

# Introduction

## *Central Asia in an Era of Sovereignty: The Return of Tamerlane?*

There is something about Central Asia that defies logic and reason; it is ever changing and yet somehow remains the same. For thousands of years it has occupied a key position between Asia and the West, serving as a pathway connecting the two, as well as being influenced by both. Throughout all this time, it has been able to maintain an identity of its own, one that often escapes the understanding of those who pass through, or stay only short periods of time before moving on to other parts of the world. Yet for those willing to take the time and make the effort to understand the region, it never fails to fascinate, raising two new questions for everyone that it answers. It is for those who seek that better understanding that this volume has been written.

Part of the problem of studying the region is that, for a number of reasons, information about the territory and its people has been uneven at best, and difficult to obtain or entirely missing. This is due in part to size and geography; it has been and remains one of the most isolated parts of the world, making it difficult for most travelers to access. It is also due, in part, to the nomadic nature of many of the cultures based there, who never had the need for the types of institutions found in other parts of the world, which would record and store the histories, stories, and traditions we have come to depend on as essential for understanding a society. It is also due in part to political considerations; by the time that technology had evolved to the point that travel to and communication with the region were facilitated, the Russian and then the Soviet Empires put restrictions on the travel of outsiders, so that when those on the outside wished to study and learn there, manmade obstacles were placed in their way.

This is not to say that such restrictions were absolute or totally effective. There have always been a few intrepid souls who managed to make their way there and return, bringing with them tales that sparked the interest of others.

While Marco Polo is probably the best well known for his travels along the great Silk Road, other names, such as Arthur Connolly, F. M. Baily, and Fitzroy Maclean are all noted westerners who have helped to lift the veil that has shrouded the region. Of contemporary scholars, Peter Hopkirk is perhaps the best known for his masterful multiple volumes about Central Asia, which have whetted the appetite of many in the current generation of scholars and regional specialists, who are rediscovering what those before found so fascinating.

In 1991, with the breakup of the Soviet Union, the barriers to travel that had been in place were suddenly gone, allowing this new generation to travel, work and experience firsthand what they had only been able to read about before. What they discovered was a region undergoing culture shock, both from the loss of one governing system that, while foreign to them they had grown accustomed to, and from exposure to western ways from which the old governing system had shielded them. Yet in spite of this turbulence, there were also deeply embedded norms, tied to the land and its people, which allowed the region to weather this turbulence and in some cases even begin to thrive in these new, chaotic circumstances. When we the editors published our first collaboration, it was a volume titled *In the Tracks of Tamerlane*. In this volume, we sought to capture those first ten years of independence. Written as seen through both the eyes of westerners and people from the region, it examined a number of topics and issues that were critical to the area's survival as a sovereign territory.

In the early years of independence, preservation of sovereignty in Central Asia was far from certain. Now, twenty-five years later, there is little doubt that the five states will not only persist as states, but that they will increasingly differ from each other in many ways, and make their mark on global politics. Where the states were once connected only to Moscow (and not always even to neighbors), they are now connected to Afghanistan and South Asia, to China, and increasingly to Iran. Thus, it is time to reassess Central Asia's prospects for the future, and at the same time to review what the Central Asian states now make of their past.

*The Tracks of Tamerlane* came out in 2004, as a government document published by National Defense University Press. At the time, both of the editors were faculty at the National War College, and we were trying to address an absence that had bothered us in our efforts to teach about the region—the dearth of books on Central Asia that were “teachable” in the sense that they provided some depth on Central Asian issues, but also were of interest to people who were new to the region.

The first volume was far more successful than we expected, enjoying a place in curricula both in academia and in training programs. Now, fifteen

years later, much has changed, and while there are many more scholarly volumes on Central Asia available, the majority focus tightly on a single issue or country. Thus, we set out once again to assemble a survey volume covering a wide range of issues from a number of scholars and specialists on the region, and present their views in an accessible format to an audience that follows international relations, but may not be familiar with Central Asia. Among our authors, we have a mix of well-known names, with new scholars whose work in the region is just beginning. We hope this volume will fill the same niche that the last volume did—a non-quantitative volume of scholarship for those trying to learn about the region, whether in a classroom or by independent study.

## CONTENTS

The book is divided into three broad sections—Social Issues; Economics and Security; and Case Studies. Our authors in the first two sections were asked to examine how their issue unfolded in two or more states of Central Asia. In some cases, they give equal time to multiple countries, while in others they focus on one country, but discuss implications for the broader region. In our final section, the Case Studies, each focus on one key issue in each of the five Central Asian states.

