and more recently “Central Eurasia” all refer to a region that is marked by a frustrating imprecision of location. Here I will consider Central Asia to consist of the former Soviet states of Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan, along with the western reaches of China (western Xinjiang) and Mongolia. This territory may be thought of as a cultural-linguistic region dominated by Turko-Mongolic languages (with the exception of Tajik) and marked by a historical dichotomy of lifestyle between oasis agriculture on the one hand and pastoralism and nomadism on the other. Certainly it would be reasonable

to include Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, and Tibet in the context of Central Asia as well, but the emphasis here will be on the aforementioned countries.

The appearance of this special issue of *EAA* focused on Central Asia is especially timely and welcome. As Western powers disengage from Afghanistan and the broader Central Asian region, they run the risk of yet again losing sight, both figuratively and literally, of this vital crossroads. This would be both disadvantageous and unfortunate, as not only was Central Asia’s role pivotal in the historical development of both Asia and the West, but the region stands to play an even greater part in world events in the twenty-first century. The cultural diffusion that lies at the core of “globalization” may strike some as a process unique to the post-industrial age, but in fact, Central Asia has served as a conduit for the transfer of technology, goods, and ideas between East and West for millennia, and all indications are that it will continue to do so. In October



Map of Central Asia. Source: Nations Online Project at <http://www.nationsonline.org/oneworld/map/central-asia-map.htm>.

2011, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton promulgated the “New Silk Road Initiative,” a broad strategic plan of development rooted in resurrecting the region’s historic role as a hub of economic and cultural exchange. If geography is indeed destiny, then the states of Central Asia are positioned to collectively serve as a key global intersection in coming decades.

Yet the region remains obscure to many. For the typical student (and many teachers!), the Central Asian countries present a bewildering array of “stans.” From the perspective of an American student, this region presents both phonetic and geographic challenges, as the names of the states seem to be a daunting cluster of unpronounceable consonants that all sound similar, representing places that lie as far away as possible, located almost exactly on the opposite side of the globe from the United States. Mongolia may be slightly more familiar to some, perhaps due to its famous son Genghis Khan, but by and large, the Central Asian region represents a geographic and historic “black hole” in the minds of many in the West.

If for many Central Asia continues to lie beyond the scope of familiar geography, we should not be surprised—uncertainty surrounding the location and qualities of the region of Central Asia is not a new development. Alexander established the city of Alexandria Eschate (“Alexandria the Farthest”), modern Khudjand in Tajikistan, as the easternmost outpost of his empire. A blending of Greek and Asian cultures, the Greco-Bactrian Kingdom remained for a century, but afterward, Western civilization lost direct contact with its Central Asian counterpart, along with China further to the east. But indirect contact persisted. Both Greek and Roman writers referred to the land of “Seres,” a name that may have identified a region in the Fergana Valley of Central Asia or perhaps western China. Seres was the land that produced the commodity that lay at the foundation of the first “global economy”: silk. Wealthy Romans had a healthy appetite for this marvelous fabric and traded for it with the Parthian Empire, the state that controlled the famed network of Silk Roads that ran primarily through the heart of Central Asia. Yet despite their infatuation with the cloth, Romans had little knowledge of how silk was obtained or of those who produced it. Direct contact between China and Rome was quite limited, and Central Asia was the pathway for the trade that flowed across nearly half the world. The cities of Kashgar, Osh, Samarkand, and Bukhara, among others, became centers of commerce and cultural exchange for centuries as a result of the Silk Roads economy.

Not only did Central Asia historically link East and West, but the region also played a vital role in the diffusion of culture within Asia. Mahayana Buddhism, for example, very likely was carried by Indian merchants and settlers to the oasis cities of Central Asia; and from there the faith spread eastward, reaching Dun-huang, an ancient Silk Roads center in western China, by the first century BCE. Thus, although there was later contact directly between India and Tibet after the third century CE, Chinese culture initially encountered Buddhism via Central Asia. Dun-huang’s Buddhist cave paintings, created over several centuries, would come to represent one of the world’s most valuable caches of Buddhist art. To appreciate the part Central Asia played in linking Asia’s two great cultures, one need only remember that Buddhism’s greatest traveler, Hsuan-tsang, made his famous journey to India via the fabled city of Samarkand, following the Central Asian Silk Roads routes down into India. Hsuan-tsang made good use of silk himself, receiving thousands of pieces during his lifetime, all of which he awarded as gifts to fellow monks, mostly from India.¹

