A Forgotten Core? Mapping the Globality of Central Asia

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Abstract: The article explores Central Asia as a global region in an attempt to explain its dramatic reversal of fortune from a world core to a forgotten cul-de-sac to its current, partially global status. It briefly recounts Central Asia’s “spatially central” situation during the Silk Road centuries, the Islamic Golden Age, and the Mongol Empire, before moving to an investigation of the region’s functional “disappearance” in world affairs during the Early Modern Period. Using geopolitical and cartographic analysis of Central Asia as an increasingly relevant world region, the article then focuses on the Russo-British “Great Game,” followed by an analysis of the region’s “cocooned globality” during the Soviet era. Lastly, the article analyzes the “opening” of Central Asia after 1991 and how the events of 11 September 2001 and the region’s petro-wealth have put it “back on the map” and provided the region with a measurable level of globality.

Keywords: cartography, Central Asia, geopolitics, globality, Islam, Silk Road, Soviet Union

1 Today, the region we currently refer to as Central Asia—the geopolitical space comprised of the five post-Soviet republics of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan—is anything but a core in the contemporary network of globalized flows of information, people, goods, ideas, and money. Due to a host of factors, the lands between the Caspian Sea and the Gobi Desert represent somewhat of a global backwater (though less so than was the case in the nineteenth century when Central Asia remained an unmapped and thus “unknown country” to nearly all of the outside world). The perceptual “remoteness” of Central Asia is particularly evident by way of contrast, given that the region is neatly situated between two of the most globalized meta-regions in the world: the European peninsula and East Asia’s Pacific Rim. Central Asia’s current peripheral status represents a major inversion from the premodern era, when these lands were at the center of world trade and—at times—intellectual exchange.

2 Known as the “land of a thousand cities,” Central Asia came to be seen as a distinct region early in world history, namely during the centuries when it commanded the Silk Road traffic between China and the Eastern Mediterranean basin (150 BC onwards). Central Asia also served as the site for Islam’s “Golden Age,” where the world’s greatest thinkers, including Ibn Sina (c. 980-1037) and al-Biruni (973-1048) made their mark on medicine, geometry, physics, and a host of other fields. As S. Frederick Starr argues, this “constellation of ethnically Persian and Turkic geniuses” whose writings spread to the east, west, and south with equal vigor thus made Central Asia the “epicenter of the world.” This distinction came after a millennium of serving as the main avenue of worldwide trade, connecting such disparate civilizations as Imperial China, classical Japan, Hellenistic Greece, the Roman Empire, Byzantium, the Arab caliphates, and India under the Gupta dynasty. Like the world’s oceans during the Pax Britannica (1815-1914), or the global information and communication network in our current era of globalization, the cities, oases, and caravansaries of Central Asia served as the preeminent conduit of economic and cultural exchange, conveying missionaries, merchants, and makers of history from one part of the known world to the other.

3 In this essay, I will explore Central Asia as a global region from a historical perspective in an attempt to explain the region’s dramatic reversal of fortune from a
world core to a forgotten cul-de-sac to its current status which is somewhere in the middle of this spectrum. I will briefly recount Central Asia’s status during the Islamic Golden Age and its spatial centrality in the Mongol Empire before moving to investigating the region’s effective “disappearance” and “rediscovery” vis-à-vis the West. To demonstrate the above, I provide a close reading of European maps from the mid-1600s through late nineteenth century, supplemented by a discussion of Central Asia’s rising profile in concerns about global security in the era of high imperialism based on documents from the era. I then analyze Central Asia as a global “mirage,” focusing on the region’s situation during the Great Game and the Cold War as the most “unknown” and remote area of Russia/USSR. In the last section of the essay, I turn to the the “opening” of the region in the post-Soviet period, and how the events of 11 September 2001 and the region’s petro-wealth have put it “back on the map,” thus providing the region with a measurable level of globality.

4 Reprising Ulrich Beck’s exposition on the concept, Anna Yeatman states, “Globality denotes the development of society on a global scale.” Such a definition begs for an explanation of what the author connotes by “society.” If one uses Ferdinand Tönnies’ definition, “society” (Gesellschaft) is a “transitory and superficial” solidarity amongst “an aggregate of human beings,” which mirrors a community (Gemeinschaft) based on language, kinship, proximity, or other “organic” bonds. While it is entirely possible to apply this trenchant conceptualization on a global scale (as Beck and Yeatman do), limiting the parameters of “globality” to the field of social interaction unnecessarily hobble the concept. Instead, I embrace a wider notion of the concept, specifically one which treats globality as a condition which can be observed (if not always measured) in any entity. In order to avoid a tautological loop (e.g., “globality is the state of being global”), I refer to this condition as the level to which a given entity is anti-local; here, I use both meanings of the prefix “anti-“ (from the Greek for “against”): “opposing in effect or activity” and “not.” While more expansive and admittedly cumbersome than Beck/Yeatman’s delineation, this definition still proves useful. In limiting the concept to a state of existence, globality is thus differentiated from globalization (the process through which globality is achieved) and globalism (the ideology which places a normative value on achieving globality).

As such, my own definition of globality bears a strong resemblance to that of Martin Shaw:

In its simplest meaning, globality is the condition or state in which things are global. The idea of globality represents the global as something increasingly achieved, real and manifest. Globality represents not just certain trends with the modern world, but a new condition or age in which the latter is brought into question. Globality represents a sufficiently fundamental shift in the very principles on which modern social organization is for us to question the continuation of modernity.

While Shaw certainly makes the “globality” of social relations the core of his analysis, he is careful not to prune his definition so much that it precludes fruitful employment elsewhere. Likewise, Jan Aart Scholte, who has written prolifically on the concepts of globalization and globality, tightly binds society to globality without making the latter exclusive to the former.

Globality refers to a particular kind of social space—namely, a realm that substantially transcends the confines of territorial space, territorial distance, and territorial borders. Whereas territorial spaces are mapped in terms of longitude, latitude, and altitude, global relations transpire in the world as a single space, as one more or less seamless realm.

