Map of the Republics of Central Asia

Central Asia: An Overview

by

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Geography

Central Asia is a conventional designation applied to the lands between the eastern shores of the Caspian Sea and the Altai mountains. The Kyrgyz steppe forms its north and northeast borders while the Kara Kum and the Kopet Dag rest in its southwestern frontiers. The southern region of Central Asia is occupied by a complex of mountain ranges meeting at the Pamirs. These ranges are the Kunlun, the KaraKoram (the northwestern part), the Hindu Kush (the northeastern part), and the Tien Shan in its entirety. Spurs of these mountains, like the Kyrgyz range, the Alai range and the Pamirs entered into Central Asia and forming river valleys and habitable oases. Often Iran, Afghanistan, and the Caucasus are also included in Central Asia. But, rather than

geographic, this is a socio-economic, cultural, and political bonding among the peoples of the entire area that has been in the making for centuries.

Central Asia draws on the resources of the world's four largest inland waters, i.e., the Caspian Sea, the Aral Sea, Lake Balkhash, and Lake Baikal. The waters of the first two, although high in salinity, have had a great impact on the agriculture and marine industry of the region. The Caspian Sea, for instance, is one of the world's best centers for caviar production. In addition, Central Asia has a number of glaciers, mostly in the Pamirs, that drain into its lake. The most prominent of these is the Fedchenko glacier discovered by the 30-year-old explorer A. P. Fedchenko in the late 1800s.

Central Asia's two main rivers, the Amu Darya and the Syr Darya, take source in the Pamirs and Tien Shan respectively. 1630 miles in length, the Amu is joined by a number of tributaries like Gunt and Vakhsh before it drains into the Aral Sea. Similarly, the Syr (1913 miles), taking source in the Tien Shan, after being joined by several smaller rivers, pours into the Aral Sea. Lake Balkhash is regularly replenished by the Ili River.

Central Asia is a patchwork of steppe and desert. Human habitation is possible on the fringes of the deserts, around the lakes, and in the river valleys. Moving from the north in a southerly direction, we come first to the Kyrgyz steppe. Also called the Kipchak Steppe, this is a vast region stretching from the Don and Volga river basins to the Irtysh River and the Altai highlands. Originally, the home of Kipchak Turks, at the present it forms the Republic of Kazakhstan populated by Russians and a people of Mongol origin swept into Turkish lands in the 13th c. by the armies of Chingiz Khan. After the rejuvenation of Russia, Russian serfs displaced about half of the original Kazakh people of the region. Further south, there are three major deserts, the Kara Kum, immediately to the east of the Caspian Sea, the Kizil Kum between the Amu and Syr rivers and, farther to the south and east, the Takla Makan, one of the most inhospitable places on earth. Fed by the Tarim River and its tributaries on the southern slopes of the Tien Shan, several oases provide comfort to the traveler.

Recent History

The popularity of Central Asia during the Middle Ages was due to trade and conquest, rather than to raw materials and political rivalry as has been the case since the late 1800s. At that time, European merchants traveling through exotic cities like Baghdad, Ray, Bukhara, Samarqand, Kashghar, and Chiu-ch'Ÿan took wools, gold, and silver to China and India. From there, they supplied Europe with Chinese and Indian goods including silk, pepper, rice, cotton, and sugar. Commerce, however, gradually was displaced by other interests such as human and natural resources to be tapped, developed, and manufactured. Travels of missionaries like John of Plano Carpini and adventurers like Marco Polo had provided ample information about the existence of such resources and their abundance.

After the discovery of the sea routes to Asia by Vasco da Gama in the 15th century, a new route and a new set of attitudes began to develop regarding the East, especially India.

This attitude, during the latter years of the nineteenth century, made Central Asia a major bone of contention between British India and Imperial Russia. At stake were the natural and human resources of a region populated predominantly by settled farmers and nomadic stockbreeders.

Western encroachment on India had a slow but deliberate pace. It began with the Portuguese who were the first Europeans to reach India. Thereafter, for about a hundred years, from their trade center of Goa, they held sway over the Indian commercial sea routes. Eventually, however, they were joined by competitors from Holland, Great Britain, France, and Denmark. The rivalry that ensued for the control of the sea routes and the resources they provided led the Dutch to push the Portuguese out of Goa. The British then forced the Dutch out of India. A brief history of British movement north towards Central Asia is provided below.

