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## THE WIDER WORLD

### *Central Asia: The Great Game in the Modern Context*

By Diane Chido and Aidai Tynybek kyzy  
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*Author Note: Following is the second of a three-part series on the complexity of Russian and post-Soviet ethnicities in the context of geopolitical rivalries. The previous installment focused on [Russia](#), while this is a general overview of Central Asian history. The final part of the series will delve into the five former Soviet countries in Central Asia and why they matter to us today.*

*I am pleased to introduce Aidai Tynybek kyzy, a Kyrgyz undergraduate student at Gannon University who collaborated with me on this piece and will do so again on the next one. Aidai is a Public Service and Global Affairs major who plans to study law. She served as an intern with the Jefferson Educational Society in 2023 during the fall semester. – Diane Chido*

To the delight of my Central Asian students, I strongly believe that this region is one of the most pivotal in geopolitics. “The Great Game,” a largely overused term of questionable aptness, historically referred to the intense geopolitical rivalry and strategic competition between the British and Russian Empires in the 19th century over the broader region, with Afghanistan as a key focal point. Both players suffered high casualties and eventually lost, which caused Afghanistan to be dubbed “The Graveyard of Empires.” This name was fitting regarding the Soviets, who invaded in 1980 and pulled out without gain a decade later and served as an unheeded warning for the U.S. 2001 invasion that only ended after 20 years just as ignominiously.

Rather than discussing Afghanistan itself in this article, Aidai and I will take a swift 14th century journey from the coalescing of rival Turkic tribes across the region to today's five Central Asian independent countries.

To begin with, it is important to note the difference between *Central Asia* vs. *Middle* [i][iii]. **Central Asia** was the Soviet name for the region that included the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR), Kyrgyz SSR, Tajik SSR, Turkmen SSR, and Uzbek SSR. These republics were collectively referred to as Central Asian Soviet Socialist Republics. Modern "Central Asia" generally refers to the region composed of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan because it emphasizes the geopolitical and cultural ties among these nations, highlighting their shared history during the Soviet period and their common challenges in the post-Soviet era.

**Middle Asia** is a broader definition that refers to a geographical region, which may include the former Soviet republics but also neighboring countries, such as Afghanistan and parts of China, Iran, and Pakistan. It is often associated with historical trade routes and cultural interactions that extend beyond the borders of the former Soviet republics.

### **Turkization**[iii] **from the 6<sup>th</sup> century CE & Mongol invasions**[iv]

The loosely governed Turkic Khaganate in the 6th and 7th centuries CE, shown on the first map,[v] played the main role in the Turkization of Central Asia. As a nomadic state, it exerted influence over a vast territory from the Pacific Ocean to the Black Sea. The Turkic Khaganates not only influenced political structures but also introduced Turkic languages, customs, and nomadic governance and legal frameworks to once diverse tribes and ethnic groups in Central Asia.