And of course, during the thirteenth century, a Central Asian people, the Mongols, would erect the most expansive land empire in history, linking Asia, the Middle East, and Eastern Europe into a single economic and political space. Forged by violent conquest, the Pax Mongolica that held for just over a century set in motion a wholesale transfer of knowledge and technology across the entire Eurasian space. For the first time in history, there was direct, extensive contact between East and West. An expanded and reinvigorated Silk Roads network lay at the core of the empire’s prosperity, and like a thousand years earlier, the long string of oasis cities lying from western China to the Caspian Sea were the centers for economic and cultural exchange.²

Following the decline of the Mongol Empire, Tamerlane (Amir Timur) would briefly create a massive imperial state with his capital at Samarkand, but shortly thereafter, Central Asia would slip into the shadows of history as the overland routes between Europe and Asia were displaced by international sea lanes. Much of Central Asia was absorbed into the Russian Empire in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and subsequently fell under Soviet aegis for the better part of the twentieth century. Indeed, during the nineteenth century, the geopolitical relevance of the region became magnified, as Russia and Great Britain pursued imperial interests there as part of

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Editor's Note: The major reason several Central Asian states are garnering geopolitical attention is their significant hydrocarbon resources. The three sidebars in this article provide readers basic facts about three hydrocarbon-rich Central Asian states. For more extensive basic information about two other Central Asian states, please see our online supplement table of contents.

KAZAKHSTAN

Geography and Population

Area: 1,693,174 square miles; almost four times the size of Texas.

Population: 17.74 million.



President Nursultan Abishuly Nazarbayev.
Source: <http://tiny.cc/pxkd5w>.

Government

Type: Republic, authoritarian presidential rule.

Chief of State: President Nursultan Abishuly Nazarbayev.

Head of Government: Prime Minister Serik Akhmetov (appointed by president).

Elections: Popular vote every five years (Note: Nazarbayev has the status of "First President" and can run for an unlimited number of terms).

Legislative Branch: Bicameral Parliament; Senate (forty-seven seats, six-year terms); Mazhilis (lower house, 107 seats, non-appointed members serve five-year terms).

Judicial Highest Courts: Supreme Court of the Republic, Constitutional Council.

Judges: Proposed by president, confirmed by Senate.

Economy

Kazakhstan has large amounts of fossil fuel reserves, as well as a large agricultural sector.

GDP: \$235.6 billion.

Unemployment Rate: 5.3 percent.

Population Below Poverty Line: 5.3 percent.

Inflation Rate: 5.1 percent.

Agricultural Products: grain, potatoes, vegetables, melons; livestock.

Industries: oil, coal, iron ore, manganese, chromite, lead, zinc, copper, titanium, bauxite, gold, silver, phosphates, sulfur, uranium, iron and steel, agricultural machines.

Society

Religion: 70.2 percent Muslim, 23.9 percent Russian Orthodox, 2.3 percent Christian.

Life Expectancy: 69.94 years.

Literacy Rate: 99.7 percent.

Major Contemporary Issues

Drugs: There is significant cultivation of cannabis, opium poppy and ephedra with limited government pushback against the cultivation of the drugs. Kazakhstan is also a transit country for Southwest Asian drugs heading for Russia and Europe.

SOURCES:

Hanks, Reuel R. *Central Asia: A Global Studies Handbook* (Santa Monica: ABC-CLIO, 2005).

"The World Factbook: Kazakhstan," *CIA.gov*, last modified September 10, 2013, <http://tinyurl.com/5ejoq>.



Political map of Kazakhstan. Source: University of Texas Libraries Perry-Castañeda Library Map Collection at <http://tiny.cc/g5bd5w>.

the "Great Game," a phrase made famous by Rudyard Kipling.³ Now, the past two decades have witnessed yet another resurrection of the region's global importance, even leading some commentators to suggest that Central Asia represents the prize in a new "Great Game." So why is Central Asia important? There are many reasons the region is rising in importance, but three elements in particular make the region deserving of additional scrutiny.

Central Asia in the Twenty-First Century Energy, Extremism, and Environment

Central Asia is a land of both promise and peril. Its promise as a regional, and potentially a global, energy supplier is offset by great challenges in maintaining political stability and striking a balance between economic development and managing the environment. The factors that will shape the future of the Central Asian countries the most in this century will be energy, extremism, and environmental challenges.

