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UZBEKISTAN IN MODERN WORLD

- Ўзбекистон замонавий дунёда ■
- Узбекистан в современном мире ■

Gregory R. Copley

Uzbekistan Re-Emerges as the Strategic “Heartland of the Heartland”*

Uzbekistan is emerging as the “strategic surprise player”, galvanizing the Silk Road and Central Asia.

Central Asia is still, and once again, the pivot of the “world island”, as British geographer Sir Halford Mackinder indicated in his 1904 Royal Geographical Society article [1]. And now — as with the 14th Century age of Timurlaine [2] — Uzbekistan has re-emerged as “the heartland of the heartland”.

Significantly, Uzbekistan has been largely ignored in strategic thinking by the Western, mainly maritime, powers because it is one of only two nation-states which is doubly landlocked; that is, it must cross two other states to reach the sea. For the first 66 of its now 96 years of its existence as a modern republic (starting in 1924 with the creation of the Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic), it was also submerged within the Soviet Empire. And yet Uzbekistan is re-emerging with much of its deep historical identity as the nation of Timur, not just as a significant new Eurasian continental influence, but also as a significant aspect of the Indian Ocean strategic matrix [3].

Uzbekistan and its post-Soviet Central Asian neighbors have developed sophisticated state structures, including armed forces and foreign

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policy and intelligence capabilities, as well as a modern transportation and communications infrastructure, and more market-related economies since 1990. But Uzbekistan has, since late 2016, begun to punch above its weight in regional and world affairs, and in shaping a market economy more attuned than many of its neighbors to the global environment.

The Cold War of 1945-1990 reaffirmed the centrality of Mackinder's theory, with the constant battle by the Western powers over more than four decades to ensure that a Sino-Soviet rift could be exploited to avoid dominance of Eurasia by a communist partnership. It succeeded.

Today – although the West forgot its Cold War/Mackinderish lessons and pushed post-Soviet Russia into the arms of the People's Republic of China by rejecting acceptance of Russia into the West – the former Soviet states of Central Asia have begun, on their own, to coalesce into a *bloc*. And at the heart of that *bloc* is Uzbekistan.

It is a *bloc* which geopolitically provides a wedge of separation of Russia and the PRC, and, significantly, becomes part of the greater Indian Ocean trading basin as well as a decisive factor within Eurasia. But

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by creating a cohesive alliance of interdependent Central Asian states – a process significantly advanced by the Tashkent Summit of November 29, 2019 – the *bloc* also contributes to the economic wellbeing of both Russia and the PRC, offsetting for both those powers the reality that the Central Asian states also serve to break up the monolithic dominance of the “world island”.

It would be difficult for this grouping to attain cohesion and strategic impact without Uzbekistan.

The Central Asian region began a new era with the collapse of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics in 1990-91. Most of the states are now in the second generation of transformation since that time. Even though the transitional period of Uzbek economic growth from 1990 (the Uzbek Parliament on August 20, 1990, declared the country a sovereign entity) until 2016 was highly significant, it was with the death of founding Pres. Islam Karimov (announced on September 2, 2016) that Uzbekistan moved to a truly new era. The effects of the 2016 transition on Uzbekistan's society and capabilities were almost as profound as the declaration of independence in 1990, even though the nominal GDP ranking of the country suffered badly in the first couple of years of the post-Karimov era as incoming Pres. Shavkat Mirziyoyev – the former Prime Min-

ister — moved to positively transform the levels of public trust in the Government by eliminating areas of corruption and inefficiency.

Uzbekistan, freed from the USSR, remained under Pres. Karimov a command economy, gradually modernizing. But with the move to Pres. Mirziyoyev, Uzbekistan moved rapidly to become a market economy and an open, liberal democracy. What has been surprising has been the speed and

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calmness with which this transition has occurred, particularly with the effectiveness of moves toward a relatively corruption-free business environment, and the holding of truly transparent parliamentary elections on December 22, 2019.

