

The New York Review of Books

Why, and What, You Should Know About Central Asia

AUGUST 15, 2013

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The Chinese Question in Central Asia: Domestic Order, Social Change and the Chinese Factor

by Marlène Laruelle and Sébastien Peyrouse

Columbia University Press, 271 pp., \$60.00

Great Games, Local Rules: The New Great Power Contest in Central Asia

by Alexander Cooley

Oxford University Press, 252 pp., \$29.95

Central Asia and Afghanistan: Insulation on the Silk Road, Between Eurasia and the Heart of Asia

a report by Shahrbanou Tadjbakhsh

Peace Research Institute Oslo, 62 pp., available at www.prio.no

Restless Valley: Revolution, Murder and Intrigue in the Heart of Central Asia

by Philip Shishkin

Yale University Press, 316 pp., \$28.00

China's Central Asian Problem

a report by the International Crisis Group

35 pp., available at www.crisisgroup.org



Jonas Bendiksen/Magnum Photos

An Uzbek patrol in the Fergana Valley, on the Uzbekistan–Kyrgyzstan border, 2002

On the freezing night of December 12, 1991, in the heart of Central Asia, I stood on the icy tarmac of the airport outside Ashkhabad, the capital of the Soviet Republic of Turkmenistan, watching as the five former Communist Party bosses and future presidents of the republics of Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan arrived wearing fur coats and hats. The honor guard, the military band, and the dancing girls holding frozen flowers went through elaborate drills, shivering all the while as the dignitaries' planes landed.

It was a critical moment in the history of the world. Four days earlier Boris Yeltsin, president of Russia, and the leaders of Ukraine and Belarus had signed a treaty dissolving the Soviet Union. The five republics were now suddenly independent but nobody had consulted the Central Asian leaders themselves. Angry, frustrated, fearful, feeling abandoned by their “mother Russia,” and terrified about the consequences, the leaders sat up all night to discuss their future.

It was strange to see the heirs of conquerors of the world—Genghis Khan, Tamerlane, and Babar—so cowered. They were tied to Moscow in thousands of ways, from electricity grids to road, rail, and telephone networks. Central Asia had become a vast colony producing raw materials—cotton, wheat, metals, oil, and gas—for the Soviet industrial machine based in western Russia. They feared an economic and social collapse as Yeltsin cast them out of the empire. That night a deputy Turkmen foreign minister told me, “We are not celebrating—we are mourning our independence.”

The next morning the leaders declared that they would all join the newly formed loose union called the Commonwealth of Independent States. There were doubts about the Central Asian states surviving and many of their 51 million people,

members of some one hundred different ethnic groups, began to decamp for Russia. The birth of new nations had never taken place under so much doubt, fear, and lack of confidence by the very people being liberated.

It is important to remember this background when we look at Central Asia today, twenty-two years later and facing another momentous change—the departure of US and NATO forces from Afghanistan in 2014. The Central Asian countries have survived in spite of repression and lack of reforms in all five states, a civil war in Tajikistan, and protests, massacres, and economic decline in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. Only the energy-producing states of Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan have become more prosperous. Kazakhstan's GDP per capita, now \$13,900 in US dollars, and Turkmenistan's GDP per capita of \$8,500 together represent two thirds of the total GDP of Central Asia, according to the CIA's *World Factbook*. In contrast, Tajikistan's and Kyrgyzstan's GDPs per capita each stands at little over \$2,000.

Since September 11 and because of Central Asia's borders with Afghanistan, the big powers—Russia, China, and ...

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