ENERGY

Central Asia is rapidly emerging as a major energy producer. The great bulk of this energy will not be consumed in the local economies but will be exported to regional and global markets. By dint of a fortunate geography, the Central Asian states sit adjacent to two of the world's largest emerging energy-consuming regions: China and South Asia. Europe, increasingly dependent on imported energy, is already a reliable customer. Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, countries lying along the east littoral of the Caspian Sea, hold enormous reserves of petroleum and



Political map of Turkmenistan. Source: <http://tiny.cc/ccwwad5w>.

TURKMENISTAN

Geography and Population

Area: 303,291 square miles; slightly larger than the area of California.

Population: 5.11 million people.



President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow.

Source: <http://tiny.cc/oskd5w>.

Government

Type: Secular democracy and a presidential republic, displays authoritarian presidential rule.

Chief of State and Head of Government: President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow.

Elections: Popular vote every five years.

Legislative Branch: Unicameral National Assembly (Mejlis) (125 seats, five-year terms).

Judicial Highest Courts: Supreme Court of Turkmenistan.

Judges: Appointed by president.

natural gas, respectively. By some estimates, Kazakhstan holds the tenth-largest reserves of petroleum in the world. China has already tapped into Kazakhstan's oil wealth with the completion of the Kazakh-China pipeline in 2009, which runs almost 1,400 miles from the Kazakh city of Atyrau to Alashankou in Xinjiang. In the opposite direction, Kazakhstan sends oil to Europe and the global market via Russia's pipeline network, as well as a modest amount through the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline. As the transport infrastructure is expanded and improved, oil from Kazakhstan will account for a significant amount of the global petroleum supply.

Turkmenistan, lying to the southwest of Kazakhstan, possesses apparently huge deposits of natural gas. Some independent estimates suggest that in 2010, the country ranked fourth in the world in proven reserves, slightly ahead of the United States and Saudi Arabia. Galkynysh, located in the southeastern sector of the country, may be one of the largest single gas fields in the world; and like Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan is poised to become a major energy supplier to both East and West. For a decade, the governments of Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India have worked to complete plans for the TAPI gas pipeline, a route that would connect Turkmenistan's vast gas resources to the energy-hungry markets of South Asia. To date, political instability in Afghanistan has stalled the project, but if the Afghan conflict is resolved, Turkmen gas may well fuel the economies of both Pakistan and India throughout the twenty-first century. Moreover, China has already invested heavily in building the infrastructure to bring Central Asian gas, much of it originating in Turkmenistan, to the Chinese market. The Central Asia-China gas pipeline is expected to deliver sixty-five billion cubic meters of gas to China annually once the Galkynysh field is brought fully online. China's economic expansion in this century will depend in large part on Kazakh oil and Turkmen gas.

Economy

Largely focused on gas and oil resources, as well as cotton crops in irrigated oases.

GDP: \$49.75 billion.

Unemployment Rate: 60 percent. (Statistic is from 2004; government is very secretive about this data.)

Population Below Poverty Line: 30 percent.

Inflation Rate: 8.5 percent.

Agricultural Products: cotton, grain, melons; livestock.

Industries: natural gas, oil, petroleum products, textiles, food processing.

Society

Religion: 89 percent Muslim, 9 percent Eastern Orthodox.

Life Expectancy: 69.18 years.

Literacy Rate: 99.6 percent.

Major Contemporary Issues

Human trafficking: Both forced labor and sex trafficking are major issues in Turkmenistan. Turkmenistan is rated at a Tier 2 Watch List, which means the government does not fully comply with the standards to eliminate trafficking but is making an effort to do so.

Drugs: Turkmenistan is a transit country for Afghan drugs heading for Russia and Western Europe, as well as a transit country for heroin precursor chemicals heading to Afghanistan.

SOURCES:

Hanks, Reuel R. *Central Asia: A Global Studies Handbook* (Santa Monica: ABC-CLIO, 2005).

"The World Factbook: Turkmenistan," *CIA.gov*, last modified September 10, 2013, <http://tinyurl.com/33um4w2>.

The hydrocarbon riches of Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan have garnered most of the headlines in the Western media, but Central Asia offers still another source of energy that may be marketed to surrounding regions. Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are resource-poor countries when compared to their neighbors in the region, but again, geography confers an advantage. Much of the territory of both states is occupied by mountains, and the streams draining these peaks give Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan enormous hydroelectric generating potential. Since 2006, the Asian Development Bank, World Bank, USAID, and other donor agencies have promoted investment in building generating capacity in these countries, as well as transmission

UZBEKISTAN

Geography and Population

Area: 278,026 square miles; slightly less than the area of California.

Population: 28 million.



