

The Central Asia– Afghanistan Relationship

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**From Soviet Intervention to
the Silk Road Initiatives**

Edited by
Marlene Laruelle

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List of Acronyms

ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
BOMCA	Border Management in Central Asia
BRICS	Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa
CACI	Central Asia Counter-Narcotics Initiative
CACI	Central Asia–Caucasus Institute
CADAP	Central Asia Drug Awareness Program
CAREC	Central Asian Regional Economic Cooperation
CASA-1000	1000 Electricity Transmission and Trade Project for Central Asia and South Asia
CIS	Commonwealth of Independent States
CPSU	Communist Party of the Soviet Union
CSTO	Collective Security Treaty Organization
DIAG	Disbandment of Illegal Armed Groups
DOSAAF	Volunteer Society for Cooperation with the Army, Aviation, and Navy of the Soviet Union
EaEU	Eurasian Economic Union
FATF	Financial Action Task Force
FDI	Foreign direct investment
FSB (<i>Federal’naia sluzhba bezopasnosti</i>)	Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation
FSKN (<i>Federal’naia sluzhba Rossiiskoi Federatsii po kontrol’u za oborotom narkotikov</i>)	Federal Drug Control Service of Russia

GRU (<i>Glavnoe razvedyvatel'noe upravlenie</i>)	Main Intelligence Agency of Russia
GUAM	GUAM(Georgia– Ukraine–Azerbaijan–Moldova) Organization for Democracy and Economic Development
IGO	intergovernmental organization
IMU	Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan
IRPT	Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan
ISAF	International Security Assistance Force
ISAF	International Security Assistance Force
KGB (<i>Komitet gosudarstvennoi bezopasnosti</i>)	Committee for State Security of the Soviet Union
KhAD (<i>Khadamat-e Aetla'at-e Dawlati</i>)	State Intelligence Agency of Afghanistan
Komsomol (<i>Kommunisticheskii soiuz molodezhi</i>)	Young Communist League of the Soviet Union
MFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NDN	Northern Distribution Network
NGO	nongovernmental organization
NUG	National Unity Government
OBOR	'One Belt, One Road'
OSCE	Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe
PDPA	People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan
RFE/RL	Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty
SCO	Shanghai Cooperation Organization
SDN	Southern Distribution Network
SNB (<i>Sluzhba natsional'noi bezopasnosti</i>)	Uzbekistan's National Security Service
TAPI	Turkmenistan–Afghanistan– Pakistan–India Pipeline
TRACECA	Transport Corridor Europe–Caucasus–Asia
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Program
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNODC	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime
WTO	World Trade Organization

Introduction

Marlene Laruelle

Geographically-based interpretations of world affairs have invaded the media, and the policy and expert communities along with it. Some regions of the world seem subject to an excess of geographic metaphors, which is the case for the Central Asian region, among others. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union more than two decades ago, Central Asia has been cast as the “south” of the former Russian empire, as the eastern pole of Washington’s “Greater Middle East,” as the new “Great West” of China, as the “Greater Central Asia” linked to South Asia, as the “Caspian region” with a history of conflict between Russia and Iran, and as a “Central Eurasia” where Slavic, Turkic, Persian, and Chinese cultures meet. Central Asia thus seems to make sense in international affairs mainly in terms of its geographic location: it is always set in a spatial relationship with another region or country.

Two main metaphors fuel this view of the region, both having the particularity of being at once geographical and historical: the Great Game and the Silk Roads.

The notion of the “Great Game” is an updated version of the nineteenth-century Orientalist reading of the region, shaped by a romantic attraction to a mystical and mysterious “East,” which it endows with a smack of colonial adventure.² The term refers to the conflicts of interest that arose between Tsarist Russia and the British Empire under Queen Victoria in Central Asia, Afghanistan, and Tibet, and speaks as much to public opinion as it does to decision-makers.³ At issue is not classical armed conflict but an unspoken struggle based on cultural and commercial sway that uses scientific knowledge as a weapon along with methods of disinformation and discrete fights for influence—all elements that reflect astoundingly well the strategies of the post-Cold War world. Nonetheless, this alleged revival of the “Great Game” must be dismissed. First, the Central Asian states are not mere pawns subject

to competition between great powers. They are independent and resilient actors that have divergent views of their geopolitical environment and are able to manipulate external actors' intentions to fit their own agendas.⁴ Second, there is no longer any binary opposition between two major powers in Central Asia, as was once the case between Saint Petersburg and London; on the contrary, there are many actors, and therefore many potential games of alliance and competition. China has become a major piece of the puzzle, and many nonstate actors are influential as well. Third, Central Asia cannot be conceived merely as a region of conflict between great powers: it is also a space of complementary distribution and negotiation.