Globality in this sense has a “transworld” or “transborder” quality.

Elsewhere, Scholte expands his analysis of the state of globality by arguing that it possesses four interrelated aspects: internationality, liberality, universality and supraterritoriality. He stresses the interaction and interdependence between countries, low (or non-existent) barriers to cross-border flows, the spread of objects from one corner of the globe to the other, and a (partial, incipient, and/or conceptual) transcendence of territorial geography.

5 This mention of territorial geography brings us to our second concept, namely that of “world region.” According to Marie D. Price and Catherine W. Cooper, world regions are crafted through “popular understanding, shared histories and cultures, environmental features, geopolitical ambitions, and active regional construction.” The analytical shorthand of world regions allows scholars and laypersons alike to discuss vast territories encompassing intense diversity (e.g., Latin America) as easily as comparatively small ones characterized by relative ethno-cultural homogeneity (e.g., Scandinavia), and distinguish one region from all others (though overlap may occur, e.g., Eastern Europe and the Balkans). Regardless of the size or internal diversity of a given area, a world region is characterized by its unique “spatial cohesion,” historically embedded processes of mutual relations (socio-political,
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The Silk Road Centuries: Central Asia as the Hub of the Proto-Global World

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Retroactively named for the most precious of all the goods that passed through Central Asia[37] the Silk Road developed into the preglobal equivalent of today’s Information Superhighway or the high seas of the nineteenth century: a conduit through which far-flung cultures would interact as they sought to profit from transregional trade and commerce. Unlike today when Alaskan fishermen chat with IT specialists in Bangalore when their cell phones break and Sakha miners toss back Guinness in an Irish pub after work, the Romans and Chinese—situated as they were at opposite ends of continuum of trade—continued to know very little about one another. However, in the hub of global trade, a Central Asian cultural complex developed, influenced by diverse strains of thought from Europe, East Asia, and the Indian Sub-Continent.[38] To take the poignant example of faith, on the Silk Road, Indo-European and Turkic strands of paganism mingled and merged with Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Buddhism, Nestorian Christianity, Manichaeism, and—finally—Islam to create one of the most religiously diverse cultural spaces in global history.[39]

With the arrival of Islam, the region began a steady transformation into a site of learning and scientific inquiry, ultimately attracting scholars from across the Muslim world stretching from Spain to central China. It was in the cities of Central Asia that Greek and Roman knowledge merged with new ideas generated during Islam’s “Golden Age” (850-1200), only to be retransmitted back to Europe via Berber-ruled Spain in the second millennium. It was in Bukhara that Ibn Sina (popularly known in the West as Avicenna) wrote his Canon of Medicine, which, when translated into Latin, triggered the advent of modern medicine in the West.[40] Likewise, it was Turkic- and Persian-speaking Central Asians who adapted the Hindu numbering system and transmitted it to the Mediterranean world as “Arabic” numerals. Baghdad—the preeminent metropolis of the Dar al-Islam until its decimation by the Mongols—teemed with intellectuals from the Silk Road cities of Merv, Otrar, and Khiva, including al-Khwārizmī (‘from Khuwārizm,’ or modern-day Uzbekistan) who bequeathed his name to the algorithm. While the modern capital of Iraq might have been the single-most important Muslim city, Beckwith argues that the “Central Asian Islamic cities together constituted the brilliant commercial and intellectual center of Eurasia in this period.”[41] Educational advances such as the madrasa system, forged in Central Asia, spread like wildfire across the Arab-speaking and Muslim worlds producing geniuses on other continents like Ibn Rushd (Averroës), even shaping the first institute of higher learning in Europe, the Collège des Dix-Huit (part of the original University of Paris).

While the rise of Genghis Khan in the thirteenth century wrought destruction on Baghdad and created havoc across the eastern Arab lands, Central Asia benefited greatly from the establishment of the Mongol World Empire (1206-1368), due to the Genghisids’ focus on reviving the great trans-Eurasian trade routes.[42] Within a generation, the conquerors from the harsh steppes built an empire which stretched from the Pannonian Plan to the Vietnamese coast and from Palestine to the Korean Peninsula, with Central Asia serendipitously situated at its center. Unconcerned with spreading their faith, values, philosophies, architecture, or even worldview (other than a desire for free trade), the Mongols were concerned with creating an economic empire. Once their enemies had been co-opted, subdued, or annihilated, they set about this endeavor in earnest, opening new and reestablishing old avenues of trade and communication between Europe, the Middle East, India, and China to create history’s largest free-trade zone. In order for this to work, the center had to hold, and it did for two centuries. The rule of law, religious freedom, and the institution of diplomatic immunity became standards across inner Eurasia.

So stable and prosperous was the new world order that the intrepid Polo family (Marco being the most famous) felt safe enough to travel the overland route from Venice to Kublai Khan’s capital in China and back in the late thirteenth century, thus introducing Europe to a mysterious Asia beyond the Arab lands and proving that Central Asia functioned as the glue that bound the contemporary world. Unfortunately for Central Asia, this journey marked the symbolic “beginning of the end” for the region’s centrality in the preglobal world. Spurred on by desires to trade with the civilizationally-superior East and resentful of Muslim (and Venetian) control of the Silk Road trade routes, Spanish and Portuguese ships would soon break the bottleneck on trade with the Orient, both by sailing around Africa and eventually the globe itself, thus inaugurating the Western dominated protoglobal period. With these
new waterborne routes, the so-called Littoral System[43] came into being, first marginalizing and then destroying the old Silk Road System, which had made Central Asia the epitome of a preglobal region for more than a millennium.[44]

