

The future of Central Asia : from the predictable to the desirable

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This is an enlarged version of a presentation given in Russian in Kyrgyzstan on 21 October 2008 at the opening of the forum of the Franco-Swiss Foundation for Human Progress (FPH) dedicated to 'the future of Central Asia and the code of ethics for its armed forces'.

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EVEN IF the prospects for Central Asia, rich in hydrocarbons, uranium and gold, seem promising, its future remains a cause for concern. This situation results as much from surrounding threats as from the narrowness of outlook of some of its leaders, withdrawn into their national realities. In fact, the only salvation for Turkistan, at least the western part, [1] and for it to keep its independence, lies in the emergence of a form of solidarity between its states, even of a Central Asian Confederation. That is still a long way off. Nonetheless some recent signs indicate a community of awareness of a destiny based on a willingness to close ranks.

Central Asia's current good fortune

Since the tenth century, and the zenith of Central Asian history that was constituted by the Samanid Empire, [2] Central Asia's opportunities have never been better.

The reserves of gas and oil of the Caspian, but also of other areas, where prospecting has barely started, assure the Kazakhs and Turkmen of high revenues for at least 50 years.

The gold, uranium and rare metal resources of the Tian-shan are still far from being over-exploited. A wealth of water and electricity supplies is already giving the Kyrgyz people, and soon the Tajiks, an undeniable asset.

As for the Uighurs, they are already benefiting from China's current dynamism, but they are not allowing their character to become submerged by the mass of Han Chinese : remember that Uighuristan, also called Eastern Turkistan and Sinkiang, where communist Chinese control is still maintained, has always been an integral part of Central Asia, occupying almost a third of its surface. It is therefore included in this study.

There is also Uzbekistan, with its revenues from 'white gold'—cotton—from the gold of Muruntao, from the uranium of Navoi, from healthy supplies of gas and oil, but above all from the ancestral know-how of its people in farming and trade.

However Central Asia's greatest good fortune is quite simply its current tendency to make of itself, at least for the time being, a sanctuary and a haven of peace. Perhaps because the Turan [3] is rich and certain people need tranquillity to exploit its resources or for the transit region that it represents (for hydrocarbons, drugs, etc.), crises and wars are chiefly evident among its neighbours : Tibet, Kashmir, Pakistan, Iran, the Caucasus and of course Afghanistan, all of them 'grey areas' full of risk for the 'heartland' ! [4]

Grey areas and risks

In immediate proximity to Central Asia, Afghanistan is what astronomers, and now strategists, call a black hole : 'a region of extremely high density, difficult to observe and to understand, but which exerts an irresistible attraction . . .'

The United States in 2001, and then NATO, succumbed to this attraction. Their war in Afghanistan is lost, as it was for the English and for the Russians before them, and for the same reasons : conventional warfare methods employed by distant peoples will never beat a rustic, hostile people, embedded in its mountains and willing to fight the toughest kind of war. NATO may, at best, achieve over northern Afghanistan, but not in the interior, what the Anglo-Saxons call containment, which would help in the drugs war. But they can only do it with Russian help.

Are the Afghan people, particularly the Pathans, a danger beyond their frontiers ? Yes, on the Pakistan side, where the Pathans feel at home, far less so in the direction of Central Asia, where subversive activity would be filtered through the Uzbek, Turkmen and above all Tajik minorities of Afghanistan : bear in mind that there are more Tajiks (seven million) in Afghanistan than in Tajikistan (five million).

From the Turan side, with or without the intervention of these minorities, the factors tending to destabilisation are fanaticism [5], drugs and their common offspring, terrorism.