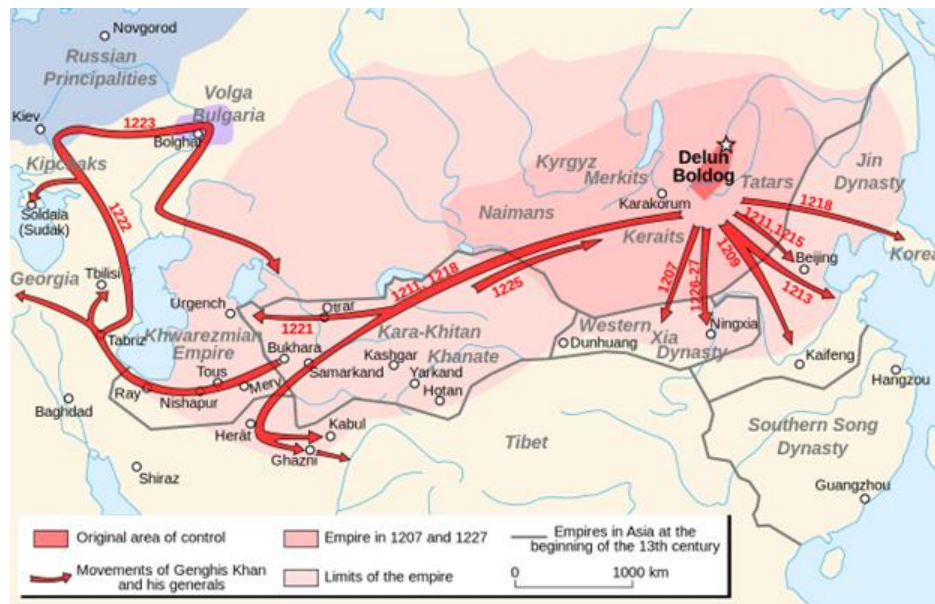


*Map of Turkish Khaganate in mid-6th century CE*

Arab invasions in the region originating in today's Middle East in the 7th century introduced Islam to Central Asia, with the conquest of Qutayba ibn Muslim, a soldier who'd go on to be an administrator of Merv in 651, in today's Turkmenistan, marking a significant turning point in the region's religious and cultural landscape.

Merv was used as a base for continued Arab expansion in the region. After the collapse of the Arab Caliphate in the 9th century, the local Samanid dynasty of Persian origin established itself, contributing to a fuller adoption of Islam that led to the development of Islamic architecture, education, and legal systems in Central Asian societies. The Kara-Khanid Khaganate, emerging in 999 CE, re-invigorated Turkization after its conquest of key historical regions in Central Asia. Thus, Central Asia modeled a blending of Turkic and Islamic institutions.

The Mongol invasion by Genghis Khan from today's China in the early 13th century, shown on the second map,<sup>[vi]</sup> left an enduring impact on Central Asia. Genghis Khan initially had no intention of attacking Central Asia, but in 1218, he sent a delegation led by a trusted envoy to the Khwarazmian Empire, a Turko-Persian Sunni empire comprising areas of today's Afghanistan Central Asia, and Iran, ruled by Shah Muhammad II.



*Map of Mongol invasion routes*

These Mongol ambassadors were mistreated and killed by Shah Muhammad, which prompted Genghis Khan to launch a military campaign against the Khwarazmian Empire in 1219. He took the entire region in just two years.

Mongol invasions were characterized by brutal sacking and destruction of many urban centers, including Bukhara and Samarkand in today's Uzbekistan, which led to the displacement of populations, economic decline, and integration of Central Asia into the larger Mongol Empire. This all occurred during the Crusades with the Holy Roman Empire, which was also involved in the conflicts among Arabs, Mongols, Persians, Turks, and others.

### **Role in Silk Road<sup>[vii]</sup> and Ottoman Empire**

Central Asia served as a key crossroads for trade and cultural exchange along what is often called "the Silk Road." Merchants from China, India, Persia, and the Mediterranean would converge across Central Asia to exchange goods, ideas, and technologies. Central Asia was mainly inhabited by nomadic tribes of Turks and Mongols who played a significant role in facilitating trade as middlemen, providing protection to traveling cargo caravans, and contributing to the spread of cultural and technological advancements.

While Central Asia underwent its gradual conversion to Islam, Muslim merchants and scholars traveled throughout the region to spread Islam to different parts of Asia. Key cities, such as Samarkand and Bukhara, and Osh in

modern Kyrgyzstan, became trading hubs and centers for learning, where scholars from different cultures and civilizations gathered.

The Ottoman Empire, briefly discussed in a previous [piece](#) on Palestine, was established in about the year 1000 CE by Osman I, a Turkish tribesman from a powerful family that had been negotiating cooperative trade and defense agreements among various Turkic tribes for generations to stem the tide of constant invasion. Central Asia was a strategically important source of resources and cultural influence. The region provided the empire with access to valuable goods and influenced the diversity of arts and sciences. Economic and cultural connections with Central Asia also strengthened the political power of the Ottoman Empire in the region by controlling trade routes and ensuring the security of travelers.

### **Russian Empire<sup>[viii]</sup> and Soviet Union**

In the 19th century, the Russian Empire sought to secure its southern borders and access trade routes, leading to the annexation of Central Asian territories and the establishment of the Turkestan Governorate. Individual Central Asian khanates resisted, but through military campaigns, Russia gradually brought these territories under its control. The conquered regions were administratively reorganized into the General-Governorate of Turkestan in 1867, solidifying their integration into the Russian Empire. This annexation triggered additional cultural and social changes, with efforts to Russify the region through language promotion and educational initiatives.