President Islam Karimov.
Source: <http://tiny.cc/d0kd5w>.

Government

Type: Republic, authoritarian presidential rule.

Chief of State: President Islam Karimov (in power since March 24, 1990).

Head of Government: Prime Minister Shavkat Mirziyoyev (appointed by president).

Elections: Popular vote every five years.

Legislative Branch: Bicameral Supreme Assembly (Oliy Majlis), two chambers (both five-year terms); Upper House: Senate (100 seats); Lower House: Qonunchilik Palatasi (Legislative Chamber) (150 seats).

Judicial High Courts: Supreme Court, Constitutional Court, Higher Economic Court.

Judges: Appointed by president, confirmed by the Oliy Majlis (Supreme Assembly), five-year terms.

Economy

Largely centered around the agricultural production of cotton in the small amount of land that is arable, as well as the export of natural gases.

GDP: \$106.4 billion.

Unemployment Rate: 4.8 percent (official rate; plus another 20 percent underemployed).

Population Below Poverty Line: 17 percent.

Inflation Rate: 12.7 percent.

Agricultural Products: cotton, vegetables, fruits, grain, livestock.

Industries: textiles, food processing, machine building, metallurgy, mining, hydrocarbon extraction, chemicals.

Society

Religion: 88 percent Muslim (mostly Sunni), 9 percent Eastern Orthodox, 3 percent other.

Life Expectancy: 73.03 years.

Literacy Rate: 99.4 percent.

Major Contemporary Issues

Pollution: Soviet Russia's use of agrochemicals starting in the 1960s led to the pollution of the Aral Sea, which caused it to shrink to a third of its original size. This remains one of the world's most critical environmental issues.

Human Trafficking: Both forced labor and sex trafficking are major national issues. Uzbekistan has a Tier 3 rating for trafficking, which means it does not meet the minimum standards for its elimination.

Drugs: Uzbekistan is a transit country for Afghan drugs bound for Russia.

SOURCES:

Hanks, Reuel R. *Central Asia: A Global Studies Handbook* (Santa Monica: ABC-CLIO, 2005).

"The World Factbook: Uzbekistan." *CIA.gov*, last modified August 10, 2013, <http://tinyurl.com/2uyp2t>.



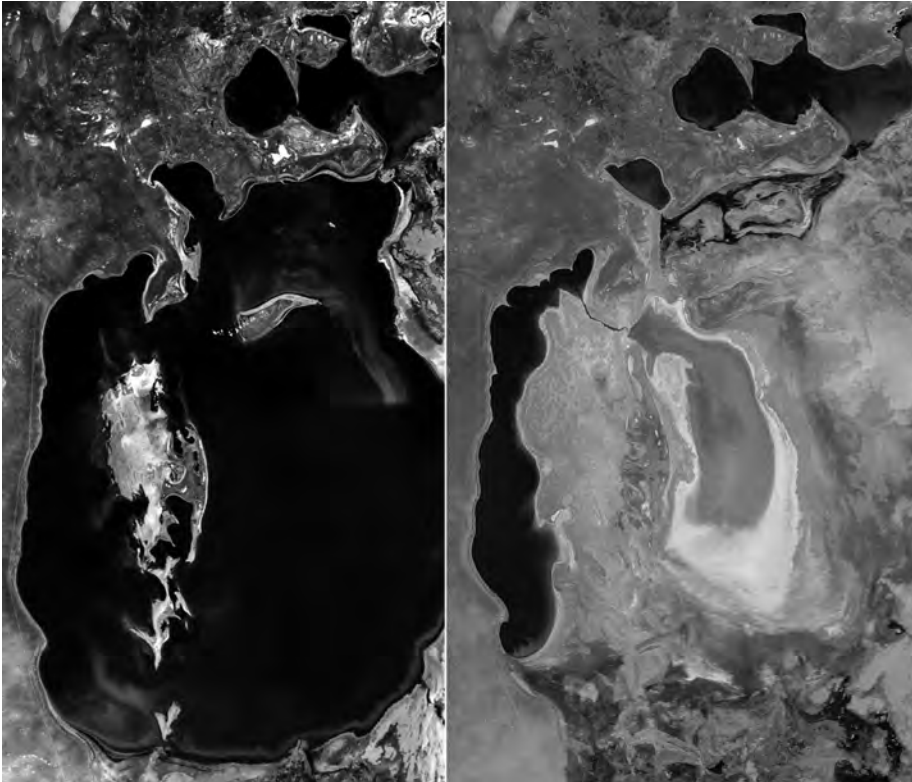
Political map of Uzbekistan. Source: University of Texas Libraries Perry-Castañeda Library Map Collection at <http://tiny.cc/vecd5w>.