Fanaticism

Confronted by fanaticism, which is starting to appear in Turkistan, there is some room for hope based on the tradition of tolerance and reason in the local version of Islam. This was illustrated in former times by a good many front-rank Central Asian personalities, like the theologian, Al-Bukhari (810-870 AD), a collector of *hadith*, the deeds and sayings of the Prophet, a veritable evangelist of Islam, or like the philosopher Al-Farabi (872-950 AD), a man of great learning, in his time dubbed the 'second master'—after Aristotle—who launched the concept of 'universal harmony'. But these Central Asian foundations of Muslim civilisation were more than a thousand years ago. To avoid the excesses of sectarianism the Turan has need of a deepening of its faith, in other words of a better knowledge of the Koran and of its values. In any event, the Central Asian people are, by their nature, far too benevolent and hospitable to become, one day, a fanatical majority.

Drugs

Drugs have become the pillar of the secular arm of fanaticism : this was already so in the Middle Ages, at the time of the Assassins, or Hasishin, hashish eaters. They represent a considerable danger for central Asia if only because they foster the gangrene of corruption and Mafia activity that gnaws away the nascent wealth of society, and also terrorism that seeks to put a stranglehold on that society.

This is the situation today : everything is becoming more corrupt, in Central Asia as in the West ; everyone bows down before money . . . and drug trafficking is what supplies most of it. The so-called drug war is one of History's greatest hypocrisies : we know almost everything

about the cultivation of the opium poppy, the manufacture and marketing of heroin, but we do little or nothing about it. Any action is inhibited by those with interests at stake : in Afghanistan, in Central Asia . . . everywhere ! [6]

Terrorism

As for terrorism in Central Asia, it can be said that if the dictatorships remain or spread further, there is a risk of total destabilisation. Terrorism seeks to impose a stranglehold. But if, as is often the case in Central Asia, it is confronted by another stranglehold—that of a dictatorship—what is the point of fighting this new excess ? Moreover, blindly cruel and short-sighted repression as practiced in Uzbekistan can only, in the long term, arouse fanaticism, even amongst the patient and sensible people of the Turan. In this case, the Afghan example arouses a sort of hysterical-religious fascination : it encourages terrorism to spread little by little across the whole Central Asian region, inviting external interventions.

The battle between insurgents and peacekeeping forces supported from abroad will be intense, and victory for the insurgents is not assured, because one learns, slowly, how to fight insurgency : the Americans appear to be demonstrating this in Baghdad.

But can the methods used in Iraq [7] work in Afghanistan, or in Pakistan, or indeed in Central Asia ? In this last region, by relying on the relatively modern and reasonable foundation of Islam and of the population, a successful counter-insurgency conflict is entirely possible. But for that to be so demands a determination, knowledge of the ground and financial and manpower resources of which the West, too distant in every sense, seems to be ever more destitute. Looking at the future of central Asia therefore has to take into account China, and above all Russia. Neither America, Europe nor even Turkey [8] can play more than a supporting role, which should be used to the benefit of the Russians.

Prospects

They are all the less appealing inasmuch as Central Asia harbours internally some thoroughly disturbing dangers ! The most obvious derives from the galloping demography of the Central Asian peoples, above all the Uzbeks. The 'cradle revenge' of the Turanian people, appearing after the Second World War, is being maintained. Linked to ecological catastrophes—desertification, the drying up of the Aral Sea, etc.—it can be seen even in such a relatively unpopulated region as Turkistan, with the over-population of certain areas, the Ferghana in particular. Emigration, clandestine or otherwise, towards Russia has become a safety valve in recent years : more than three million Central Asians—mostly Uzbeks and Tajiks—work there more or less regularly today. Since the current financial crisis has given rise in Moscow to declarations favouring immigration control, even repatriation of this labour force, there is cause for anxiety as to the potential impact of these measures on Central Asian society and the rather tense situation on the Uzbek borders, difficult to control : the Uzbeks have already colonised the Kyrgyz Ferghana and number more than 200,000 Gastarbeiter in Kazakhstan. The domestic dissensions to which Turkistanis are prone run a serious risk of being encouraged by this. And with talk of food shortages, uncontrolled displacement of needy populations cannot be excluded. The disappearance of Islam Karimov, who currently holds Uzbekistan in an iron grip, could set off destabilisation. This picture, disturbing enough, could become apocalyptic if we add the risk inherent in misery and disorganisation of epidemics,

even pandemics.