The Silk Roads metaphor is more complex, as it has had more solid success in the policy realm. The allegory is used by both domestic and external actors to anchor themselves in a Braudel-inspired *longue durée*—a way to circumvent the image of post-1991 Central Asia as uncharted territory for international affairs. In his book *Myths of Empire: Domestic Politics and International Ambitions*, Jack Snyder illuminates how mythmaking offers a shortcut for the legitimation of domestic policy by providing a latent pool of malleable national symbols to validate the foreign policy agendas of states.⁵ These mythologized frames enable policy actors to legitimate their foreign policy decisions to domestic public opinion in accordance with their own specific political and economic objectives and to find a common language by which to formulate their involvement in world affairs. The Silk Roads allegory can be analyzed in this framework. It is a mythmaking process that allows Central Asian states to explain their positioning on the international scene to their own domestic audiences, and external actors to justify their involvement in the region.

In a seminal review essay, Alfred J. Andrea reminds us that the Silk Roads are a historiographical construct.⁶ Since the last third of the nineteenth century, European (especially German) Orientalists have studied the ancient and medieval continental trade between Asia and Europe, interchangeably using the terms “Silk Road,” “Silk Roads,” and “Silk Routes.” The geographical focus has shifted over time. Far from being a single road between China and the Mediterranean Basin—like the route taken by Marco Polo—historical studies have demonstrated the existence of multiple routes, reaching Kievan Rus, the Indian Ocean, the Red Sea, and the Horn of Africa. Alfred J. Andrea and Scott Levi define the historical Silk Roads as “a complex network of caravan routes across the heart of Central Asia that connected and cross-fertilized the peoples and cultures of the Afro-Eurasian Worlds, [and that] flourished from about 100 BCE to circa 1350 CE, with five periods of particular vitality. Long before the advent of the global ‘world system,’ the Silk Road served as a major medium for economic and cultural exchange, and constituted a true Afro-Eurasian System.” It is this “major medium for economic and cultural

exchange” that now so fascinates the policy community, which is hankering after a grand design to frame its strategic interests.⁷

In both Europe and North America, cultural rediscovery of the Silk Roads predates the political use of the concept. This region of the world, which had disappeared from the Western mental atlas during the Cold War, reappeared suddenly during the late 1980s, at first focusing mainly on China’s Xinjiang region and then incorporating post-Soviet Central Asia. In 1988, UNESCO inaugurated a major 10-year program on the study of the Silk Roads, defined as “Roads of Dialogue,” marking a departure from the Cold War geographical imaginary.⁸ UNESCO funded dozens of projects throughout the region, but China played a critical role, due to the rapid expansion of its tourism sector and the rehabilitation of its Buddhist past, highlighted in particular by the huge International Dunhuang Project. In 2002, the Smithsonian Institution’s Folklife Festival on the National Mall in Washington, DC, was devoted to the Silk Roads, and its title, “The Silk Road: Connecting Cultures, Creating Trust,” was an obvious rejoinder to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.⁹ The Smithsonian project was only the tip of the iceberg of a massive process promoting the history, culture, and arts of the Eurasian-Asian continent and propagating classic Oriental clichés about Silk Roads, desert landscapes, silks, spices, and forgotten cultures. The scholarly community, too, played an indirect role in popularizing the notion of the Silk Roads. The birth and framing of the new discipline of world history, looking at interactions and exchanges that transcend the classical regional approaches of area studies, contributed to turning the Silk Roads into a legitimate historiographical object.¹⁰

Since the mid-2000s, the image of the Silk Roads has also been linked, in the United States in particular, with the project of reviving the notion of the “Afghanistan neighborhood”—that is, of reintegrating Afghanistan into its regional environment, especially by creating a new relationship between post-Soviet Central Asia and South Asia. During his trip to Central Asia in November 2015, Secretary of State John Kerry—the first US secretary of state to visit all five Central Asian republics in one trip—stated: “We are promoting connections across the region to what we call our New Silk Road Initiative, which will link Central and South Asia in four key areas: energy, trade and transit, customs and border operations, and connecting businesses and people.”¹¹ The authorities of the five Central Asian states, like the external actors engaged in the region, follow this same trend and often open their official speeches with a rhetorical formula about the region being at the “crossroads of the world.”