The International Strategic Studies Association (ISSA) undertook a monitoring mission on these elections, which were not only pronounced as free, fair, and transparent, but also a model of sound electoral practice. The evolution of stable, representative governance in Uzbekistan is evident, and popular participation in the process was well in evidence during the election.

Today, the capital, Tashkent, and other Uzbekistan cities are alive with activity. Investment is growing dramatically along with the formation of new capital markets. Inward tourism has soared, unsurprisingly given the significant and spectacular attractions of Samarkand, Bukhara, and the Silk Road destinations in the Ferghana Valley.

Paralleling the rise in tourism (numbers doubled from 2017 to 2018, to some five-million; and grew again substantially in 2019), the security, crime, and corruption situations also transformed for the better. The relative freedom of narco-traffickers, coming from Afghanistan to transit Uzbekistan, was ended; business practices, particularly with the Government, became increasingly transparent.

The transformation of the society was, by the end of 2019, becoming profound, and the implication for Uzbekistan’s strategic future was equally significant. Most Uzbeks in 1990 spoke at least Uzbek and Russian and possibly one more dialect; today, with a growing emphasis on foreign language education from the earliest levels, most Uzbeks speak additional languages. English is widely used.

Uzbekistan does not have the largest economy of the five landlocked former Russian/Soviet Central Asian states, but it has overwhelmingly the largest population. In-deed, most states in the region are still recovering economically after the declines which hit the region — and much of the world — in 2013-14. But Uzbekistan remains the geo-political cross-

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roads linking the region to the south and the Indian Ocean, and in the East-West Silk Road, and it remains a cultural heartland.

	Pop. 2020	GDP 2018
Uzbekistan	33.24m	\$50.50bn
Kazakhstan	18.78m	\$179.34bn
Turkmenistan	6.03m	\$40.76bn
Tajikistan	9.54m	\$7.52bn
Kyrgyz Rep.	6.52m	\$8.09bn

When stability reaches a notch higher in southern neighbor Afghanistan, it will be the rail links from Uzbekistan which will link Central Asia through Afghanistan to Pakistan and thence to the Indian Ocean ports of Gwadar and Karachi. At that point, the strategic *bloc* of Central Asia will start to incorporate two other “stans”: Afghanistan and Pakistan. As well, the *bloc* is already linked across the Caspian Sea with Azerbaijan.

The missing piece of the geopolitical jigsaw, for the moment, is Iran. India has hopes of reaching into Central Asia via rail links it is sponsoring from the Iranian Indian Ocean (Arabian Sea) port of Chah Bahar, northward along Iran’s eastern frontier and into Afghanistan. But the evolution of that link awaits a resolution of Iranian strategic isolation.

In 1939, as World War II was erupting in the West, Uzbekistan had a population of only 6.55-million. Indeed, at that time the identity of the nation as Uzbekistan was only some 15 years old. The Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic was formed in 1924. Despite this, the Uzbeks in the Red Army suffered 330,000 military deaths in World War II, fighting away from their territory for the USSR in the war against Germany. Another 220,000 Uzbek civilians died in the war. But, in some measure of compensation, the war saw the Soviet Union move much of its industry east of the Ural Mountains and into Central Asia, to protect it against the German invasion.

But it would be a mistake to believe that the identity of the Uzbek people and their capability for unified action stemmed from the creation of that Uzbek soviet state in 1924.

The Uzbeks descend from a Mongol- Turkic people who inhabited the region which later became part of Turkestan in the 15th Century. Even then, the region had been a major trading area along the overland routes to China. In the 14th Century, Samarkand had become the hub of Timurlaine’s vast empire. Before that, in 1220, the region had been overrun by Mongols under Genghis Khan. The Uzbeks consolidated in the 16th Century and gradually established a system of khanates and emirates.

The area did not come under the control of the Russian Empire until the 1860s. The emirates of Khiva and Bukhara became protectorates of the Russian Tsar and the region became known as Turkestan.

