



Débats d'idées en Asie centrale

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Time to accept the idea of a "Greater Central Asia"



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Would it come to anybody's mind to talk about a “post-colonial” Algeria or Madagascar, or even to introduce those countries, first and foremost, as former “French colonies”? Did we ever talk, at any time in American History, of a Post-British United States? Of course, such strange designations would never come to mind. It does not mean that the colonial past is denied: but a country cannot be defined by one part of its past alone. In October 2018, a Ukrainian journalist, Maxim Eristavi, criticized, on twitter, the use of the term “former Soviet Republic” when talking about Ukraine and Georgia. He is rightfully pointing out that after nearly three decades of independence, countries that used to be part of the Soviet Union should not be necessarily defined by this recent past.

But one could argue that Ukraine or Georgia are not the main “victims” of such designation: this is Central Asia that is the most naturally seen as “post-Soviet” by researchers and journalists alike. And it partly explains why the region is often neglected in the analysis of international affairs, as an appendix of Eurasian (i.e. Russian) affairs or, at best, as one of the ‘chessboards’ (and rather a secondary one, for now) in the “new Great Game” between Russia, China and the US. To remedy such a situation, it is urgent to go beyond the Soviet past, and rethink the region from a more geopolitical point of view: hence the defense, in this paper, of the notion of “Greater Central Asia”.

“Post-Soviet States”, “Eurasia”, “Central Asia and the Caucasus”: unsatisfying notions to talk about Central Asia nowadays

Of course, there could be other ways to talk about Central Asia nowadays: one could think of using, for example, the geopolitical notion of Eurasia. But it is obviously too centered on Russia, bringing back the same issues that one can have when using the notion of “post-Soviet” countries. What happens in the Kremlin will continue to be of particular interest for the Central Asian states, and one cannot deny the particular political, economic, geopolitical, and human link between Russia and this part of the world. But the use of “Eurasia” or of “former Soviet Republics” make us naturally consider those links as set in stone, and bound to be of primary importance in Central Asian geopolitics. Both expressions say more about the analysts using them than about the area itself. It over-simplifies the Russian influence on Central Asia, and minimizes too much the impact of other states, as if the “Iron Curtain” was still a reality, despite the fall of the USSR. It might be relevant to talk mostly about Eurasia in the future if Moscow expands even more its importance in the region, and is able to supplant



other important forces, like the EU, the US, and China, from this particular part of the world. At this particular time, such outcome seems unlikely, at least in the years to come. Most importantly, if the goal is for journalists and academics to avoid missing geopolitical evolutions in Central Asia in the coming years, there is a need to keep away from associating too directly, one way or another, Central Asia to its former imperial ruler. Last, but not least, the notion of Eurasia, would have to include the Caucasus, but also other countries neighboring Russia, like Ukraine or Belarus, if one tries to give the region a historical, linguistic, and geopolitical unity. It nearly brings us back to the USSR under a different name, puts again Central Asia as a periphery under *de facto* Russian influence, and does not consider the fact that the region is not protected by a Soviet bubble any longer.

If it is a necessity to stop defining Central Asia as “post-Soviet” or broadly speaking as a former Russian colonial territory, it is also important to avoid using again the notion of “Central Asia and the Caucasus” that was pretty common after the fall of the URSS, at least in the Western world. Such term was influenced by the desire to talk of this area while refusing to connect it to Russia in any way, which is as intellectually simplistic as insisting on this particular link to Moscow by talking about “Post-Soviet” states. Plus, this particular term, like the fact of talking about “former Soviet” states or of Eurasia, was also linked to a simplistic way of thinking the area, focused on energy-related interests coming from the West alone. With the rise of China, and the importance of Asian powers in energy-related projects, such particular approach does not make much sense. More importantly, South Caucasus and Central Asia are more and more distinct from a geopolitical point of view. The former has a much more complicated relationship with Russia (influence of the tensions with Georgia to this day, and a more important influence of the competition between Moscow and the West in this part of the “post-Soviet” area), and is much more connected to the Near Eastern geopolitics, notably through the regional countries’ links with Israel and / or Iran. As for Central Asia, here again, as the “Iron Curtain” does not exist any longer, the choices made in China, and the political evolutions in Afghanistan, have a tremendous impact on its future, which is not the case for the South Caucasus. Broadly speaking, if one wants to find a region for the South Caucasus, its place is in the more neutral “West Asia”, term already used in English-speaking countries, rather than in “Eurasia” or “Central Asia and the Caucasus”. As for Central Asia, its geopolitical future is too different from South Caucasus to see those two areas associated in one region.