The first section, *Social Issues*, begins with an examination by Vivian Walker of the Central Asian borders themselves—how the highly artificial boundaries of the region have solidified and defined relations and regional dynamics. She sets the context for two main currents within Part One: responses to transboundary challenges and issues of political development. Roger Kangas's chapter reviews the legal frameworks that underlie the political development of each of the five states. Maria Omelicheva then reviews the evolution and current state of human rights issues in each of the states. Among the transboundary challenges, the ongoing efforts (and failures) of the states to address HIV/AIDS is taken up by Svetlana Ancker. The emergence of social media as a force with political effects is reviewed by Stacie Giles. The rebirth of Islam in the region, and its evolution into the IMU movement, is examined by Sebastien Peyrouse. The first section closes with Saltanat Liebert's study of outmigration from Central Asia to the United States.

The second section, *Economics and Security*, addresses the overlapping issues of prosperity and stability, and offers some reasons for optimism as well as areas of concern. Several chapters focus on specific factors that contribute to both prosperity and stability—such as Dena Sholk's examination of the rise of Bazaars as the center of the informal economy, Theresa Sabonis-Helf stud-

ies of how new infrastructure is beginning to change the political economy of the region, and Yuhao Du analyzes Chinese investment in Central Asia. Because energy exports play such an important role in the political economy of Central Asia, two chapters are devoted to issues associated with energy. Richard Wheeler looks at the engagement of international institutions in guiding energy development, while Dan Burghart examines the role that energy may play in Central Asia's future. But the Central Asian states' efforts to improve their economies and security remain very much works-in progress. Several chapters address how states are approaching some well-known challenges to security in the region. Jack Rowe reviews the history and current status of Ferghana Valley ethnic enclaves and their potential to spark wider conflict, while Elena Kovalova reviews the persistence of illicit networks and organized crime in the region. Robert Timm explores the puzzle of why the nations of Central Asia have changed little of their approach to military security, in spite of sweeping changes with regard to threats and opportunities.

The third section is comprised of *Case Studies*. In this section, each author was invited to focus on a single country, and examine a single issue that is critical to understanding that country. These in-depth case studies offer a "deeper dive" into specific factors that matter in the internal politics of the Central Asian states, from ideology to local governance. Erica Marat investigates Kyrgyzstan's efforts to develop democracy. Marlene Laruelle examines Kazakhstan's debates about its future role in the region, and the balance it seeks to strike between the Eurasian Economic Union and its other options. Laura Adams, Mans Svensson, and Rustamjon Urinboyev study Uzbekistan through the lens of everyday life and governance at the local level to shed light on how the country is managed. Theresa Sabonis-Helf examines Roghun, the massive hydropower project that is a centerpiece of Rahmon's post-civil war government. Sophia Srinivasan provides the history of Turkmenistan's development of its gas sector, explaining the evolution and careful management of foreign direct investment. These cases offer depth on a specific issue, and serve as a complement to the broader views provided in earlier sections of the volume.

## FINAL THOUGHTS

This volume is not necessarily meant to be read end-to-end, but to allow the reader to focus on topics of interest to him or her. We hope that the format makes it accessible to those who are interested in a specific issue or county, and expect that a portion of the audience will continue to be those preparing to serve the US government in some capacity in the region. For those who do

read the volume in its entirety, we hope it will provide new insight into some of the patterns of continuity and change in the region, now that it has passed the twenty-five-year mark of independence.

At the same time, it is hoped that this volume will provide a “snapshot” in time, of a region that has both confounded and fascinated those who have sought to know it better. While it remains common practice to speak of post-Soviet states as nations in transition, this volume provides a clear picture of a region in which the states have already arrived at the end of one major transition—sovereignty is consolidated, in the sense that the borders and forms of government appear well established. Where the states will go from here is yet to be determined, but that process will continue to unfold in the years to come, creating new opportunities for both scholars and analysts alike.

Both volumes refer to Tamerlane in their titles, acknowledging the most internationally renowned personage from the region. In the course of his life, Tamerlane traveled from Europe to Asia, traversing Central Asia many times in the process. Whenever and wherever one may travel in the region, they are bound to find themselves “in the tracks of Tamerlane.” It is hoped that our modest effort will help guide and enlighten these travelers on their journey.