infrastructure to carry the electricity to markets in South Asia. Electrical usage patterns are complementary between Central and South Asia, with peak demand occurring at different times of the year; and Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan could emerge as significant energy suppliers to Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh.⁴ However, two serious obstacles must be overcome. First, the transmission lines must cross Afghanistan, and continued political instability in that nation will inhibit development of electrical infrastructure. Secondly, Uzbekistan is strongly opposed to the construction of large dams by its upstream neighbors, and Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan also are concerned about such projects. Until a mutually acceptable agreement is reached among the Central Asian states governing water usage and allocation in the basins of the Amu Darya and Syr Darya, it is unlikely that Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan will develop into major electricity suppliers for their southern neighbors.

EXTREMISM

All of the former Soviet states and Xinjiang historically fall within the Islamic realm. Mongolia is the only corner of Central Asia considered here that does not contain a large population who self-identifies as Muslim. Certainly the potential of Muslim extremism, expressed as Muslim militancy, enlarges the importance of Central Asia on the global stage. But here, I will consider another type of extremism as well—state extremism, as evidenced by political and cultural repression, accompanied by a dearth of democratic institutions and absence of civil society. Both varieties of extremism carry the potential to destabilize the region, and instability in the heart of Asia could very well have dire consequences for the whole of Eurasia.

Islamic militant groups have been active in Central Asia since the 1990s. The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) is believed responsible for a rash of bombings



NASA images of the Aral Sea in 1987 (left) and 2008 (right). Source: <http://tiny.cc/pjve5w>.



Semipalatinsk nuclear test site, Kazakhstan. Photo by Grigory Bedenko. Source: *Kazakhstan travel and tourism blog* at <http://tiny.cc/4l6e5w>.

in Tashkent in 1999, as well as armed incursions into Kyrgyzstan in 1999 and 2000. The IMU was supported by both the Taliban and Osama bin Laden and until 2001 had bases in Afghanistan. After the US bombing campaign in the fall of 2001, many of the IMU's followers were killed. Splinter groups, such as the Islamic Jihad Union (IJU), remain active but appear to have only small numbers of supporters. In Xinjiang, the East Turkestan Islamic Movement has claimed responsibility for occasional acts of terrorism, including assassinations and bombings; but again, its activities have been limited to only a few isolated incidents. Some Islamic groups, such as Hizbut-Tahrir and Tablighi Jamaat, are banned throughout most of Central Asia and are considered threats to security by the regimes there, but there is little evidence linking these groups to any anti-government violence. Moreover, the number of supporters of all fringe Islamic groups appears to be quite limited in Central Asia, certainly far below the threshold necessary to support a mass movement. The appeal of extremist messages is also muted by

Perhaps the most important lessons we can learn from a study of Central Asia pertain to the dangers of unfettered environmental exploitation.

the region's long history of Sufism, a tolerant, highly personalized expression of Islam, and modernization and absorption of Western values and practices under the Russian and Soviet empires.⁵

However, the extremist message could find fertile ground in countries where political repression and corruption are rampant and economic opportunities are afforded only to an entrenched elite determined to maintain the status quo. Unfortunately, these are the conditions that hold in several Central Asian countries. Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan are typically ranked by Transparency International as some of the most corrupt and repressive states in the world, while Nursultan Nazarbayev's regime in Kazakhstan may be characterized as "enlightened authoritarianism." Kyrgyzstan's volatile democracy, marked by two popular coups since 2005, is also plagued by pervasive corruption at all levels of government. With the exception of Kazakhstan, economic development in these countries since independence has not been sufficient, and today, large proportions of the GNP of both Uzbekistan and Tajikistan are derived from remittances Uzbeks and Tajiks working abroad send home. Many Central Asians live in poverty, and outside of major urban areas, basic amenities are often in short supply. Yet Islam Karimov, president of Uzbekistan, is believed to have amassed a personal fortune in excess of a billion dollars, and his daughter Gulnara, a prominent figure in the country, may have assets in the hundreds of millions. "Extremism" may take many forms in Central Asia, but all of its manifestations are harmful to the region's future and may result in failed states and unfulfilled potential.