**Mapping Terra Incognita: Central Asia as the Abandoned Core**

Despite the fourteenth century Turkic conqueror Timur’s short-lived attempt to revive the Silk Route system and turn his beloved Samarkand into the center of the universe, Central Asia’s centrality in world affairs effectively ended with the Mongols. The Timurid Empire (1370–1526) ruled a region that was in the process of being turned from a core into a periphery and then into a veritable no man’s land. Following the destruction of the Mughal Empire (a dynasty built by Babur, a reputed descendent of both Chingghis and Timur), Central Asia was totally cut off from economic exchange with the outside world—becoming in the words of Laura Adams, “isolated and stagnant”[45] —and eventually fell victim to a grand partition by the Russians, British, and Manchu-Chinese. However, in the words of Beckwith, “The road had been closed” long before this.[46] With the great maritime trade routes of the sixteenth century established, Central Asia’s usefulness as hub of the international economic system evaporated. As Europe entered into the heady days of its cartographic revolution,[47] the inner zones of Eurasia were forgotten (or worse, turned into nightmarish dreamscape where fantasy rather than fact reigned). As a result, the region slipped back from the cusp of protoglobality into a deep preglobal funk.

In order to explain just how unknown the region was in Western quarters, I have undertaken a document analysis of more than two dozen original maps from the period between 1600 and 1910. While I concede that I may place an overemphasis on the importance of cartography as a measure of coming globality, it is difficult to underestimate the centrality of mapping in the creation of the modern world. In the words of John Brian Harley and David Woodward, “As visual embodiments of ... conceptions of space, maps have deepened and expanded the consciousness of many societies. They are the primary medium for transmitting ideas and knowledge about space. As enduring works of graphic synthesis, they can play a more important role in history than do their makers.”[48] My aim here is to interrogate the globality of pre-modern Central Asia by examining the external construction of the region through the medium of European maps.

The first map is Joan Blaeu’s *Atlas Maior* (1665), which shows the Caspian Sea (*Mare Hyrcanum*) as an oblong body which is wider on its west to east than its north to south axis. To its north and east of the great salt lake is *Tartaria* or the region of the Tatars, which stretches all the way to the Arctic Ocean (*Oceanus Tataricus*) and the Pacific (*Oceani Chinensis Pars*), thus including modern Siberia and the Russian Far East. Rather than any sort of political subdivisions, the massive region is characterized by its populations: Kazakhs (*Kasakki Tartari* and the *Nogaia Horda*), Chagatai Turks (*Zagatay Tartari*), Kalmyks (*Kalmycki*), and so on. Turkestan (*Tyrochestan*) represents one of the few political appellations (though, it should be pointed out, “Turkestan” is in fact an ethnonym, meaning ‘land of the Turks’). Some of the great cities of the Silk Road are shown, but inaccurately placed, e.g., Andijan (*Andegen*) is west of Tashkent (*Taskent*), while Bukhara (*Buccara*) is far to the east of the Aral Sea, which is in fact shown as two small, non-contiguous lakes (*Saluna Lacus* and *Amu Lacus*). Most inaccurately, Blaeu’s map of Tartary shows the Oxus (Amu Darya) and the Jaxartes (Syr Darya) flowing into the Caspian. The map itself is peppered with devils and dragons, pictorial representations of Marco Polo’s spurious reports on the region. Maps from Philipp Clüver’s slightly earlier *Introductio In Universam Geographiam* (1624) show a surprisingly similar Tartary (divided ethnically between the Chagatai [*Zagataytari*], Karakitay, Kazaki [*Kirghiz*], and Kalmucks [*Kalmyks*] in the west and labeled simply “Turkestan” in the east) though without the fanciful embellishments.
More than a century later, geographic knowledge of Central Asia had improved greatly, though large gaps remained. Rigobert Bonne’s 1780 “Carte de la Perse, de la Géorgie, et de la Tartarie Indépendante” shows a comparatively accurate Caspian (now evincing its trademark “kidney” outline), now relieved of its fictitious connections to the Syr and Amu rivers. However, the Aral, while now a single body of water, bears little resemblance to its actual shape and is bordered on its eastern shore by a prodigious (though imaginary) mountain range. The cities of Bukhara, Samarkand, and Tashkent are all placed in correct alignment from west to east (though Kokand and Andijan are still shown out of place, but at least now are situated in the Ferghana region). Kazakhstan’s massive Lake Balkhash makes its appearance on Bonne’s map in the Pays de Geté (Khitan Lands) under the name Palcati; however, it is small, tadpole-shaped body rather than a long, thin arc it actually is (Kyrgyzstan’s Issyk-Kul is also shown but not named). Important, the Chagatai Turks are now called the Uzbeks (Usbeks), reflecting the emergence of the new ethnos (at least in the European mind). The map still suffers, however, particularly from its failure to represent accurately the Tian Shan (Belur Taagh) mountains that stretch from Xinjiang across Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan into Kashmir (though the traveler is warned that the area is both “high and cold”).
Recognizing themselves as “imperfect and inaccurate authorities,” Du Halde, D’Anville, and Jelenieff’s map “Central Asia” (1804) improves somewhat on Bonne in terms of ethnography (the three hordes of the Kirghiz are represented) and urban locations (in particular, the infelicities of placement vis-à-vis Kokand and Andijan are remedied and a somewhat accurate rendering of the interlocking mountain ranges is shown). However, it is the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge that provides a modern gestalt—albeit a rather fuzzy one—of the region with its “Western Siberia, Independent Tartary, Khiva, Bokhara, &c.” (1838).[49] The Khanates of Khiva and Kokand, as well as the Emirate of Bukhara, are shown as political subdivisions of Tartary (though without distinct borders in the deserts—a trait which was common in European map-making even through the first half of the twentieth century).

Map 3: “Central Asia” by Pere J. B. du Halde, Jean Baptiste Bourguignon d’Anville, and Johanne Flu Islenieff in A New and Elegant General Atlas by Aaron Arrowsmith, 1804, plate 27.