The best option for Central Asia when it became independent would have been to install a regime of neutrality amongst its component states that could have prevented much friction and intrusion : the Turkmen example shows that this option was conceivable. But for it to become so again would require a disengagement of the Great Powers and an understanding between them that seem unlikely.

Instead of being neutral, Central Asian countries more than ever 'in between empires' [9] are wavering between Russia and America, whilst being gnawed at by a neighbour with sharp teeth : China. [10]

Russia seems for the moment to have the upper hand. This is not the worst aspect, since the former colonial power knows the Central Asian terrain better than any others. Isn't the Russian himself, in many ways, an Asian ? The problem is that Russia, embedded in Western Turkistan, [11] can only oppose American influence today, and eventually that of China.

America, a long way away and essentially a maritime power, should not be a serious and stubborn rival to Russia in the Turan, above all if Moscow assures it, as it has Europe, of its slice of the Eastern energy cake : steady supplies of oil, gas and uranium for the coming 20 years.

China is another matter. Divergent interests between Beijing and Moscow, and particularly Russia's defence of Siberia, already eroded at the edges by the Chinese, could overcome the cosy *entente* proclaimed today within the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. History shows that an alliance between Russia and China is against nature and will not last. The long-term danger for Central Asia therefore lies in frenzied competition between Russians and Chinese. The current situation in the Caucasus shows what could happen on the day when the Turan is no longer a sanctuary.

If China were to take over a Central Asian country in its own way—economically at first, then politically [12]—as the United States has taken over Georgia, it could use it as an intermediary to harass that country's neighbours : there are many Abkhazias and South Ossetias in Central Asia. In reply, subversion could be organised in Sinkiang and elsewhere in China. Then, all the beautiful nascent wealth of Central Asia would vanish in more or less instigated insurrections.

On this phenomenon, observations in Yugoslavia a few years before the civil war are still relevant. Collapse from within could be seen across the Yugoslav Federation : rubbish invaded the streets ; the countryside was neglected ; armed mafiosi gangs appeared ; drunkenness and a scorn for learning reigned ; disoriented youths were recruited by extremists ; in short, regional interests were starting to take priority over the national interest.

We are starting to see the same phenomena in Central Asia today, where unfettered capitalism, becoming ever more criminalised, is gradually abandoning Turkistan to laxity, to the mafia, and to drugs. Riddled with corruption, national authorities are weakened and cannot react effectively against the multiple enticements that have already resulted from frontier problems, population overflow, water and energy resource sharing. This all encourages the Turanians in their endless quarrels, of which foreign powers know how to take advantage. On the regional chessboard, Central Asian countries are sometimes little more than pawns in the

hands of others.

Towards a Union of Central Asian States ?

One hopeful note should be sounded in conclusion : the doyen of Central Asian presidents, the Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev, has for a number of years been proposing insistently a Union of Central Asian States, if only for the sake of organising the distribution of water and energy resources. He is supported by the Kyrgyz and, increasingly, by the Tajiks. The Turkmen are coming down from their ivory tower and have accepted bilateral cooperation agreements with the Kazakhs, the Tajiks and the Kyrgyz. As for Uzbekistan, usually so reticent with its neighbours, it is at least working on the idea of a free-trade zone with Kazakhstan.

There is still better news : 18 October 2008 could go down as a historic date. On that day, for the first time, at Almaty, after months of very tough negotiations, the five Central Asian countries signed an agreement that had become essential in the face of the prospects of a hard winter and a generalised economic and energy crisis : it concerns the exchange or transit of water, electricity, gas and coal from one country to another. Until now the Turkmen had stayed aloof from any agreements, but today they are participating and supplying large quantities of thermal energy. Coordinated from one end of Western Turkistan to the other ; the exchange and transit of Turkmen gas and electricity, Uzbek gas, Kyrgyz electricity and water, Kazakh coal, gas and oil and Tajik water represent enormous progress compared with the previous bilateral agreements, even if, like them, the agreements are for one year, renewable. Are we looking at the genesis of a Turanian Common Market ? That is being rather hasty. There is no doubt, however, that if these first measures are applied successfully, they will open the way to the cooperation that alone will allow Central Asia to join in 'the Great Game' [13] of the powers whose prey they are.

