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A Brief Journey into Central Asia

By Diane Chido and Aidai Tynybek kyzy
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Author Note: The following article delves into the five former Soviet countries in Central Asia and why they matter today. It is the third part of a series on understanding the complexity of Russian and Eurasian ethnicities in the context of geopolitical rivalries. The first installment focused on [Russia's multicultural society](#) and the second was a [general overview of Central Asian history](#).

I am pleased to write this piece with Aidai Tynybek kyzy, a Kyrgyz undergraduate student at Gannon University, who collaborated with me on this and the prior piece. Aidai is a Political Science and Legal Studies major who plans to study law. She served as an intern with the Jefferson Educational Society in Fall semester 2023.

Central Asia is a collective designation of the five countries in that region that used to be part of both the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union illustrated on the map.^[1] Since 1991, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan are independent countries attempting to chart their own paths, while Russia and China compete for influence in all of them. The U.S. also has an interest. This is a neighborhood that has been on critical global trade and invasion routes over the past two millennia.



Map of Central Asian Countries

All of these Central Asian countries are landlocked, although Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan both share western borders with the inland Caspian Sea. The region is bordered by Russia in the north, China in the east, and Afghanistan, Iran, and Pakistan in the south. They are all inhabited by people who are generally Muslim by religion and generally Turkic in language and culture. They also have varying Russian, Chinese, and other ethnic populations.

Selected Demographics of Central Asian Countries					
	Total Population (in millions)	Majority Ethnic Group	Primary Minority Ethnic Group	Majority Religion	Primary Minority Religion
Kazakhstan	19.5	Kazakh (70%)	Russian (18%)	Sunni Muslim (70%)	Eastern Orthodox (26%)
Kyrgyzstan	6.1	Kyrgyz (74%)	Uzbek (15%)	Sunni Muslim (90%)	Christian (10%)
Tajikistan	9.2	Tajik (84%)	Uzbek (15%)	Sunni Muslim (93%)	Sh'i'a Muslim (3%)
Turkmenistan	5.7	Turkmen (72%)	Russian (12%)	Sunni Muslim (88%)	Christian (6%)
Uzbekistan	31.4	Uzbek (84%)	Tajik (5%)	Sunni Muslim (98%)	Eastern Orthodox (9%)
<i>Country Data From CIA Worldfactbook</i>					

Chart of selected demographics created by authors

Central Asians have preserved their nomadic traditions and are known for their hospitality and oral traditions in which music, dance, and storytelling play a significant role. Handcrafts, such as ceramics, embroidery, metal work, and carpet weaving, contribute to their vibrant cultural tapestry. They also have differences from each other culturally, politically, economically, and historically, although most of their governments are relatively autocratic and elections are typically not considered free nor fair.

Kazakhstan

Kazakhstan is the world's largest landlocked country, nearly the size of all of Western Europe, with a diverse landscape featuring a vast plain, deserts, mountains, and the Caspian shoreline. Kazakhstan has by far the largest landmass and the second largest population after Uzbekistan, as noted in the chart, which has a much smaller land area.^[ii] Kazakhstan is also the most diverse with only 70% of its population made up of ethnic Kazakhs, and 18% Russian. While all five Central Asian countries are mainly Sunni Muslim, Kazakhstan has the largest single religious minority with 26% identifying as Eastern Orthodox. These factors give neighboring Russia significant influence in Kazakhstan.

Today, Kazakhstan's capital is Astana, but it wasn't always. From 1929, the capital was Almaty, renamed Akmola upon independence in 1991. In 1997, then-President Nursultan Nazarbayev moved it to its current location in a remote northern plains region with notoriously freezing cold winters and renamed it Astana. The new capital was built in a grandiose style befitting an autocratic ruler who stayed in power for three decades. When he stepped down in 2019, his hand-picked successor, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, renamed the capital Nur-Sultan in Nazarbayev's honor.

Despite Nazarbayev still retaining control over the security council, the name change did not prove popular with many Kazakh parliamentarians, and Tokayev agreed in late 2022 to change it back to Astana.^[iii] While Parliament sometimes asserts itself, as noted, the political system remains generally more autocratic than democratic. Kazakhstan has pursued a policy of neutral diplomacy, maintaining good relations with both Western and Eastern powers, and has been actively involved in international organizations. It also hosts Baikonur Air Base, from which Russia and other countries launch spacecraft.

Kazakhstan is the wealthiest country in Central Asia with significant reserves of oil, natural gas, minerals, and metals. The country is a major player in the global energy market and has begun to diversify its economy in recent years, emphasizing sectors such as agriculture, finance, and technology. Kazakhstan has actively sought foreign investment and economic partnerships.

In January 2022, protests spread across the country initially in opposition to a doubling of fuel prices, which are heavily subsidized by the federal government. These protests were essentially leaderless and drew opposition from groups not only against inflation, but unemployment, low wages, no collective bargaining power, and the corrupt and autocratic government established by Nazarbayev.