Before it attracted the Aryans, India was inhabited by Dravidians, millions of whom make India their home today. Over the centuries, the Achaemenian Darius included the Indus valley in his empire (5th c. B.C.), Alexander the Great included roughly the same area in his Greek domains (4th c. B.C.), Mahmud of Ghazna exported Islam there (11th c. A.D.), and Turko-Mongol rulers, known as the Mughals, brought it prosperity and fame. The last Oriental ruler to invade India was the Afsharid ruler of Iran, Nader Shah. And the last and only occidental power to control India for a considerable length of time was Britain.

British hegemony in India begins with the formation of the East India Company for the exploitation of trade with East and Southeast Asia in AD 1600 and with the building of a major fortification in Madras, on the east coast of India in 1639. Called St. George, the fort was built for the exclusive use of the British. The Indians, regarded "black," were not allowed near the fort. A year later, three other areas, including Calcutta, were bought. Bombay, too, as part of the dowry of the King of Portugal's daughter who married Charles II came into the possession of the latter who turned it over to the Company. In time, Calcutta became a major trading center.

The East India Company lasted 213 years before it was transformed into a means of conquest of India. In AD 1700, the United East India Companies received a monopoly on all Indian trade and by the end of the 18th century, it changed its mode of operation from trade to conquest. India, passing the last stages of Mughal rule, was easily overcome. Using divide and conquer as their main strategy, the British captured Dakan in 1748 followed by the elimination of Saraj al-Dowlah in Bengal (1764) at the hand of his own countrymen. Bengal became the base of British operations in India.

By 1783, when the Company reaches Banares, it is broke. The people of Banares are to hand in not only their own possessions but the jewels of their temples as well to restore the credibility of the Company. Between 1783 and the early 1840s the company gathers and mobilizes large armies drawn from principalities already captured and invades the nearly 50,000,000 Marathas who live around Bombay in Marahashtra. Known to Indians as yeomen champions of Hinduism, the Marathas--mostly peasant cultivators,

landowners, and soldiers--were defeated. Their land was annexed to British domain in India in 1843.

Mysore and Oudh were the next territories to be annexed. The king of Mysore put up a big fight but was eventually defeated (1852) by a British led alliance consisting of the leaders of Mysore's neighboring provinces. The mode of operation in Oudh was different in that here the British meddled in the internal affairs of the province to the point that its rulers could no longer run their own affairs. As a result, the Navvab was forced to resign. After the Navvab's death in 1858, the Company took over. Baluchistan was added the following year.

Steady consolidation of British rule in India worried the Russian tsar the most. With each conquest, the British were getting closer to what are today Afghanistan and Central Asia, two weak buffers separating British India from the Russian heartland.

To impede Russian mobilization into Central Asia, the British engaged the Russians in what came to be known as the "Great Game."

The Crimea and the Caucusus were the first two venues for the game. In Crimea, the British supported the Ottomans who opposed Nicholas I's demand that Russia should influence the Ottoman's treatment of Turkey's own Orthodox subjects. This opposition resulted in the Crimean War (1854-56) in which Russia contended with the forces of Britain, France, the Ottoman Turks, and Japan. When the Crimean War ended without a clear winner, another obstacle was created to keep the Russian forces engaged beyond Central Asia. The obstacle was Imam Shamil (1797-1871) of Dagestan who continued the Murid Wars that had been started by his predecessors some twenty years earlier.

Like Britain's calculated conquest of India, Russia's conquest of Central Asia was systematic. It was spearheaded by the creation of Zemstvos or provincial assemblies to sort out local issues and by the introduction of social and political changes. By 1864, freed Russian serfs moved into Ust-Urt and the Kazakh Steppe regions and dispossessed the Kazakh's of 100,000 acres of land. Poor herders, the Kazakhs were forced to move up into the hills and into the deserts of the south and southwest where they perished. Then, between 1864 and 1895, Tashkent and Kokand as well as Khiva, Merv, and Panjdeh were

annexed to the Russian Empire. Full and serious Russian advance in Central Asia coincides with the rule of the Manghits whose history is explored in the Manghit Amirs of Bukhara on this site. We shall, therefore, not dwell on it here. Suffice it to say that the capture of the Pamir region in 1895, brought Russians and the British face to face across the Wakhan Corridor. To avert catastrophe, a Russo-British buffer zone was established at that site and was, by mutual agreement, given to Afghanistan to control.