ENVIRONMENT

Perhaps the most important lessons we can learn from a study of Central Asia pertain to the dangers of unfettered environmental exploitation. Central Asia is

the location of some of the worst ecological disasters caused by human activity in history, catastrophes that will continue to affect the region for many decades. Poor ecological conditions are found across the entire realm. Mongolia's capital city, Ulan Bator, has become notorious for its poor air quality, in one of the least industrialized countries in Asia. But it is the former Soviet states in the region that have experienced environmental mismanagement on a colossal scale, with two particularly egregious examples: the destruction of the Aral Sea and the devastation within Kazakhstan's infamous "polygon."

Almost two million people live near the Aral Sea in western Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan and have seen their quality of life drastically decline as the Aral has vanished. The collapse of the Aral Sea, a body of water that only 50 years ago was the fourth-largest lake in the world, stands as quite possibly the worst ecological debacle in history. As fresh water was drawn from the Aral's feeder streams, the Amu Darya and Syr Darya, the sea simply

evaporated. Satellite images now show a body of water that is only one-third its size in 1960, and all commercial fish species in the Aral have died off. Indeed, the volume of water has declined to the point that the Aral has now separated into three distinct bodies of water. Only the "Little Aral," lying within Kazakhstan, appears to have stabilized. Approximately two million people in western Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan have had their livelihoods and health degraded by this calamity, and the crisis is likely to only become worse in coming decades.

Between 1949 and the late 1980s, over 400 atomic tests were conducted by the Soviet government in eastern Kazakhstan, about 100 miles west of Semipalatinsk, a city of several hundred thousand people at the time. Kazakhs refer to this zone as the "polygon." Many of the tests in the 1950s and 1960s were detonated above ground, and radioactive material was carried hundreds of miles toward the east over Semipalatinsk and other cities in the region. Incidents of thyroid cancer and other diseases are many times the national average in this part of Kazakhstan, and to date, several hundred thousand people have suffered serious health conditions because of the radioactive contamination. But there will likely be thousands more in coming years, and background levels of radiation remain high in many corners of the polygon. The disaster at Chernobyl in Ukraine is well-known in the West, but the effects of Soviet testing in eastern Kazakhstan are longer-term and will continue to damage the lives of people living there for a generation to come. It is unlikely that Uzbekistan or Kazakhstan will be able to solve their legacy of ecological damage without additional international expertise and assistance.

Whither Central Asia?

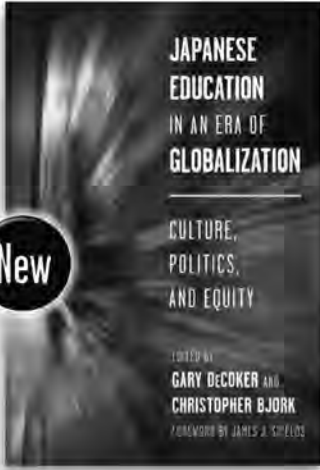
For those who wish to "beat the bells along the Golden road to Samarkand," to quote James Elroy Flecker's famous lines, there is much to learn.⁶ Central Asia remains as mysterious and alluring today as it was a thousand years ago. But in the next several decades, the world will develop a new familiarity with the "stans." This is inevitable as geography, international relations, and economics all work in concert to magnify the region's global relevance. Central Asia will supply the world's future engines of economic growth, East and South Asia, with energy and will provide the same to the 700 million consumers of the EU. It is possible, perhaps likely, that an extensive network of pipelines, roads, and railways will connect Moscow to Dacca and Kiev to Beijing, carrying goods and passengers across the whole of Eurasia. But in order to reach this future, the countries of Central Asia must face the crises of the past and solve the dilemmas of the present. ■

NOTES

1. Xinru Liu, *Silk and Religion* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996), 70.
2. Svat Soucek, *A History of Inner Asia* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 103-116.
3. Kipling uses the term in his novel *Kim*, but Arthur Conolly, a British military officer, is generally believed to have coined the phrase.
4. Gregory Gleason, Reuel Hanks, and Yuri Bosin, "Afghanistan Reconstruction in Regional Perspective," *Central Asian Survey* 28, no. 3 (2009): 375-387.
5. Reuel R. Hanks, "Dynamics of Islam, Identity, and Institutional Rule in Uzbekistan: Constructing a Paradigm for Conflict Resolution," *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 40, no. 2 (2007): 209-221.
6. See Flecker's play *Hasan*, scene two.

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EDUCATION
IN AN ERA OF
GLOBALIZATION**

CULTURE,
POLITICS,
AND EQUITY

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JAPANESE EDUCATION
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CULTURE, POLITICS, AND EQUITY

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