And yet, for experts on Afghanistan, the mental map they project of the country’s regional environment tends to highlight in flashy colors Pakistan, the brother/enemy India, and Iran, and to obscure Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan,

Tajikistan, and China. The long northern border of Afghanistan, at more than 2,000 kilometers, is indeed the least known part of the country's neighborhood. And yet, historically, northern Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan were part of Transoxiana, and the main dynasties and empires that developed in that part of the world included both what is today Afghanistan and a large part of what is today Central Asia. Afghanistan itself, created as a buffer state between Victoria's Great Britain and Tsarist Russia in the last years of the nineteenth century, became an object of competition between the Soviet Union and the United States in the 1950s and again during the mujahideen war in the 1980s, and then a proxy tool during the civil war in the 1990s. Today, the regional context has profoundly changed: no neighbor wishes to reengage in an open proxy war that could be costly in terms of spillover. However, this does not mean that Afghanistan's neighbors do not have their own strategic agendas for the region or that they do not factor Afghanistan into a broader, region-wide, geopolitical calculus.

The future of "Afghanistan's neighborhood" is often discussed in terms of American interests in the region and the games for geopolitical supremacy that oppose Pakistan, India, China, and Gulf countries, to name only the main ones. But very few people start by inquiring into the premises of this notion. Does being in the "Afghanistan neighborhood" mean anything? Can one trace an enduring shared identity by dint of being Afghanistan's neighbor? Or is it merely an illusion produced by the international community's recent focus on the country? All the countries surrounding Afghanistan have other, much more important neighbors, and none consider Afghanistan to be their "main other" in identity terms. Even when Kabul impacts directly on a neighbor's domestic stability, it is not considered the dominant neighbor: Pakistan remains more focused on India, and Tajikistan on Uzbekistan. Afghanistan is also relatively low on the agendas of Iran, Russia, China, and India, as well as the other Central Asian states, ranking well below more pressing foreign policy issues.

Moreover, this "Afghanistan neighborhood" identity did not really appear as a driver for regional identities until the Soviet withdrawal in 1989, and thus was mainly symbolized by the Afghan civil war and the spoiler role played in it by the "proxies" of neighbors. After the fall of the Taliban regime in late 2001 as the United States retaliated for the 9/11 attacks, the regional character of the Afghan question, deemed to be the cause of decades of drama, was marginalized and indeed denied. The prevailing assumption was that internationalization of the Afghan question would be the solution, and Afghanistan's neighbors were themselves relieved to see the massive Western presence, even if they criticized it. The "Afghanistan neighborhood" only returned as a key theme in the second half of the 2000s, accompanying preparations for the withdrawal of NATO's International Security Assistance Force (ISAF).

This return is the logical result of both a success and a failure: of a success because, once rebuilt and recognized, the Afghan state rejoined its regional environment; of a failure because the region's role is often seen as a last resort for what is considered the failure of American policy to liquidate the Taliban as a political force.

This "Afghanistan neighborhood" identity is now expressed through two major narratives: the Silk Road one, which is used whenever the point is to valorize the success of rebuilding the Afghan state; and the spillover one, invoked whenever the aim is to emphasize the failure of Western policy or the need to keep the West involved. These narratives are like two faces of the same coin, used simultaneously by local and international actors to express their relationship to Afghanistan. But if both narratives must be understood as ideological constructs, not as objective descriptions of realities on the ground, then what remains of this regional identity? Probably only an entanglement of temporalities and territorialities.

When Afghans state ironically that "the Americans have watches, the Taliban have time," they are expressing something fundamental. The international community's focus on Afghanistan is characterized by its transience: the short duration of the military intervention (albeit that twelve years of maintaining a large-scale presence is already a very long in terms of the temporality of armies); the short attention span of shifting media perspectives, thus influencing public opinion about what is urgent and what is not; the relatively short shelf life of international aid; and changing Western bureaucracies, which, marked by the rapid turnover of civil servants and high-level senior officials, have very brief institutional memories. It is this temporal criterion that has marked the international community's response in regard to Afghanistan: once the Afghanistan question was seen as a race against the clock, the West lost the ability to shape the narrative.