Subsequent history of Central Asia consists of the contributions of Central Asians to the First World War, the 1916 uprising in Khujand which spread throughout the region, and the era of relative freedom that ended in the Basmachi movement and the clash between the Muslims and the newly formed Soviet State. These events are covered in detail elsewhere as are the events that resulted in the administrative division of the region (1924), the great terror (1936-39), and the era of stagnation (the Brezhnev period) which led to the introduction of Perestroika and Glasnost by Gorbachev (1985). At the end of Gorbachev's tenure in office, the pulse of Central Asia is best felt in the reaction of its leaders to the August coup that led to the formation of the new Russia and the independence of the republics.

Reaction to the August Coup in Russia

The forthcoming republics of Central Asia reacted differently to the August 1991 coup in Russia. Kazakhstan, led by Nursultan Nazarbaev, who is a moderate in politics but radical in economic matters, did not cooperate with the junta. Although a member of the progressive wing of the CPSU, he resigned from both the CPSU and the Politburo. As for the Communist Party of Kazakhstan, he considered it essential for effective economic change but not as a part of the CPSU.

Nazarbev's decision was important because Kazakhstan houses nuclear weapons, has a 50/50 Russian/Kazakh population, and is prone to ethnic strife. For these reasons, Nazarbaev did not condemn the coup immediately, rejected the junta, instructed the KGB and the army to remain in their barracks, and waited for the situation to resolve itself.

Kyrgyzstan's Askar Akaev, a liberal, closed the Communist Party amid conservative protest, appealed to the people to uphold the constitution, and openly contacted Yeltsin. In fact, he ordered Yeltsin's appeal to be broadcast every two hours on republican television and had the same appear in print media. He even appealed to the United Nation for assistance.

The position of Uzbekistan's Islam Karimov was the least clear. He rejected both the junta and the democratization process for which, he thought, his republic was not prepared. In addition, although he resigned from the Politburo, he retained both the USSR and the republic constitutions. Like today, the main fear in Uzbekistan was the possibility that under Yeltsin Russia might reassert its old role and take over the rights of the republics.