After the protesters set fire to government buildings and occupied the main airport, Tokayev branded them “foreign terrorists,” turned off internet access, issued a “shoot to kill” order, and requested assistance from the Cooperative Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), which sent 4,000 mainly Russian troops to violently put down the uprising.

In the end, 12,000 people were arrested, and many others, including journalists, disappeared. Ultimately, Tokayev canceled the fuel-price hikes, removed Nazarbayev from the security council as well as many of his old guard allies from top official positions, with several found dead due to alleged suicide. It is still unclear what the long-term outcome of this shakeup will be, but few analysts expect a full democratic shift.^[iv]

Kyrgyzstan

The Kyrgyz Republic is the country’s official name. Bishkek is the capital and largest city with Osh as its second city; almost half of the population lives in these two urban areas. Nearly 90% of the country is in the Tian Shan and Pamir Mountain ranges. Kyrgyzstan boasts stunning natural beauty, with glaciers and alpine meadows. Lake Issyk-Kul, a prominent geographical feature, is one of the largest mountain lakes in the world.



Traditional Kyrgyz yurt on Issyk-Kul

Kyrgyz music, dance, and epic poetry (such as the "Manas" epic) play a significant role in preserving cultural heritage. Yurts, traditional nomadic

dwelling made from felt, (example shown in the graphic), are still used for various purposes, including celebrations and festivals.

Kyrgyzstan's economy is primarily based on agriculture with both crops and livestock, plus gold and uranium mining. Remittances from Kyrgyz migrant workers abroad, particularly in Russia, also play a crucial role in the country's economy.

Kyrgyzstan has experienced political turbulence since its independence from the Soviet Union in 1991. Askar Akaev became the country's first president in 1991 and played a significant role in the early years of Kyrgyzstan as an independent nation. But over the years, Akaev was accused of corruption and falsifying votes during the parliamentary election in 2005, which resulted in the "Tulip Revolution" that overthrew Akaev in favor of Kurmanbek Bakiyev. In 2010, Bakiyev also faced mass protests, driven by economic issues and authoritarianism. He was also overthrown, and his departure caused the government to shift from an executive to a parliamentary system.

Recent massive protests occurred after allegations of voter fraud during the 2020 presidential election when the public accused President Sooronbay Jeenbekov of fraud. In response, Jeenbekov voluntarily resigned, and Sadyr Japarov became president. Japarov has since been attempting to revert to executive authoritarian control.

Due to the revolutions and freedom of press, Westerners had considered Kyrgyzstan "a democratic island," unlike its neighbors. But in recent years, and after Sadyr Japarov implemented new laws targeting independent media or any oppositionists in the parliament, the progress of democratization in Kyrgyzstan has slipped backwards.

The main social problem in Kyrgyzstan remains high levels of corruption, which has become an integral part of life. Not only are Kyrgyz politicians to blame for corruption, but also citizens and civil society, which actively engage in corruption to pass exams, get education, avoid arrest from law enforcement, obtain documentation, and in business matters. Although achieving political stability has been a struggle in this relatively new independent nation, Kyrgyzstan needs more time and support to do so.

Tajikistan

Of all Central Asian countries, Tajikistan had the most difficult transition to independence after the collapse of the Soviet Union. They were beset almost from inception by a five-year civil war between what are conventionally called the "Communists" and the "Islamists." After the war, questions remained about how the new country would be governed and what its culture and politics would

be without Soviet dominance. The situation has become more complicated as several opposition groups vied for power.

The end of the war was brought about with the help of the Kettering Foundation, where my (Diane) former husband worked at the time. His superior, former State Department official Harold “Hal” Saunders, had developed a dialogue process that led to success and is still called the “Tajikistan Dialogue” approach today. Within the Tajikistan Dialogue framework, all sides were given a safe space with honest brokers to air their grievances and state their desires for the future country. A negotiation process ensued, creating a government in which the opposition groups could participate. Saunders had been instrumental in drafting the Camp David Accords, a peace agreement brokered by United States President Jimmy Carter’s administration in the 1970s.

The country has remained essentially at peace since 1997, but it is by far the poorest in the region and the people still suffer under relatively poor governance under Emomali Rahmon, a former Soviet official who has been president of Tajikistan since 1994. The country is at a low level of development with Russia providing aid and security to keep it together. Tajikistan has also been enhancing relations with China, ceding land to China to settle a century-old border dispute in 2011.

On the border of Afghanistan, Tajikistan is a U.S. partner working with the U.S. Department of State to resolve Tajikistan’s many challenges, including “underdeveloped border security, widespread corruption, inadequate health and education systems, and food and energy shortages. Regional threats include violent extremism, terrorism, and the trafficking of narcotics and weapons.”^[v]

Turkmenistan

Turkmenistan is characterized by diverse landscapes, including the Karakum Desert, the Caspian coastline, and the Kopet Dag mountain range. Ashgabat is the capital and largest city. At 6.5 million, Turkmenistan has the lowest population of the Central Asian republics. It is home to a predominantly Turkmen ethnic majority, with Uzbek and Russian minorities.