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Notes

[1] Turkistan, or 'the land of the Turks', as distinct from the Turks of Anatolia, of the Caucasus and of Europe, is divided into Western Turkistan (Turkmenistan), formerly under Soviet control, and Eastern Turkistan, still under Chinese control.

[2] The Muslim Tajik dynasty which, from its capital Bukhara, reigned from 874 to 999 AD over Central Asia, giving rise to a brilliant civilisation.

[3] This term strictly applies to western Turkistan. It is, however, often employed to denote 'land of the Turks'. Alongside the 55 million Turkic-speaking peoples it includes an original Indo-Iranian population of nearly 10 million Tajiks, with Slav minorities (7 million) and Han Chinese (10 million ?) more recently established, notably where the Han Chinese are concerned, who have been expanding their presence in Sinkiang for the last 50 years.

[4] We owe this perception to the geopolitician Halford John Mackinder who, throughout the first half of the twentieth century, propounded the notion of Central Asia considered as the axis, the pivot of the world.

[5] The author prefers this term to 'Islamic fanaticism', since the overheated products of the Pakistani *madressas* are far from the values propounded by the Koran.

[6] Apart from legalisation of drugs, perhaps a last resort, the only counter to this disaster is ethical, both personal and collective, designating by a form of categorical imperative those activities that are particularly reprehensible, that men worthy of the name cannot permit : drug trafficking is one of those inadmissible activities against which, in Central Asia as in the rest of the world, it is a duty to act.

[7] As the Americans admit, their current counter-insurgency methods owe much to a work published in English in 1965 by an unknown French officer, Lieutenant-Colonel David Galula (1919-1968), *Counter-insurgency, Theory and Practice*, recently translated and entitled *Contre-insurrection, théorie et pratique* (Paris : Economica, 2008).

[8] The Turkish Republic is quite naturally in favour of a pan-Turan Confederation including all the eastern Turkish peoples. Attempting to recreate its empire by becoming a regional power from the Mediterranean to Siberia, it is making efforts to show its presence amongst all these peoples by promoting economic, cultural, social and if possible military cooperation with them.

[9] René Cagnat and Michel Jan, *Le milieu des empires, entre Chine, URSS et Islam, le destin de l'Asie centrale* (Paris : Robert Laffont, 1981 and 1990).

[10] Recent rectifications to the border with Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have resulted in significant gains for the Chinese communities, who, with access to the previously Kyrgyz glaciers of the Khan Tengri, are gaining rights to this huge reservoir of water. And in Tajikistan, to the east of Murgab in the region of Ramkul, they have seemingly obtained a former gold mine that has become exploitable with the rise in the price of gold. Furthermore, this territorial encroachment could call into question, to the advantage of the Chinese along the entire Sino-Tajik border, the principle of following the line of the watershed previously observed.

[11] Russia is trying to prolong the existence of the USSR with international organisations like the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (ODKB in Russian), which, at Moscow's instigation has military cover over all the central Asian countries, less neutral Turkmenistan. A Eurasian Economic Community (EVRAZES in Russian) is trying to extend the defence agreement with economic cooperation between the same countries, but

Uzbekistan has recently withdrawn.

[12] Tajikistan, and even more so Kyrgyzstan, where the Chinese are already very much in evidence on the economic front and have built roads towards the capitals, is vulnerable to this type of action. This possibly explains, at least in part, the presence of American and Russian bases near Bishkek, and a Russian base near Dushanbe.

[13] See 'Le très grand jeu', *Défense nationale*, March 2002.