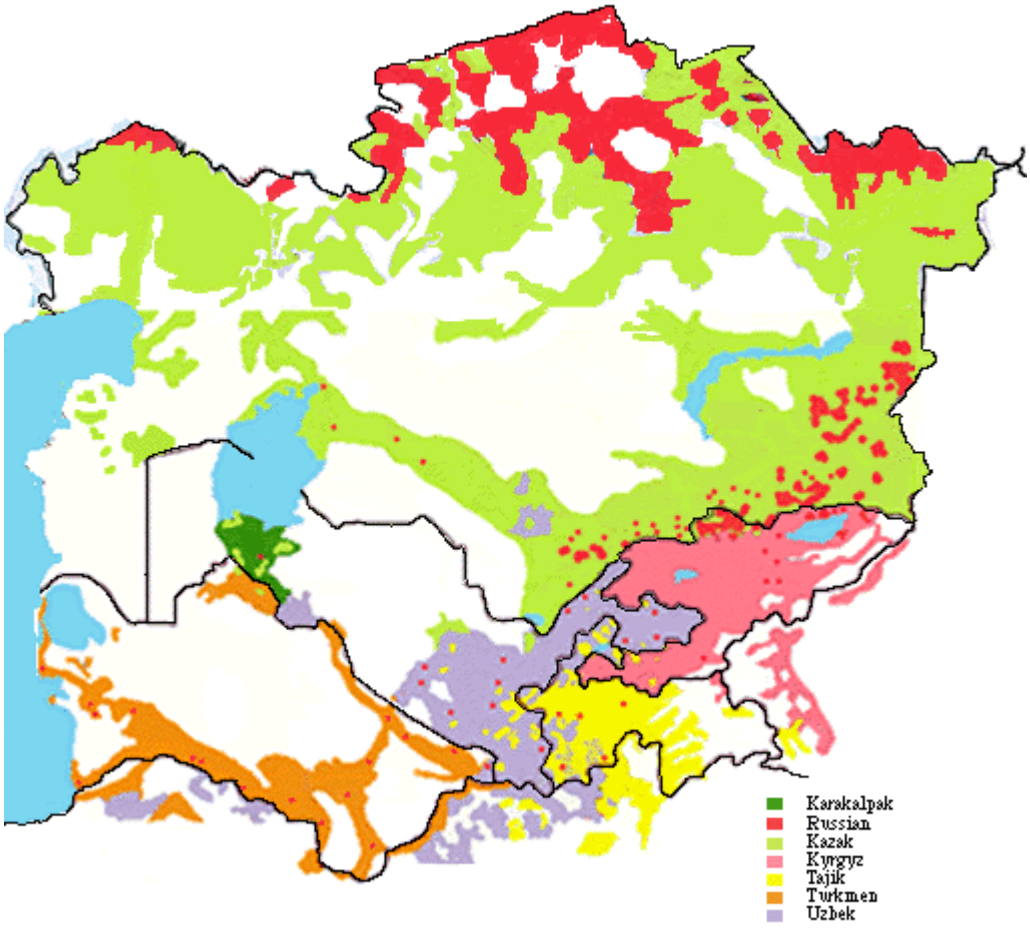
Turkmenistan's Niyazov was not in Turkmenistan during the early stages of the coup. He was visiting India. Upon his return, he was shocked at what had transpired in Moscow. He reacted slowly and cautiously by arresting some members of the democratic party and by refusing to disseminate the orders of the junta.

The position of Tajikistan's Kahhor Makhkamov was quite clear at the beginning. In time, however, he became increasingly ambivalent. At the beginning, for instance, he supported the junta in principle because, he felt, it tried to restore order, had promised to promote democratization, and would have assured republican sovereignty. In fact, he felt that the junta was sent to rescue the country from chaos. Two days later, Makhkamov reversed himself and said that what the junta had done was a tragedy that could have ended in a civil war. He then condemned the CPSU and distanced the Communist Party of Tajikistan from the CPSU.

After the coup, one by one, the republics declared their independence and went their own separate ways. Developments in each republic are covered on this site under the name of the republic followed by the phrase "an overview."

Peoples

The peoples of present-day Central Asia come from two distinct ethnic groups: Indo-European and Uralic Altaic. A good number of them, however, belong to both of these ethnic groups, i.e., over the centuries they have eveolved as a mixed breed carrying not only Indo-European and Altaic but other ethnic groups, such as Semitic, as well.



Ethnic and Linguistic Map of Central Asia
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The Indo Europeans of present-day Central Asia are of Iranian, Slavic, and Germanic descent. The Iranians, known as Tajiks, occupy the Kuhistan region of present-day Tajikistan as well as eastern Badakhshan (i.e., both the Autonomous Gorno-Badakhshan and the Afghan Badakhshan). In Afghanistan, in Takhar and Baghilan, there is a Tajik population that is equal in size to the population of the former Soviet republic. Ethnic purity among the Tajiks varies depending on which axis one travels. If the center is the Kulab regions, for instance, traveling south, one encounters Tajiks increasingly mixed with Pushtuns. Traveling west or north, the percentage of Uzbek blood increases (see Tajik Ethnicity).

Tajikistan's ethnic mix consists of 64.9% Tajik, 25% Uzbek, and 3.5% Russian.

The Slavic group consists mostly of Russians with pockets of Ukrainian settlements. The Russians, spill-overs from Russia proper, are concentrated in northern and northeastern Kazakstan, especially in the Omsk, Petropavel, Dostanay, Karakanda, and Semipalatinsk regions. There are also considerable concentrations of Russians in southeastern Kazakstan in and around Almaty as well as in northern Kyrgyzstan in the Bishkek and

Issyk Kul regions. Albeit with less intensity, Russian settlements are found throughout the other republics, predominantly in urban and industrial centers.