The fall of the Tsar in 1917 led to instability and a series of revolts against the new Russian overlords, the bolsheviks. The bolshevik Red Army conquered the region in 1920, bringing it into the new USSR. The Soviets divided Turkestan into the republics of Turkmenia (now Turkmenistan) and Uzbekistan. The Soviet objective was to create identities loyal to Moscow, not to pan-Turkism.

While by then impoverished, the Uzbek Republic was rich in minerals and agricultural lands and the Soviet Union continued the old imperial system of extracting its raw materials for the benefit of industry elsewhere in Moscow’s domains. For example, it provided 30 percent of the gold mined in the USSR. Even today, gold remains Uzbekistan’s most valuable source of foreign earnings, along with oil and gas, and followed by rapidly-expanding high-value agricultural exports and tourism.

In the manufacturing sector, Uzbekistan’s automotive industry — established since 1992 — is now building some 200,000 vehicles a year, exporting to Russia and other CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States) nations. The industry, built around GM Uzbekistan

(of which General Motors in the US owns 25 percent), UzDaewooAuto, and SamKochAvto, imports steel coil from Russia and advanced technology parts from the Republic of Korea, significantly integrating the country into the Eurasian (Silk Road) supply chain. A separate company, GM Powertrain Uzbekistan, in which GM of the US has a 52 percent stake, is producing auto engines for global export.

Within the Ministry of Health, an Agency on Development of the Pharmaceutical Industry has been created to help attract foreign investment and technology into the expansion of a major pharmaceuticals sector which aims to service much of Eurasia.

By the 1980s Uzbekistan also produced two-thirds of Soviet cotton. As the prestige of local politicians and managers was tied in with this, more extreme measures were taken to expand production. Heavy use of fertilizers caused widespread pollution and health problems. Associated irrigation schemes created an ecological disaster in the Aral Sea and the rivers flowing into it.

The 26,300 square miles (68,000 sq. km) Aral Sea, which extends from Kazakhstan into Uzbekistan’s autonomous Republic of Karakalpakstan,

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was still complete in its water area at 1960, but was virtually without water by 2016. It had been the fourth largest body of inland water, with an average depth of 53 ft (16m), but with a maximum depth of 226 feet (69m) off the western shore. The disappearance of the Aral Sea, due to the Stalin-era (early 1950s) water diversions of the two major rivers feeding the Aral Sea – the Amu Darya and the Syr Darya – to cotton irrigation was one of the largest human-engineered environmental disasters on record.

As with everything else in the country, the Armed Forces and security services underwent a profound modernization when Pres. Mirziyoyev took office. A new defense doctrine was approved by law on January 9, 2018, which showed a distinct orientation toward information warfare and psychological operations in support of conventional and unconventional warfare. It also showed a focus on advanced technology capabilities and operations to counter disruptions to state infrastructure and to manage transborder issues.

But the issue is now being addressed, both in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. In Kazakhstan, which holds the northern portion of the Aral, the World Bank, in the 1990s, funded an \$87-million project to build a 12km (7.5 mile) dyke – the Kokaral Dam, completed in 2005 – across the narrow channel linking the North Aral Sea with the South. This captured what little water was flowing into the Sea. And then,

with improvements to existing channels of the Syr Darya river, which flows northward from the Kazakh side of the Tien Shan Mountains, the flow of water into the North Aral improved. Water levels in the North Aral rose 3.3m in seven months after the dam was completed, and the fishing industry resumed. A plan to raise the height of the dam, and therefore the North Aral Sea, is progressing.

In the South, in the Uzbek Republic of Karakalpakstan, the issue is more difficult, so the initial task has been to address human concerns in the region as a first priority; then ecological concerns regarding the stabilization of the seabed with plant life; and then finding ways to improve the efficiency of irrigation methods to ensure that agriculture can be sustained while restoring water flow back to the Aral. All three aspects have made significant progress, and my visit to the South Aral Sea port city of Muynaq with Jusipbek Sidikbekovich Kazbekov, First Deputy Chair on Environment and Development of the Aral Sea Region in the Karakalpakstan Council of Ministers, gave strong evidence of that. Kazbekov was trained at the University of Colorado in irrigation engineering.