The October Revolution of 1917 in Russia resulted in the establishment of the Soviet Union. This coincided with World War I, a multifaceted conflict commonly viewed as a European effort to carve up the declining Ottoman Empire. The Bolshevik government initially recognized the independence of some Central Asian states to gain their support in the ensuing Russian Civil War, but later re-integrated the region into the new political entity. The 1920s and 1930s saw the establishment of the Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Tajik, Turkmen, and Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republics (SSRs), with collectivization and industrialization transforming traditional agrarian societies.

During World War II, Central Asia played a significant role in the Allied victory, contributing resources and manpower. Post-war, further industrialization occurred, and the Soviet era persisted, marked by demographic shifts as Russians and other Slavic groups migrated to Central Asia. With the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the Central Asian republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan emerged as sovereign nations, *officially* ending the Russian and Soviet eras in Central Asia.

## **U.S.-Russian clash over military bases**

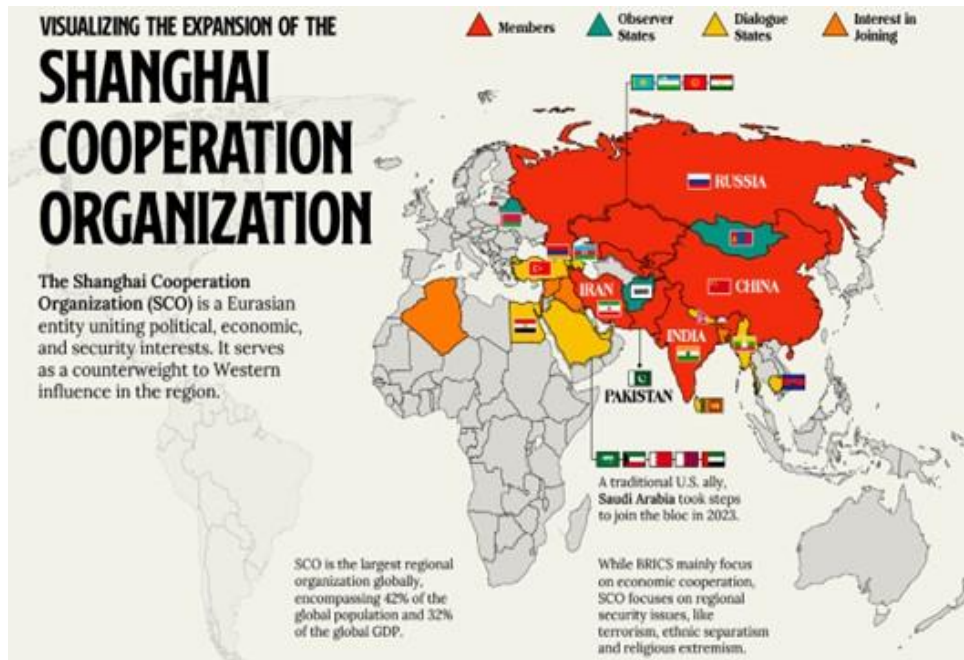
With the expansion of maritime exploration and trade in the 15th and 16th centuries, as well as air transport in the 20th, Central Asian overland routes gradually lost their importance in global trade. This changed in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, as the United States sought Central Asian countries' permission for flyover rights and to lease former Russian military bases as staging areas for supplies to support operations in Afghanistan. These provided strategic locations for logistics and intelligence activities.

Countries such as Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan hosted U.S. military facilities, and the U.S. airbase at Manas in Kyrgyzstan played a crucial role in supporting Afghan operations. In 2014, however, it was closed after the Kyrgyz government decided not to renew the lease. The presence of U.S. military bases in the region raised concerns in Moscow, as it perceived this as an encroachment into an area it views as its own sphere of influence.<sup>[ix]</sup> Some Central Asian nations have sought to maintain a delicate balance between their relationships with both powers, while others have tilted more toward one, or the other, based on their geopolitical and economic interests.