The Germanic population is quite small. These are Germans who have been deported to Central Asia after the world wars or others who, as peasants, have sought a new life outside their homeland. They live in most of the republics in small numbers but as a considerable population in northern Kazakstan.

The Uralic-Altaic people of the region differ in the intensity of their Semitic and Indo-European blood on the one hand and of Mongolian and other Asian (Oriat, Tatar, etc.) blood on the other hand. In general, however, Turks in the western part of the region who before the Mongol invasion became Islamized and formed the Ghaznavid, Saljuq, and Khwarazmian dynasties are distinct from those in the north and east who were swept by the Mongol hordes to southern Russia. As remnants of a Turko-Mongol people, after the break up of the Golden Horde, they moved to present-day Kazakstan and Uzbekistan. Here, in Uzbekistan in particular, they interacted with the original Muslim Turkish population discussed earlier and created a new breed of Central Asians. Linguistically, too, the Uralic-Altaic Central Asians divide along Turkish and Mongolian lines. The Uzbeks and the Turkmens, for instance, are much closer to Anatolian Turks and Azeris in their speech than they are to Kazakhs and Kyrgyzes. In addition, the latter languages have accommodated as much Mongolian as the former have accommodated Arabic and Persian.

The Turkmens live primarily in Turkmenistan, on the eastern shore of the Caspian Sea and on the fringes of the Karakum Desert. Adapting to the harsh living conditions, the Turkmens live in oases created by the Tajan and Murghab rivers and by the recently created Kara Kum Canal. A similar concentration of Turkmens exists along the Amu river. The southern regions of the Aral, where the Amu joins the lake, is occupied by the Karakalpaks, a people more akin to the Kazakhs than to their Turkmen and Uzbek neighbors. Finally, northeastern Iran and northwestern Afghanistan also accommodate a relatively high concentration of Turkmens.

Turkmenistan's ethnic mix consists of 73.3% Turkmen, 9% Uzbek, and 9.8% Russian, and 2% Kazakh.

Uzbeks live primarily in the republic of Uzbekistan, more accurately in the south of the republic and along the Amu and Syr Rivers. The north, the environs of Bukhara all the way to the Aral Lake, is occupied by the Kizil Kum Desert. Uzbeks live in an around the cities of Bukhara, Samarqand, Qarshi, and Termez in the west and in and around Tashkent in the east. The Ferghana Valley, with the most concentration of Uzbeks, forms the backbone of Uzbekistan's ethnic identity. Outside the republic Uzbeks live in western Tajikistan and in northern Afghanistan. The latter population is considerable in numbers and influential in the politics of the region.

Uzbekistan's ethnic mix consists of 71.4% Uzbek, 4.7% Tajik, 8.3% Russian, 4.1% Kazakhs, and 2.1% Karakalpaks.

The republic of Kazakstan is populated by Kazakhs and Russians at about an equal level and by other ethnic groups including Germans and Ukrainians all of whom reside in northern Kazakstan. As for Kazakhs themselves, they live in oases around the Syr River and on the fringes of the vast Turanian Lowlands, the Muyunkum Desert, and the Kyrgyz Plateau. As mentioned earlier, they share the Kyrgyz Steppe with the Russians and other mostly Indo-European peoples. In addition to Kazakhstan proper, there is a relatively large population of Kazakhs in northwestern China and around the population centers of Urumqi, Kashi, and Shachi (or Yarkant). There, they coexist with Russian settlers and with Uighurs.

Kazakhstan's ethnic mix consists of 41.9% Kazakh, 37.0% Russian, 5.2% Ukrainian, 4.7% German, 2.1% Uzbek, and 2% Tatar.

The Kyrgyz live primarily in the republic of Kyrgyzstan, mostly in the north (i.e., in Bishkek) and in the northeast, around Lake Issyk Kul, the region they share with Russian settlers. There are also concentration of Kyrgyz in the center of the republic around the Nargu River and on both sides of the Ferghana Valley. These latter groups live close to and interact with the Uzbeks of the Valley. Two other, relatively large Kyrgyz population groups live immediately to the east and southeast of the republic in China and two relatively small pockets of Kyrgyz nomadic herders live in Eastern Badakhshan.