Turkmenistan's economy is heavily reliant on natural gas and oil exports. The country has significant natural gas reserves and is a major player in the global energy market. However, economic diversification has been a challenge, and efforts are being made to develop other sectors such as agriculture and textiles. Turkmenistan follows a policy of neutrality in international affairs and has focused on maintaining diplomatic relations with various countries and organizations. It is the only Central Asian country that borders Iran.

Turkmenistan has sought to attract foreign investment to boost its economy but has a reputation for being one of the most closed countries in the world.

Turkmenistan is a presidential republic, and the political system is characterized by a strong, autocratic executive branch. Longtime President Saparmyrat Niyazov, who ruled from 1985 until his death in 2006, was a North Korean-style authoritarian who was given the honorific name “Turkmenbashi,” or “Leader of Turkmen.” His autocratic successor, Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov, is widely believed to be Niyazov’s illegitimate son. The political environment is marked by stability, but this is achieved through a one-party system with strict limitations on political freedoms.

Uzbekistan

Uzbekistan, officially the Republic of Uzbekistan, has primarily flat terrain, with the Kyzylkum Desert covering a large part of the country. The fertile Fergana Valley is a notable geographical feature. Thus, Uzbekistan's economy is largely dependent on agriculture and natural resources. Uzbekistan is the most populous Central Asian country with Tashkent as its capital. The majority of the population is Uzbek, with significant Tajik, Kazakh, Karakalpak (an indigenous Turkic group), and Russian minorities.

In the Soviet period, the region was known for its especially tasty watermelons, and as an aside, I (Diane) had a close friendship with a Russian family while living in Moscow in the late 1980s, whose father was the director of six Uzbek silk factories. Uzbekistan is still the world's largest producer of silkworm cocoons per capita and is the world's third largest producer after China and India by volume. Strictly enforced silk production quotas have led to disputes with producers over labor rights.



Silkworm cocoons [vi]

Today, the country is also a major exporter of cotton, gold, and natural gas. In recent years, there has been an effort to diversify the economy, with a focus on industrialization and infrastructure development. The government has undertaken economic reforms to attract foreign investment and promote private-sector growth.

Uzbekistan has experienced political stability under the leadership of President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, who came to power in 2016 after the death of Soviet-era leader Islam Karimov. Mirziyoyev has implemented a series of reforms aimed at modernizing the country, including economic liberalization, opening up to foreign investment, and improving relations with neighboring countries. The political system is characterized by a strong presidency, and the country has made efforts to engage diplomatically with the international community.

In the 1990s, Uzbekistan was beset by the emergence of violent Islamic extremist groups, most notably the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), which claimed responsibility for the 2004 bombing of the U.S. embassy in Tashkent, the Uzbek capital. The bomber and two security personnel were killed. In 2014, the IMU participated with other groups in a siege of the international airport in Karachi, Pakistan that killed 37 people. Today, the IMU is believed to be based in the perpetually unstable Pakistan Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) bordering Afghanistan and is in partnership with elements of the Taliban and former Islamic State groups.[vii]

The U.S. State Department reports that Uzbekistan has effectively managed this threat by actively participating in multinational anti-extremist organizations, and the government and non-governmental organizations use “advertisements, counter messaging campaigns, and training to prevent violence and radicalization of at-risk nationals and labor migrants. Law enforcement has shut down channels for spreading violent extremist propaganda and promoting terrorism on social media, particularly on the popular Telegram messaging application.”^[viii]

Why Central Asia Matters to Geopolitics Today

Central Asia is often overlooked as a backwater best left to Russian and Chinese management, but the area is rich in natural gas and minerals and more not yet discovered. It is a dramatic landscape of extremes with a relatively homogeneous population that is still an important global crossroads.

[i] “Central Asian Countries: Learning to Live Next to the Taliban,” *Orbis*, Vol. 66, Issue 3, 2022, pp. 391-401 available [here](#), accessed on December 27, 2023

[ii] Table created by author, data from *CIA World Factbook* available [here](#), accessed on January 15, 2024

[iii] “Kazakhstan to change name of capital from Nur-sultan back to Astana,” *The Guardian*, September 13, 2022 available [here](#), accessed on December 27, 2023

[iv] “Behind the Unrest in Kazakhstan,” *International Crisis Group*, January 14, 2022 available [here](#), accessed on December 30, 2023

[v] “U.S.-Tajikistan Relations,” *U.S. Department of State*, available [here](#), accessed on January 24, 2024

[vi] An Economist vs Uzbekistan’s Silk Industry: Whose Facts Matter? *The Diplomat*, October 5, 2023 available [here](#), accessed on January 24, 2023

[vii] Counter Terrorism Guide: Groups - Central Eurasia and Central Asia Terrorism, *Director of National Intelligence, Counter Terrorism Guide*, available [here](#), accessed on January 15, 2024

[viii] “Country Reports on Terrorism 2022: Uzbekistan,” *U.S. Department of State Bureau of Counterterrorism*, available [here](#), accessed on January 15, 2024

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