Despite some important, but potentially short-term, successes—in terms of security, improvement of health, and access to education for women, for example—the durability of the US footprint in Afghanistan is questionable. The projected sustainability of the country appears to be wishful thinking: the Afghan state does not generate enough revenues to manage a centralized state structure with an expensive army and law enforcement agencies, trafficked drugs remain the main export of the country, and it would be impossible to redistribute rents in such a way as to further limit intra-elite competition. The central state survived the political transition from Hamid Karzai to the National Unity Government, but there still seems to be little evidence of sustainable progress toward peace and stability; US forces continue to be modestly involved in combatting the Taliban and launching air strikes against ISIS (or so identified) targets. Meanwhile, as the United States was signaling an intention to withdraw from the region, the Chinese were announcing

a commitment to long-term engagement through the One Belt, One Road project (OBOR), launched in 2013. Even if OBOR remains very imprecise on Afghanistan and focuses mostly on its neighbors, it nonetheless confirms China's new ambitions on its continental side and its will to integrate its western neighbors into a global strategy of connecting with the Middle East and Europe. Russia, for its part, has been less and less convinced of the need to keep the United States involved in Afghanistan, having come to the view that nothing really serious can happen there that cannot be managed from the Amu-Darya border—the former Soviet border and now the border of the independent Central Asian states.

In many respects, the current agendas of the United States and the international community have little to do with political realities on the ground in Afghanistan. For decades, the international community has thought in a normative way about how to transform Afghanistan; in contrast, Afghanistan's neighbors do not uphold a rigid normative agenda. Rather than the short-term temporalities of the West, they have longer-term perspectives. Afghanistan is seen as a neighbor, for better or worse; failures and successes are never definitive, the Western presence is ephemeral, and geopolitical reasoning insists on "civilizational" fundamentals: at stake in Afghanistan is not the name of the future president, but rather territorial cohesion, ethnic composition, the role of religion, and economic prospects. To be in the "Afghanistan neighborhood" thus means juggling multiple temporalities, those of a longer duration specific to territorial proximity, and those of short duration imposed by the international community.

Similarly, Afghanistan's neighbors have to deal with multiple geographical scales. For each neighbor, territorial proximity to Afghanistan has specific ramifications. Pakistan's undelimited border with Afghanistan along the Durand Line impedes its own statehood, while Tajikistan's porous, 1,400-kilometer-long border brings its own set of challenges. On the other hand, Uzbekistan shares only a 137-kilometer-long border that is well monitored, while China considers the remote Wakhan Corridor to be almost a "non-border" with Afghanistan. Multilevel territoriality can also be at work in one and the same country: for Iran, bordering Afghanistan entails both the commercial dynamism of trade exchanges between Mashhad and Herat and bloody skirmishes against drug traffickers in the Khorasan desert. These multiple territorialities imply that Afghanistan's neighbors apply the international community's scale in dealing with Afghanistan as a classic nation-state, but also combine that with other, more specific, scales: border issues, cross-border exchanges (whether legal or illegal), strong regional identities opposed to central control, regional disparities in terms of socioeconomic development, and so on. Being Afghanistan's neighbor thus means being able to manage both state-to-state relations with Kabul as well as local dynamics over which the state may have little leverage—in the Federally Administered

Tribal Areas (FATA) and Baluchistan for Islamabad, the Gorno-Badakhshan region for Dushanbe, and Xinjiang for Beijing.

The “Afghanistan neighborhood” identity can thus be defined as a multiplicity of both temporal and territorial layers not shared by the international community. This makes the Afghan policies of the neighbors particularly complex and paradoxical, but also flexible and fluid: total disengagement is not an option due to territorial proximity, and this makes the room for pragmatic compromise wider. At least three recent books have looked at Afghanistan’s regional environment: Aglaya Snetkov and Stephen Aris edited *The Regional Dimension to Security: Other Sides of Afghanistan* in 2013,¹¹ Amin Saikal and Kirill Nurzhanov edited *Afghanistan and Its Neighbors after the NATO Withdrawal* in 2016,¹² and Kristian Berg Harpviken and Sharhrbanou Tadjbakhsh published *A Rock Between Hard Places: Afghanistan as an Arena of Regional Insecurity*,¹³ in 2016. Our edited volume takes a slightly different approach in that we do not deal with all of Afghanistan’s neighbors, but rather focus exclusively on the Central Asia–Afghanistan relationship over a longer historical span—the nearly forty years between the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the publication of this book. Over these four decades of interaction, we encounter many ups and downs, with patterns of conflict as well as of cooperation, mutual ignorance, and sudden revival of interests and interactions.