Kyrgyzstan's ethnic mix consists of 52.4% Kyrgyz, 12.9% Uzbek, and 21.5% Russian, 2.5% Ukrainian, and 2.4% German.

Resources

Cotton, the primary agricultural crop of Central Asia, is cultivated on the major rivers mentioned earlier (Syr, Chu, Vakhsh, Amu, Zarafshan, Surkhan) as well as throughout the Ferghana Valley and along the Kara Kum canal. The foothills of Hissar and Qarategin mountains as well as portions of the Amu and the Kara Kum Canal are given to the production of Tobacco and opium.

Mixed crops (cereals, rice, wheat) are cultivated on the Irtysh, Ishim, and Ural Rivers as well as east of the Issyk Kul and of the Ferghana Valley. Mixed crops are also found in Urateppe, Hissar, and Qurqanteppe Regions, on the Vakhsh, Gunt, Zarafshan, Surkhan, and Syr Rivers. Orchards (apples, grapes), too, are cultivated in the same areas as well as on the Ili River, in southern Badakhshan, on the Vakhsh and around Urateppe. Mulberry trees, for raising silk worm, are cultivated in the Ferghana Valley.

Next to cotton farming, herding sheep (karakul) in the Amu and Kara Kum Canal regions, in eastern Badakhshan, as well as in the Syr and Surkhan Darya regions is of prime importance. The Kara Kum Desert, of course, is an ideal place for raising Bactrian as well as dromedary camels.

Cattle, in general, is raised in the east of the Caspian and on the Kazakh plateau, especially its western regions. Other places for raising cattle are around the Issyk Kul, on

the Chu, Talas, and Naryn Rivers, and on the slopes of the Tien Shan and the Pamir-Alai mountains. Eastern Badakhshan, the slopes of Hissar and Qarategin mountains, the Qurqanteppe region, and the Hungry Desert along the Amu River and Kara Kum Canal also yield to cattle raising. Other cattle-raising regions of Central Asia are around Lake Karakul, on the lower elevations of the Pamirs, and on the Panj (Uzbekistan side), and the Zarafshan.

Although primarily in the Kyrgyz steppe, dairy is produced in all the places mentioned above in relation to raising cattle and sheep.

Fishing has traditionally been undertaken in the main inland waters, especially the Caspian and the Aral as well as on the eastern shore of the Caspian in the Issyk Kul. While the Aral fisheries are no longer in operation due to ecological problems plaguing the Sea (see below), the Amu Darya, Syr Darya, and the ara Kara Kum Canal continue to produce reasonably good catches.

Central Asia attracted attention during its earlier history not as a source of minerals but of grain which can be produced around the Ural and Ismim Rivers in the Kyrgyz steppe in the north, around the Talas and Chu Rivers in the center, and around the Zarafshan, Vakhsh, Surkhan, and Gunt Rivers in the south and southeast.

About 1.5% of the world's resource for antimony, mercury, and uranium lies in the Kyrgyz Republic, southeastern Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan. In addition, large amounts of lead, silver, and zinc are found in Achisay and in the Altai mountains. Gold is found in Murutau, the Altai mountains, the Kyrgyz Republic, southeastern Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan. In addition to these places for gold, copper mines abound in Kounrad, and Jezkagan. The latter two places as well as Akchatau have large deposits of molybdenum. Akchatau is also known for its deposits of tungsten. Other minerals found in the region include asbestos in the Altai, chromium in Khromtau, and phosphate in Karatau.

From ancient times Badakhshan, both the part of it that is in Afghanistan and the part that is in Tajikistan, has been a good source of precious stones. Jewelers from throughout the world come to the Panj (esp. the Kulab region) for the best types of stones available anywhere. Kulab, along with the Ferghana Valley also produce a major portion of the salt used in the region.