It is at this point that global history intervenes, tearing down Central Asia’s floodgates against modernity. Following the embarrassment of the Crimean War (1853-1856), Russia began to push deeper into the Muslim-dominated lands of Central Asia, prompting a veritable explosion in interest on the part of European (particularly British and French) cartographers, explorers, and military strategists. By 1863, Edward Weller possessed enough information to produce a fairly accurate rendering of Lake Balkhash and Issyk-Kul (much improved when compared to those depicted in A. H. Dufour’s “Turkestan” in 1854) in his “Independent Tartary (Turkestan),” as well as sufficient political intelligence to show complete boundaries for the territories of Khiva, Bukhara, and Kokand. With the knowledge gap on Central Asia closing, the region began to enter the increasingly globalized world of the late nineteenth century,
becoming the imperial playground of the British and Russians (Qing China, the other potential player, was too preoccupied defending its interests at home).


Reflecting this interest, Élisée Reclus’ *The Universal Geography: The Earth and Its Inhabitants* produced three important maps of the region in 1876: one showing “The Delta of the Amu Daria” (including roads and dried-up river channels), another a highly accurate rendering of “Lakes Balkhash and Issik-kul,” and the last, a relief of “Turkestan and Inner Asia.” These specialized cartographic analyses of the region unequivocally demonstrate an end to Central Asia’s global anonymity. Maps produced in the subsequent decades provide a visual account of Russian imperialism, as Kokand disappears as a distinct entity, Samarkand becomes a Russian-controlled city, and Khiva shrinks to a fifth of its original size by the time of the publication of Richard Andree’s “Centralasien und Ostindien” in the *Allgemeiner Handatlas* (1881). A comparison with Ravenstein’s “Map of Turkistan comprising the countries between the Caspian and British India” (1873) published in *The Illustrated London News* provides a dramatic report of the speed of the Russian military advance in less than a decade. By 1892, Brockhaus’ “Inner-Asien” in *Konversations-Lexikon* is able to show the competition between the imperial juggernauts of Britain and Russia in fine detail, particularly the lands of Afghanistan, which is slowly assuming its modern shape (though the characteristic “Afghan Finger” will not appear until the mid-part of the next decade, e.g., in Meyers’ *Konversations-Lexikon* from 1906). All remaining mysteries were dispelled by the publication of W. & A. K. Johnston’s “Central Asia” in 1906, a highly detailed and beautifully drawn map, which—in terms of geographic features and spatial relationships—is nearly indistinguishable from atlases produced in the 1950s or even today.[50]


Saunders, GSJ (20 April 2010), page 8
Shortly after the region was wrenched from its cartographic obscurity, the renowned geopolitical Halford Mackinder placed the Euro-Asian “heart-land” at the very epicenter of global power, naming it the “pivot area of the world’s politics.”[51] Possession of this vital region, in Mackinder’s mind, endowed the holder (read Russia) with a “central strategic position” and far-reaching military capabilities and economic leverage over the “World Island” (i.e., Europe-Asia-Africa).[52] Assuming an eventual alliance with Germany, Mackinder predicted the emergence of a world empire reminiscent of the one Alexander of Macedon established. Later in life, he would refer to the region as the “greatest natural fortress on earth.”[54] However, as the history of the twentieth century so mercilessly demonstrated, the old oases of inner Eurasia, once the webbing of Hellenistic and Mongol World empires, were far from the all-important nodes of contemporary commercial activity, international communication, and personal mobility that proved vital to global influence.[55] All in all, Mackinder’s heartland proved to be nothing but a geopolitical mirage produced by friction of great powers clamoring for territory in the deserts and mountains of their imperial peripheries.

Cocooned Globality: The Transformation of Soviet Central Asia

The “opening” of Central Asia was certainly abetted by its role as the “laboratory of unambiguous imperial competition” between the Russians and the British during the so-called “Great Game.”[57] As was the case with “new imperialism” in India, Southeast Asia, East Africa, Australia, and elsewhere, European conquest introduced telegraphs, railroads, modern schools, and other tools of empire, which—collectively—began the process of establishing permanent links to the rest of the globe.[58] However, just as importantly, indigenous changes going on in the region were key to this transformation.

Prior to the February and Bolshevik Revolutions of 1917, a progressive, pan-Islamist reform movement known as Jadidism had taken root in the region. Imported by Turkic-speaking Tatars from southern Russia, Jadidism, from the Arabic usul-ul-jadid or “new method,” was a socio-religious movement which emerged as the dominant strain of Muslim thought in late tsarist Central Asia.[59] Its proponents sought to reform shariah (Islamic law) through forward-looking interpretation (ijtihad) which accommodated the demands of modernity, all the while stressing the acquisition of knowledge from all sources, especially the West. The Jadids, who could be described as self-cognizant globalizers, were particularly interested in promoting geographical knowledge among the Turkic- and Persian-speaking Muslims of inner Asia, stressing that European’s knowledge of space had allowed them to conquer much of the known world. As Adeeb Khaliℓ states of the Jadids’ cartographic obsession: “Modern geography brought with it new conceptions of space, as something that could be envisioned in the form of a map or a globe but that was finite. It provided a sense of the interconnectedness of peoples and countries.”[60] In the wake of educational reforms, a local scientific revolution, and expansion of trade and intellectual exchange both with Europe and the wider Muslim World, Central Asia lurched towards increased globality in the first two decades of the twentieth century. In the 1920s, Jadidism was quashed by the new masters of Soviet Central Asia, the Bolsheviks; yet, Jadidism’s legacy proved an impetus for embracing the outside world. However, the most dramatic changes occurred under Soviet rule.

Central Asia’s relationship with globality from the end of the anti-Russian/Soviet Basmachi Rebellion in 1931 until the introduction of perestroika in 1987 is paradoxical.[61] On the one hand, the Soviet state introduced sweeping political, social, economic, industrial, economic, and cultural reforms that prepared the region for integration in the burgeoning world system, which began to take shape in the aftermath of World War II (1931-1945).[62] On the other, the Kremlin locked down its Central Asian provinces, creating multiple layers of physical and ideological insulation which prohibited meaningful engagement with the rest of the globe without first passing through Moscow (sometimes literally as well as figuratively).[63] In order to capture the contradictions inherent in this relationship, I refer to Central Asia’s relationship with the outside world as an instance of cocooned globality.