The once nearly-abandoned city of Muynaq has been dramatically revived, and the fishing industry and grazing have re-started in and around the lakes of the region. The economy and the ecology are on the move again.

In the strategic sector, highly-professional and well-funded think-tanks support the President and the Minister of Foreign Affairs. The Institute for Strategic and Regional Studies functions under the President; the Center for International Relations Studies functions under the Foreign Minister. The University of World Economy and Diplomacy functions under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, with a dedicated Center for International Economic and Political Studies.

In the defense sector, Uzbekistan inherited a manpower base trained in the Soviet Armed Forces, along with an array of Soviet equipment. It had, on independence in 1990, created a Ministry on Matters of Defense, which soon reorganized as the Ministry of Defense. And on January 14, 1992, the Supreme Council of the Republic adopted a resolution taking all military units, military educational institutions, organizations and other military establishments within the country under the Uzbek Government.

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In August 2017, Pres. Mirziyoyev issued a presidential decree to remove the National Guard, the internal paramilitary policing organization, as one of the military’s branches of service and made it an independent institution, but placed under the Defense Ministry as of January 2018. In July 2019, the Government amended its criminal code, giving the Guard expanded authority.

There had been military basing and training in Uzbek territory for the best part of a century, and much of it was, after independence, incorporated into the Academy of the Armed Forces of Uzbekistan, established in 1994, to serve all branches of the Uzbek Armed Forces (Ground Forces, Air and Air Defense Forces, and Naval [riverine] Force). It incorporated the Tashkent Higher Combined Arms Command School of the Soviet era, and is housed in an extensive facility in Tashkent, where significant dedicated faculties specifically focus on the military practices of Eurasian (including Western European) and global military operators.

The Academy — which functions at officer training, command and staff, and war

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college levels — focuses strongly on the 3,000 years of military history of the country, with the iconic presence of Amir Timur setting an identity for the Armed Forces. Many senior serving Uzbek officers have had extensive combat experience during the Soviet era, particularly with operations in Afghanistan.

Uzbekistan's Armed Forces have consistently been ranking highly in professionalism, particularly with the Mirziyoyev reforms which have given real impetus to pay, conditions, military education, and equipment.

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Footnotes:

1. Mackinder, Sir Halford John: "The Geographical Pivot of History", article for the Royal Geographical Society, London, 1904. He described the "world island" as comprising the interlinked continents of Europe, Asia, and Africa (Afro-Eurasia), and the heartland at the center of this, stretching from the Volga to the Yangtze and from the Himalayas to the Arctic. In 1919, Mackinder summarized his theory as: "Who rules East Europe commands the Heartland; who rules the Heartland commands the World-Island; who rules the World-Island commands the world", because by his estimates the "world island" would control more than 50 percent of the world's resources.

2. Timur (1336-1405), the founder of the Timurid Empire in Persia and Central Asia, was born and was buried in what is now the Republic of Uzbekistan. He was known during his lifetime as Amir (or Emir: noble leader, commander) Timur, or Timur-i lang (Timurlaine or Tamerlaine), Persian for Timur the Lamé. He shared an ancestor with Genghis Khan (d. 1227), the Mongol conqueror. Timur conquered more territory than anyone else but Alexander the Great. Towards the end of his reign, Timur controlled all the remnants of the Chagatai Khanate, the Ilkhanate, and the Golden Horde. He also attempted to restore the Yuan dynasty in China. He was born at Kesh, some 50 miles south of Samarkand, the son of a lesser chief of the Barlas tribe, and it was through him that Timur claimed to be a descendant of Tumbinai Setsen, a male-line ancestor he shared in common with Genghis Khan.

3. See, Copley, Gregory R.: "Central Asian Events Mark a Significant Strategic Shift" in *Defense & Foreign Affairs Special Analysis*, December 2, 2019.

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