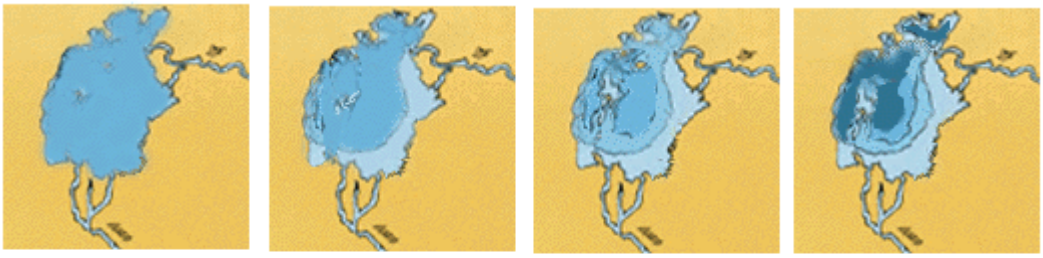
Coal is found in the Kazakh plateau, in the Muyunkum Desert, east of Issyk Kul, and in the Naryn basin east of Ferghana. The Hissar mountains, the nearby Nebit Dag (Turkmenistan), and the Surkhan Darya region of Uzbekistan also have considerable coal reserves. Further east, the Russians have been mining coal in Badakhshan, especially in the Murghab, since the beginning of the Soviet Union.

Central Asia's petroleum and natural gas reserves are concentrated on the east shore of the Caspian. In the south, there are reserves west of the Kopet Dag and Nebit Dag mountains; in the center around Aqtau, and in the north by the Emba River. Smaller reserves are found in the Naryn basin east of Ferghana and on the Panj in Uzbekistan.

The Surkhan Darya region and the southern fringes of the Kizil Kum desert, too, have considerable deposits of natural gas.

Ecological Problems

Central Asia's man-made ecological problems make us wonder about the wisdom of collective efforts that have the well-being of individuals at heart. People who happen to be at the mercy of such individuals, or of a system that works as blindly as such individuals, irrespective of ethnic background, social disposition, and ideology leanings are likely to suffer immensely. At leasr two distinct examples come to mind. The first is the plight of the Aral Sea as it continues to dry up. The second is the transitory draining of the Kara Bogaz in western Turkmenistan which resulted in the saltification of the surrounding region, a problem that continues to alarm Turkmen officials, years after allowing the Caspian to refill the Bogaz to its previous capacity. The situation of Issyk Kul is still being investigated.



The Shrinking of the Aral Sea between 1970 and the year 2000

The Aral Sea Catastrophe

For its sustenance, the Aral Sea, also known as Aral Lake, draws on the glaciers located to its southeast in the Tien Shan mountains and the Pamirs. The rivers that bring the water to the Aral are the 1370 mile-long Syr Dariya (also known as Jaxartes and Jaihun) and the 1578 mile-long Amu Dariya (also known as Oxus and Saihun). (Dariya means river in Turkish.) Before the 1950s, these rivers maintained the amount of water in the lake at 1,075 cubic kilometers and the salinity density of 10 gram per liter. Other than these two rivers, the lake does not have any other source with which to replenish itself.

Central Asia is a predominantly agrarian society. Its people had drawn on these rivers for the irrigation of their farms for centuries. Using a moderate amount of the waters of the rivers, therefore, has always been a feature of the ecological makeup of the region. In fact, the Afghans, on the right side of the Amu, still use the river for irrigating their fields.

Misuse of the rivers began when the Soviets introduced their grand scheme, i.e., to divert the waters of the Amu to feed the otherwise parched scraps of land on the fringes of the

Kara Kum and to build massive irrigation channels on both the Amu and the Syr for the creation of new cotton and wheat fields. Not everyone was happy with the plan. Many foresaw the disaster that would hit Aral and the livelihood of those who lived around the lake. Others saw bumper crops and employment for close to 2,000.000 people every year, as opposed to the fisheries that employed only 60,000 people a year. To allay all fears of doom, the planners suggested yet another grandiose project, the diversion of Siberian rivers through a 2,500 kilometer canal to replenish the Aral.

The plans were approved. By 1960, the waters of Amu reached the city of Ashgabat, making the desert bloom all across its 900 kilometers. And from Ashgabat, it headed for the Caspian Sea. The projected canals on both sides of the Syr and Amu also went into operation, turning the parched lands around them into blooming fields of cotton. Large numbers of people, attracted by the unprecedented harvests of cotton and wheat, left their original homelands and moved to towns like Merv, Murghab, Charju, and the like.