Russia has engaged in military cooperation with Central Asian countries through various mechanisms, such as the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), a regional security alliance that includes several Central Asian nations and has been a platform for military collaboration. The U.S. war in Afghanistan also influenced the strategic calculations of China, the U.S., and Russia in Central Asia. All three powers have interests in ensuring stability in the region and preventing the spread of extremism and terrorism, but as China and Russia both border the region, they are also vying for political and economic influence.

## **Shanghai Cooperation Organization<sup>[x]</sup>**

In 2001, China launched the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), to enhance regional cooperation. The roots of the SCO were spread through the negotiation process regarding the settlement of border issues among Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Russia with China after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Uzbekistan's joining the Shanghai Five in 2001, as well as the need to respond to the terrorist threat in the region, led to the further institutionalization of the Shanghai Forum. At the time, China feared Central Asia might become a pipeline through which radical Islamic groups and ethnic separatism could spread to China, especially through its western Xinjiang region, home to Islamic Turkic Uyghurs. The SCO also served as a bulwark against U.S. encroachment, as manifested by China's refusal to give the U.S. observer status in the organization in 2005, leading some to describe it with concern as an Eastern alternative to NATO.<sup>[xi]</sup>



*Map of Shanghai Cooperation Organization members with status indicated*

The functional expansion of the organization by granting observer status to Afghanistan, India, Iran, Mongolia, Pakistan, as well as dialogue partners Belarus, Sri Lanka and Turkey attracted additional attention to the activities of the SCO and gave impetus to the formation of a more than regional format for discussing issues of security, economics, and humanitarian cooperation.

In 2005, the SCO obtained “observer status” in the United Nations Security Council and has since added Iran, Egypt, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia as dialogue partners, as indicated on the third map.<sup>[xii]</sup> This is a rowdy mix of countries with often competing strategic interests, so it will be interesting to observe (unofficially) how it develops under the auspices of the U.N.

Another Chinese strategic influence effort is the **One Belt One Road (OBOR)** initiative launched by President Xi Jinping in 2013. This is a comprehensive infrastructure and economic development vehicle for multilateral collaboration involving not only China but also Central Asian nations, Afghanistan, Africa, Europe, and beyond as indicated on the fourth map.<sup>[xiii]</sup>



*Map of China's One Belt, One Road Initiative*

Collaborative efforts under OBOR are designed to address security challenges and to foster a more secure and interconnected region with Chinese investments in infrastructure providing incentives for involvement. Made up of the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, the initiative aims to bolster regional connectivity and economic development.

Some observers note that the concept of “The Great Game”<sup>[xiv]</sup> has always been a misnomer, suggesting that Central Asia is a great chessboard upon which the “great powers” of Britain (or the U.S., as its successor), China, and Russia vie for influence with mutually recognized rules, an opportunity for adventure, and no role for the peoples of Central Asia to play. In addition, the Silk Road is also an oversimplification, as spices and many other goods traveled along these multiple regional trade routes, not just silk directly from China to Europe.<sup>[xv]</sup>

There is much worth watching in Central Asia today, assuring the region retains considerable global importance, shaped by its abundant energy resources, geostrategic location, and continuing role in international trade and transportation. The region's significance is underscored by its status as a crossroads between Europe, Asia, and the Middle East, now often used for human, drug, and arms smuggling rather than silk and spices. These factors make it a focal point for geopolitical interests and economic initiatives.

In the next installment, we will delve into the Central Asian countries themselves, as they are not homogeneous nor monolithic and are carving out their own development paths and influence as independent nations despite all this “great” interference.

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- [xv] “Central Asia’s Catechism of Cliché: From the Great Game to Silk Road,” *Eurasia.net*, July 25, 2017 available [here](#), accessed on December 27, 2023

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Diane Chido is an Erie native who spent her early career in Washington, D.C, returning to found DC Analytics, a research and analysis firm. She has taught Intelligence Studies at Mercyhurst University, Political Science at Gannon University, and Cultural Analysis at the US Army War College and has conducted research for numerous US defense agencies. She holds an MS in Applied Intelligence Analysis, an MA in Russian Language, and a BA in International Relations and Soviet Studies.





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