Beginning in the late 1920s, Sovietization began to link Central Asia with the rest of the USSR. Through the medium of the Russian language, the peoples of the region were exposed to Western civilization, literature, and cultural mores. Through integration into the state capitalism model of production and consumption, Central Asia was linked first into the economic system of the Soviet Union. Following the Soviet victory in World War II, Central Asia’s connections to the outside world were greatly expanded, particularly after 1949 when it was included in the larger network of COMECON, thus linking the regional economy to points as far afield as Cuba and Vietnam.[64] While Moscow kept Central Asia as a sort of spatial preserve (direct connections to the West, China, and India were miniscule), the groundwork was being laid for the future. As Laura Adams contends, “That men wear Western-style suits in both Uzbekistan and Italy, that orchestras use polyphony in both Kazakhstan and Austria, and that King Lear is popular in both Turkmenistan and England cannot be explained by the dynamics of capitalism.”[65] Such predilections are the direct result
of Soviet institutions which ultimately came to serve as “conduits for the globalization of culture in Central Asia.”[66] An ideological orientation towards internationalism and the introduction of a modern education system, the rapid rise of literacy, increasing parity between the genders, and the destruction of traditional Islamic control over cultural production were all keenly important in globalizing the region (though within the constricting parameters of Soviet universalism, rather than along a more liberal and creolized American or Western European model).

As the 1980s progressed, Central Asia’s cocoon was ruptured. The Soviet-Afghan War (1979-1989) focused world attention on the region, while concurrently reintroducing a long-lost link to the outside world: transnational Islam. Returning veterans of the war brought back stories of mujahideen victories against the purportedly undefeatable Red Army, prompting pride in the abilities of Uzbeks and Tajiks on the other side of the Afghan border. Likewise, the conflict politicized Islamic identity across the whole of the USSR, encouraging Central Asians to rethink their attitudes towards the faith and the Soviet system. With the introduction of perestroika and glasnost, the Soviet Union’s Muslim republics began a slow re-embrace of the Islamic world. Missionaries from Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Pakistan were soon crossing the border, competing for influence in the region and attempting to revive old networks of communication, cultural exchange, and religio-political influence. As the bonds with the Soviet center began to decay in 1989, other parties—multinational corporations, transnational grassroots groups, and intergovernmental organizations—also made their way into the region. Upon independence in the waning days of 1991, the newly independent Central Asian republics (CARs) formally joined the community of nations and thus entered a new stage of globalization, one which was not insulated by the Soviet system.

**Oil and Islam: Catalysts of Globality in Post-1991 Central Asia**

Situated on what Martin Spechler calls the “outside edge of globalization,”[67] contemporary Central Asia presents a plethora of contrasts in terms of regional globality. In many ways, the region—with all its flotsam of Soviet rule—epitomizes Jan Nederveen Pieterse’s assertion: “Globalization is uneven among countries and regions, among regions with countries and among categories with regions.”[68] Consequently, Central Asia presents an interesting case study for understanding the dynamics of regional globality. Given the region’s history as part of the USSR, the recent influence of capitalism and transnational Islam on Central Asian globality is of particular interest. As mentioned earlier, the most visible manifestations of globalization in the region stem from two factors: global investment in Central Asia’s natural resources and the resurgence of transnational Islam in the region (as opposed to the highly localized versions of the faith that characterized religious practices from the 1400s to late 1800s).

With its immense deposits of oil, natural gas, and rare minerals, Central Asia has emerged as an “important” region in the calculations of the great military and economic powers of the twenty-first century: the U.S., the European Union, Russia, and China. According to Marat Tazhin:

> Central Asia occupies a strategically important location, has a vast economic potential (huge market, human and natural resources), and is well placed to become a self-sustained and self-sufficient region. The joint economic capacity of Central Asian states is quite high. The region boasts significant human, natural, and industrial resources. It has a population of about 60 million and a joint GDP of more than $114 billion. Moreover, Central Asia finds itself at the juncture of Eurasian transportation corridors and possesses a vast transport and communications network.[69]

Even before the breakup of the Soviet Union, U.S. and British and other Western oil companies were plowing investment into Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, hoping to secure access to hydrocarbon fields which had been under-developed by the Soviets. After independence, these stakes increased dramatically. With the influx of capital from large multinational corporations (particularly energy companies), portions of Central Asia have been transformed, shattering the region’s image as a Sovietsque cloister.

Kazakhstan’s president, Nursultan Nazarbayev, is the region’s greatest advocate of globalization, seeing connections with Europe, North America, and East Asia as vital to ensuring that his country does not fall victim to the “curse of oil” that has gripped other petroleum-rich economies in past decades. Speaking with a British journalist, he once attested: “I tell young people here that they should be citizens of the world and that for them there should be only one nationality—humankind.”[70] Playing on the historical legacies discussed above, Nazarbayev has sought to position his country as an open, tolerant, and stable bastion of Eurasianism, linking together East and West, past and present, and Muslims, Christians, and Jews.[71] The theme of “crossroads” is at the heart of the post-Soviet Kazakhstani identity, suggesting that the region may
Outside of the cities, however, one is confronted with intensely localized societies, where life has been only minimally transformed by the flows of globalization and Central Asians engage in herding or farming in ways that mirror those of their ancestors. Though even here, as Morgan Liu points out, local products like horsemeat and handmade dombras sit alongside cheap goods from China, Turkey, and Pakistan and cassette recordings of The Beatles: “This is the recent globalization of Central Asia as seen from the bazaar.”[74] As a zone for shuttle traders from China heading to the lucrative markets of Europe, it is highly likely that this form of “bazaar globality” will only continue to rise in the future, perhaps fitting given Central Asia’s long history as a hub of world trade.