The first part of the book addresses the legacy of the Soviet intervention with a chapter by Artemy M. Kalinovsky and a selection of unique first-hand interviews with Central Asian Soviet soldier-internationalists, or *Afgantsy*, about their memories of the Afghan war. In the 1950s, Afghanistan became a front-line region for the Soviet regime, determined to compete against the United States and China in the Third World and especially interested in exhibiting the compatibility between Marxism-Leninism and Islam. Hundreds of Afghan dignitaries and students were received in the Central Asian republics, while the Soviet Union invested massively in Afghanistan’s economic development. In December 1979, when Moscow decided to intervene in Afghanistan in order to avoid what it was interpreting as a state’s collapse and a risk of civil war, Soviet soldiers from Central Asia were the first to be sent to the Afghan front, in a “Muslim battalion” that had been prepared in the summer of 1979; these troops were progressively replaced in 1980 by regular forces. Central Asians were thereafter mostly recruited to work as translators and interpreters. As the interviews presented here confirm, their encounter with Afghans often reinforced their identification as Soviet citizens, even if in some cases it also contributed to reviving their sense of belonging to a shared Islamic Ummah.

The second section of the book analyzes Afghanistan’s northern neighborhood. Countering the conventional Western narrative of Afghanistan as a passive actor unable to develop its own foreign policy vision, Antonio Giustozzi

studies how both the Kabul government and the Taliban have managed relatively successfully a decentralized regional foreign policy. This allows for a fluid competition not only between regional actors but also between Afghan powerbrokers, with each of them able to play one strand against the other, a classic pattern in Afghan history, where a central state has always been challenged by centrifugal forces. Next, Ekaterina Stepanova analyzes Russia's strategy towards Afghanistan. Moscow's reading of regional security challenges, such as Islamist spillovers (an exaggerated fear) and drug trafficking, shapes its pragmatic policy toward Afghanistan. The Kremlin has shifted from supporting northern warlords to backing the central authorities and even being open to discussions with the Taliban, as long as security and stability can be guaranteed. At the same time, Moscow maintains a certain distance from direct involvement, having concluded that there is nothing really vital to Russia's security that cannot be stopped at the Amu-Darya border. In the two next articles, Marlene Laruelle and Bruce Pannier look more specifically at Tajikistan's, Uzbekistan's, and Turkmenistan's interactions with Afghanistan. Laruelle investigates local perspectives, decision-making, and knowledge production, while Pannier follows the recent trend that has seen the northern provinces of Afghanistan, historically little touched by insurgency, become a battlefield for a plethora of small-sized militant groups. The latter are not Pushtun Taliban but an array of ethnic Turkmens, Tajiks, Uzbeks, Kyrgyz, or Uyghurs fighting against the central authorities for different motives—some with an agenda related to the heirs of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) or to the so-called Islamic State (or ISIS) and some with no international affiliations. These insurgent groups contribute to making contribute to making part of the Central Asia–Afghanistan border less secure than it was historically, especially along the Turkmen–Afghan border.

The third section of the book engages in a scholarly reading of the so-called Silk Road policy of the United States by inquiring into its underlying conceptual frameworks. Alexander Diener looks at it in terms of an ideology of mobility. The US Silk Road is shaped by the belief that economic development and political stability come through an acceleration of mobility—of goods, human beings, and ideas. However, the policy faces difficulties in integrating the immobile nature of borders and the high level of securitization that the Central Asian states project into their territory. Marlene Laruelle then uses the tools of critical geopolitics to explore how the United States projects itself in Central Asia and proffers a geopolitical puzzle, many pieces of which, however, are missing. This elusive US geopolitics lacks any mechanisms of dialogue with the rival projects advanced by other external actors, whether under the same Silk Roads allegory or under the Eurasian one. Last but not the least, Sebastien Peyrouse and Gaël Raballand explore the economic underpinning of the US Silk Road project and question the supposed

economic rationality of developing trade and transportation in the greater Central Asian region.

NOTES

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13. Kristian Berg Harpviken and Sharhrbanou Tadjbakhsh, *A Rock Between Hard Places: Afghanistan as an Arena of Regional Insecurity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).