The first sign of substantial shrinking of the lake appears in the 1970s. It is obvious that the sea is not at its normal level. Weather conditions in the Tien Shan and the Pamirs preventing the glaciers from providing the usual amount of water are blamed. No step is taken to remedy the situation. In the 1980s, when the cause of shrinkage can no longer be hidden, the Siberian diversion is brought up and discussed. Dinmukhammad Kunaev, one of the architects of the disaster the Kazakhs were about to face, tries very hard to replenish the lake with water from Siberia. His pleas fall on deaf ear. Instead Gorbachev replaces Kunaev with Kolbin, which leads to the mid-1980s riots. Better conservation methods are advised.

By 1990, the Aral Sea region becomes off limit to foreigners. Flight to Dushanbe and other regions that cross the lake are scheduled such that the plane would fly over the lake around midnight. But what with glasnost and perestroika, people are made aware of the plight of the lake and expeditions are sent to assess the damage. They find out that the amount of inflow into the lake must be raised from the present-day 7 cubic kilometers a year to nearly 30 cubic kilometers to restore the lake to stabilize the lake; to restore its 1950s level, 56 cubic kilometers a year is estimated. Otherwise, within 30 or so years, the lake would dry up completely.

In the furor for Democracy, conferences are organized in both Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan to raise the public's consciousness about the plight, but that, too, does not yield the desired result. Administrators tied up in more complex socio-political, economic, and ideological issues postpone the ecological problems, hoping the larger world community would take care of them.

The port of Muynak, the home of a major fish canning factory with 10,000 fishermen and over 6,000 workers is now landlocked. The canning factory is closed since 1981 when the last commercially viable fish was caught in the Aral Sea. Aralsk, another major port on the north shore shares the problems of Muynak. Its fishing boats, too, dot the dry bed now a hundred kilometers from the port proper.

There are, of course, positive and negative aspects to each issue. Those who pushed for productivity in the 1950s had the well-being of their fellow Soviets at heart. They created jobs where camels grazed and planted cotton where the sand reigned. In other words, they put food in their peoples' baskets and provided jobs for their youth. Usually those who dig a canal that is 1,400 kilometers long can easily visualize the creation of another one that is 2, 500 kilometers long. So, at the time, replenishing the Aral Sea did not seem as impossible as it does today.

But, in addition to a lack of certainty for funds for the Siberian project, the 1950s architect of the Aral disaster did not think about the impact of their decision on the climate, the raise in the salinity of the water, loss of habitat for 135 out of 173 species of animals, and the like. And these factors are only footnotes to the impact of loose salt and chemicals in the air on people still living in the area. Infant mortality (100 out of 1000), throat cancer, kidney and liver diseases, arthritic diseases, chronic bronchitis, and thyroid dysfunction abound in a region that is short of hospitals, doctors, and medicine. Chernobyl and Kuwait tragedies happened as would an earthquake. The Aral Sea is becoming a source of pollutants contaminating the region as far as the Himalayas.

The Bogaz Gol Disaster

The story of the draining of Bogaz Gol is pretty much the same. In the 1970s Soviet scientists hypothesize that the floor of the Bogaz contains major deposits of minerals. In an effort to extract those minerals, in 1980, Soviet authorities undertake a complete draining of the Bogaz under the pretext that it draws too much on the waters of the Caspian, making irrigation difficult.. By 1983, it is obvious that the pot of gold the authorities had been seeking does not exist. The dam separating the Bogaz from the Caspian is lifted and the water is allowed to reenter the Bogaz.

The story would have ended happily there except for the fact that the draining of the Bogaz over three years had resulted in the saltification of the Bogaz as well as of the lands surrounding it. How long it would take and how much money needs to be spent to restore the land to its 1970's status remains to be seen, especially when eastern Turkmenistan is suffering from the saltification of the Aral and its environs.

See also:
Afghanistan: An Overview
Azerbaijan: An Overview
Iran: A Concise Overview
Kazakhstan: An Overview
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