As discussed in the preceding section, the late 1980s saw a dramatic increase in Central Asia’s exposure to transnational Islam, with missionaries flocking to the region from other parts of the Dar al-Islam (Muslim world). Like global capitalism, transnational Islam is a key factor effecting an increase in the globality of the region in the post-1991 era. The manifestations of this transformation have ranged from incontrovertibly positive (e.g., renewal of the hajj, burgeoning cultural exchanges with fellow Muslim countries, and rebuilding of important Muslim sites along the Silk Road) to highly disruptive (the devastating civil war in Tajikistan between the government and Islamists, a spate of terror attacks waged by the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, and the reduction of women’s rights in certain parts of post-Soviet Central Asia). Regardless of the positive or negative outcomes, it is clear that Islam is functioning as a mechanism for globalization across post-Soviet Central Asia (though not necessarily as a tool for regional unification as each country is embroiled in its own, often difficult, process of coming to terms with the role Islam will play in the future).

The internationalization of political Islam has been recognized by the leaders of the Central Asian republics and neighboring China and Russia. In fact, one of the guiding principles of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), a regional security grouping that includes all CARs (except neutral Turkmenistan), Beijing, and Moscow, has cooperation against radical Islam as one of its tenets. Sébastien Peyrouse argues that many radical Sunni Salafist groups have a presence across the region (as well as in Muslim Russia) and contesting enduring forms of local Islam which survived the Russian conquest and Soviet totalitarianism.[75] In terms of globality, it is interesting that the “most global” of all Islamist parties, Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT),[76] thrives in Central Asia, despite being banned by national authorities in the region. Sustained through information and communication technologies which connect them to the Islamists in Great Britain and the Arab World, Central Asian adherents of HT’s pan-Islamist platform to reestablish the caliphate proselytize their message in Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and elsewhere in the region. Fears in foreign capitals of Central Asia’s potential “Wahhabification”[77] have triggered a robust engagement of multiple governments with regional leaders, tightly tethering Central Asian politics to global politics, further adding to the globality of the region by putting it on the mental maps of policymakers from Washington to Beijing.

Escaping the Chrysalis: The Soviet Legacy and Its Continuing Effects

The legacy of Central Asia’s cocooned globality under Soviet rule continues to determine, at least partially, the region’s relationship with globalization. While the leadership of the newly independent republics scrambled to build links to Europe, the United States and Canada, China, and even smaller states like South Korea and Singapore, there has been less transnational activity at the popular level. Globalization is as much a product of individual cultural and economic production (conducted on a mass scale) as it is an outcome of what states want. As Spechler points out, Central Asians have no diaspora in the West.[78] Instead, the majority of the region’s emigrants reside in Moscow.

While the Russian capital has a tenuous claim to the status of “global city,” i.e., a command point in the global economy,[79] Moscow’s globality continues to reflect the “world” (both economic and cultural) that was constructed through Soviet internationalism. Moscow is the global city of the former Soviet Union, but not a global
city in the mould of New York or London, as its links to the network of other global cities remains weak when compared with Shanghai, Mumbai, São Paolo, and other "global" cities.[80] While Amsterdam, London, and Paris all reflect their imperial pasts in their development as global cities, these metropolises are not defined by empire. The same cannot be said of Moscow, which owes its economic position almost solely to Soviet socio-economic structures that made it the center of the Marxist-Leninist ecumene (whereas St. Petersburg enjoys some lingering benefits from its role as the center of pre-Soviet Russophobia). Despite a flowering of bilateral relationships between the Central Asian republics and states from outside the post-socialist world, Moscow remains the metropolis (‘mother city’), reflecting both the current and older (read imperial) connotations of this concept. As a consequence, the globalism of the Central Asian diasporas tends to have a perceptible post-Soviet, Muscovite patina (though this is slowly changing as a small elite have taken up study in Western Europe, particularly Germany, and the United States).

The implications of Central Asia’s cocooned globality during the Soviet era are further underscored by Madeleine Reeves’ analysis of the “Janus-faced globalization” of Central Asia in a passage, which warrants quoting at length:

The idea ... that the Soviet Union was “free” and the current post-Soviet condition is, by contrast, one of restricted movement, perhaps rings unusually to Western ears...[Yet, there has been] a contraction of everyday, experiential geographies in the wake of the Soviet collapse; the transformation of places once familiar, once “ours,” into sites which remind of a changed status—comrade into alien, fellow-citizen into foreigner [alongside] the appearance of new boundaries, new points of exclusion, at the same time they are being dismantled elsewhere.[81]

The imposition of border controls between states which were once part of the same country, the political marginalization of minorities (ethnic Russians, Chechens, and other “non-indigenous” groups in Central Asia), the skyrocketing use of national languages at the expense of the old medium of “interethnic communication” (Russian), and the dismantling of Soviet-enforced economic interdependence between the five republics of Central Asia all make real the “new” boundaries which are materializing just as globalization is dissolving “old” boundaries associated with the Cold War. These economic, physical, linguistic, and cultural borders are a paradoxical side effect of globalization, which is ostensibly supposed to produce “supraterritorial,” “transworld,” or “transborder” relations between people, and erase the situation where social geography is entirely determined by territorialism.[82]

**Conclusion: The Once and Future Heartland?**

When viewing Central Asian history over the longue durée, it becomes apparent that no other region in the world has enjoyed and suffered from a more dramatic fluctuation in terms of its centrality. Using the nomenclature of globalization studies, I have attempted to open a dialogue on the historical and contemporary globality of Central Asia as a world region, focusing on but a few attributes of the region. From a historical standpoint, Central Asia provides a cautionary tale of how particular regions can see their influence and connections to the outside world evaporate as global conditions change. Once the center of world scholarship, the population centers of Central Asia declined and ultimately became redoubts of superstition and intellectual ossification. During the Soviet era, Central Asia provides a compelling example of what I termed “cocooned globality,” whereby a region can develop the hallmarks of globality without enjoying full and free access to the globalized world. In the final section of this essay, I attempted to highlight just a few of the agents and paradoxes of contemporary globalization in the region and identify the impediments to full-scale globality in the near term.