Why talking about “Greater Central Asia” makes sense

Hence the interest of talking about “Greater Central Asia”, that associates “post-Soviet” Central Asia and Afghanistan. This notion, coming notably from the work done by Frederick Starr, a pillar of Central Asian studies in the US, has several advantages:

- it takes into account long-term cultural, historical and human links, between Central Asia and northern Afghanistan;
- it associates together countries that are linked to each other, for better and for worse, when it comes to geopolitics or security: Central Asia needs stability in Afghanistan if it wants to



eradicate the scourges that are jihadism and drug trafficking. But in the same way, one of the conditions for rebuilding Afghanistan over time is for its neighborhood to be at peace and to prosper: Pakistan of course, but also Central Asia, as its economic development could have a tremendous impact on northern Afghanistan;

- it avoids the problem one could have with the other alternatives analyzed above: it does not define the region through the influence of, or the opposition to, a particular great power. Actually, both Afghanistan and Central Asia can benefit from the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) from China, from a strong Russian diplomatic and geopolitical influence, *and* from an American and European presence.

- One might argue that what makes the idea of "Greater Central Asia" even stronger nowadays is that the Chinese BRI will need to succeed, on land, in this territory as a whole (and in Pakistan) for this important project of President Xi Jinping to be seen as a breakthrough as a whole, that would define Chinese importance in the next few decades. Through the new Chinese influence, the notion of "Greater Central Asia" is particularly relevant.

Some might object that Central Asia and Afghanistan are nowadays "too different" to be seen as one region, especially from a societal point of view. But one might argue that geopolitics has nothing to do with society: it is a mix of History, geographic imperatives, political, economic and security-related interests. Most importantly the goal here is not to see a geopolitical region as a sealed block disconnected from its regional neighbors. It would make no sense to negate the Soviet Iron Curtain between Central Asia and Afghanistan and to impose another one between Afghanistan and Pakistan, "twin brothers" according to former Afghan President Hamid Karzai, or between Central Asia and Russia. Afghanistan can also be seen as part of others regions by its History, culture, and geopolitical position: at least a South-West Asian region (Iran – Pakistan – Afghanistan) and South Asia. But the notion of Afghanistan in Greater Central Asia helps to stop seeing this country only through the traditional regional competitions between India, Pakistan, and Iran, and reminds that Afghanistan is not Pashtun only, but also Tajik, Uzbek... The same way the notion of Greater Central Asia can help us to think about Central Asia without connecting it only to Russian-related issues, it gives us the possibility to re-think Afghan present and future as a multicultural, multiethnic country, that would benefit to see itself less like Jacobine France and more like the Swiss Federal state.

Hence the notion of "Greater Central Asia" is not some ideological choice associating countries to declare that they are a new, rigid unit: it is, first and foremost, a convenient notion that considers historical, human, economic, security-related, and geopolitical factors that bring those countries closer together. Most importantly, like the term "West Asia" rather than "Middle East", "Greater Central Asia" has the essential advantage to be *neutral* towards great power politics, and does not let the states in the area be defined first by the influence of any given power. It helps to think those countries for themselves, and not through Russian or American national interests, which has too often been the case in the past few years, in



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many analyses about Central Asian nations or Afghanistan. It is indeed striking that on fieldworks in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan or Afghanistan, analysts might hear the same complaint, that foreigners are interested about the region only for motives external to the region: rivalry between the US and Russia, the US and China, the US and Iran... The notion of Greater Central Asia does not negate those “new great games” but does not let them define the geopolitical analysis of the region. Indeed, rather than Russia and America’s national interests, a proper analysis of Central Asian and Afghan affairs ask for a focus on regional security, economics, geopolitics... and such subjects make more visible links between the different countries of “Greater Central Asia” that are impossible to deny.

Rather than to oppose the notion, Central Asian intellectuals should integrate it in their own analysis, and make it theirs. And rather than to see it as a rigid notion, accept it as more fluid, more “elastic” than usually seen. Without necessarily using the term “Greater Central Asia”, Uzbekistan is following the spirit of such notion by investing itself in the Afghan peace process. Less visible than Zalmay Khalilzad, in charge of the talks with the Taliban for the United States, the Uzbek Foreign minister Abdulaziz Kamilov has also established links with the Taliban as well as with Kabul, and could help bringing the rebels and the Afghan government to the negotiating table. It shows that an important Central Asian state understands that the Afghan fate is not foreign to its own future. And that even if the Uzbek means are modest in comparison to the ones of the US or of Russia, it should not wait for other powers to find a solution to a never-ending war that is dangerous for the future of all the peoples of “Greater Central Asia”.