While Central Asia may continue to be a “forgotten core” in terms of the global system, the region situated at the heart of the Eurasian landmass clearly possesses certain attributes which guarantee its relevance to the globalized world of the twenty-first century. Whether or not the region can shed its peripheral status in the near term, however, remains to be seen.

[PDF]

**Notes**

Here, I quote Frederick Burnaby, who played a key role in the “Great Game” with his account of a trip to the interior of Central Asia entitled *A Ride to Khiva* (1875). The Christian missionary Samuel Marinus Zwemer echoes this view of the region in 1911, lamenting that the lands of Central Asia are today “unvisited,” though—as the author points out—this certainly was not the case during the days of St. Paul nearly two millennia earlier; see Samuel Marinus Zwemer, *The Unoccupied Mission Fields of Africa and Asia* (New York: Student Volunteer Movement for Foreign Missions, 1911), 2. So few Westerners had actually visited the region from thirteenth century through 1850 that Henry Lansdell saw fit to include them all in a footnote in his travelogue *Russian Central Asia* (1885); see pp. 457-459.


Following defeat in the Crimean War (1853-1856), the Romanov Empire focused its imperial ambitions on Central Asia. Over the next 50 years, Britain and Russia were set on a collision course in inner Eurasia as tsarist forces moved south from the steppes and British troops moved north from the Indian sub-continent. Espionage, proxy wars, and diplomatic hostilities characterized Russo-British relations in the region until the turn of the century, when both parties normalized ties fearing the common threat of a rising Germany.

In conducting research for this essay, I found that a search of “globalization” and “Central Asia” in EBSCO’s Academic Search Premier, billed as the “the world’s largest scholarly, multidiscipline full text database designed specifically for academic institutions,” fails to produce any articles prior to 2001, effectively arguing that it was only through that attacks of 9/11 that Central Asia entered into a state of globality (at least from the decidedly narrow perspective of Western academia).

Here, I draw inspiration from Wolf Schäfer’s contention: “One can speak about the globality of a city, nation, or region; and since there are many cities, nations, and regions, globalities are plural, comparable, and measurable;” see “Lean Globality Studies,” *Globality Studies Journal* no. 7, (accessed 18 March 2009).


Ibid.


[22] Ibid., 207.


[25] Schäfer, “Lean Globality Studies.” Schäfer envisions “lean” globality studies as a methodology that allows for the study of entities which are not yet fully globalized, but which have some measurable level of globality.

[26] As I will discuss shortly, the region was difficult for foreigners to reach during the early Soviet period (1922-1939) and under Romanov rule (1867-1917) due concerns about counter-revolution, pan-Turkism, and/or British imperialism.

[27] The most respected scholars in the field—including Martha Brill Olcott, Olivier Roy, Laura Adams, Pauline Jones Luong, Nozar Alaolmolki, and Rajan Menon—employ this definition in their writings.

[28] This distinction is reinforced by John Bartholomew & Son, Ltd.’s 1953 map “U.S.S.R. Kazakhstan Central Asia” (Plate 43) in The Times Atlas of the World. The map shows all five Soviet republics, thus conveying to the reader that Kazakhstan is separate from (though linked to) Central Asia.


[30] In a 2006 interview I conducted with Roman Vassilenko, then the chief government spokesperson for Kazakhstan in the U.S., he stated that he and the other diplomatic staff were initially disappointed when his country was placed in “Central and South Asia” rather than “Europe” when the U.S. Department of State reorganized its territorial bureaus. However, this later proved to be a blessing in disguise as Kazakhstan has proved to be the most stable and economically successful country in the region (alongside India), and, as one of twelve (rather than fifty-plus) countries, receives a great deal of positive attention.


[37] Warwick Ball states of the Silk Road: “The term was coined in the mid-nineteenth century by the Baron von Richthofen, a German geographer of Central Asia, to describe the largely imagined silk trade with China in Roman-Han times;” see Warwick Bell, Rome in the East: The Transformation of an Empire (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), 138.


[40] Starr, “Rediscovering Central Asia.”

[41] See Beckwith, Empires of the Silk Road, 177-180.

[42] An important exception being Khwarizm, which suffered from a quasi-genocidal response from the Mongols when the shah slaughtered Genghis Khan’s emissaries after first killing a delegation of 450 merchants under the Great Khan’s protection.

[43] According to Beckwith, the Littoral System began with the Vasco de Gama’s sea voyage from Europe to India: “The European discovery and conquest of the open-sea routes to the Orient and the Americas began Western European political, military, and cultural domination of the world,” a system that would persist through the nineteen century when Great Britain emerged as the global hegemon based on its command of the world’s oceans; see Beckwith, Empires of the Silk Road, 205.

[44] Here I depart from Schäfer’s definition of preglobal/protoglobal since he asserts that the preglobal era definitively ended with the European discovery of the Americas; see “The New Global History: Toward a Narrative for Pangaea Two,” Erwägen, Wissen, Ethik 14, no. 1 (2003), 75-88. My description of Central Asia as a protoglobal region is based on the premise of that the “Old World” (Europe-Asia-Africa) did, for all intents and purposes, represent the “globe” (or at least the world) until the end of the fifteenth century.


[47] While maps had always existed in some form, the Renaissance-era focus on empiricism, the “invention of America,” and the introduction of mass printing during the sixteenth century introduced a new era in cartography in which map-making became a scientific rather than a purely religious or artistic endeavor. For more on Europe’s cartographic revolution, see Ricardo Padrón, The Spacious Word: Cartography, Literature, and Empire in Early Modern Spain (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004) and P. D. A. Harvey, Maps in Tudor England (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 1994).


[49] The map is much more accurate and detailed than Copperthwaite & Co.’s “Russia in Asia and Tartary” (1853) which was printed more than decade later.

[50] With, of course, the important exception of the Aral Sea, which has shrunk to less than one-third of its original size due to Soviet-era irrigation schemes and climate change.

[51] Mackinder’s use of this term was far from revolutionary. In the opening line of his Central Asia: Travel in Cashmere, Little Thibet and Central Asia (1892), the explorer Bayard Taylor writes: “The name ‘Central Asia’ correctly describes, in a geographic sense, the heart of that continent.”


[53] Ibid.


[55] Mackinder’s intellectual alter ego Nicholas J. Spykman successfully predicted the central role of coastal or littoral control in world politics with his inversion of Mackinder axiom “Who rules the Heartland commands the World-Island” on its head, arguing: “Who controls the Rimland rules Eurasia; Who rules Eurasia controls the destinies of the world.” Spykman’s “Rimland” included the maritime Europe, the Middle East, and monsoon Asia; see Nicholas Spykman, The Geography of the Peace (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1944).


[57] Captain Arthur Conolly was the first to use the expression “The Great Game” in his mid-1800s correspondence to Henry Rawlinson, a fellow political office in British
India. Following Rudyard Kipling's use of the term in *Kim* (1901), it gained wide usage in Anglophone world and eventual Russia as well; see Robert Johnson, *Spying for Empire: The Great Game in Central and South Asia, 1757-1947* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2006).


[59] It is important to note that Jadidism was, in a way, an outgrowth of imperialism. According to Jo-Anne Gross, Russian colonization and the linking of the regional economy to Europe-dominated world trade created the economic space for new elites to emerge: namely, the Jadids; see “Historical Memory, Cultural Identity, and Change: Mirza ‘Abd al-‘Aziz Sami’s Representation of the Russian Conquest in Bukhara,” in *Russia’s Orient: Imperial Borderlands and Peoples, 1700-1917*, edited by Daniel R. Brower and Edward J. Lazzarini (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 203-226.


[61] A strange manifestation of circumscribed globalism, the Basmachi Rebellion (known locally as the Action for National Liberation) was a pan-Turkist, pan-Islamist guerrilla movement against the imposition of Soviet control over Central Asia. Enver Pasha, one of the leaders of the reformist Young Turk Revolution in the Ottoman Empire, joined the movement and attempted to reestablish the Caliphate in inner Eurasia. Curiously, Pasha’s goal of creating an anti-imperialist Islamist/Altaic constellation from Mongolia to Anatolia was taken up by Japanese nationalists and intellectuals a decade later; see Selcuk Esenbel, “Japan’s Global Claim to Asia and the World of Islam: Transnational Nationalism and World Power, 1900-1945,” *The American Historical Review* 109, no. 4 (2004): 1140–1170.

[62] Here, I date World War II beginning with the Japanese invasion of Manchuria rather than the German invasion of Poland. Reflective of this journal’s focus on globality, I find it proper to discard the Eurocentric lens when dating the conflict, particularly given fact that the subject of this essay (the Ferghana Valley—the “center” of Central Asia, according to Starr—is both 2,600 miles from the 1939 German-Polish border and the South Manchuria Railway Zone, site the Mukden Incident which began the Pacific War).

[63] Such a policy did not, in fact, represent a substantive break from the past. As Burnaby and other nineteenth-century British travelers to the region attested, Russian authorities were infamously reticent to allow the region to be opened to the West, fearing anti-Russian intrigues and a disruption of St. Petersburg’s economic control over the area.

[64] However, as Sorrentino points out, “resources and investments were allocated according to the center’s priorities, as a consequence there developed extremely lop-sided economies, devoted mainly to agriculture, especially cotton monoculture, extractive industries and energy, metallurgy (mainly in Tajikistan), heavy engineering (especially in Uzbekistan), petrochemical plants, and of course, military-industrial complexes.” See Liliana Sorrentino, “Globalization Implications for Central Asia,” in *Innovation and Market Globalization: The Position of SME's*, edited by Carlo Corsi and Ali Akhunov (Amsterdam: IOS Press, 2000), 115.


[66] Ibid., 615.


[71] As a result, it was not surprising that he bristled at Sacha Baron Cohen’s “Borat” parody of Kazakhstan as a backward and benighted, peopled by anti-Semites and misogynists; see Robert A. Saunders, *The Many Faces of Sacha Baron Cohen*.


[73] This seemingly odd combination of totems of globalization was witnessed and/or experienced by the author during a trip to Almaty in October 2002.


[76] HT operates in over 40 countries around the world and is headquartered in London. Ariel Cohen argues that HT employs a Leninist model of revolutionary cadres; however, HT’s model has been updated for the twenty-first century through a dominant focus on the use of decentralized ICTs, as well as language and tactics intended to produce an alternative mode of globalization based on radical Islam; see Ariel Cohen, “Hizb ut-Tahrir: An Emerging Threat to U.S. Interests in Central Asia,” The Heritage Foundation Backgrounder no. 1656 (30 May 2003).

[77] Derived from the name of the 18th century Arab Islamic reformer Muhammad ibn Abd-al-Wahhab, Wahhabism (Russian: vakhabizm) is used as a generic term by Russian and Central Asian governments to describe radical Islamists. In the wake of the Soviet-Afghan War, some returning veterans of Muslim descent brought back the radical ideals of the Afghan mujahideen. In the early 1990s, Saudi and Egyptian missionaries further spread an austere interpretation of Islam which promotes the use of Islamic law and is antithetical to Christianity and syncretic practices common among Muslims of inner Eurasia. Within the Central Asian Muslim community, Wahhabism is controversial, with many state-backed clerics decrying the influence of Saudi, Pakistani, and other foreign religious authorities.


[80] Operating outside the Bretton Woods system for most of the second half of the twentieth century left its economic mark on Moscow; its influence is determined mostly by its control of petro-wealth and transshipment of hydrocarbons, rather than its importance as a node in the information economy and world finance.
