

Uzbekistan: Civil Society in the Heartland

by Chris Seiple

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Each century has had its own geographical perspective. . . . To this day, however, our view of geographical realities is colored for practical purposes by our preconceptions of the past. In other words, human society is still related to the facts of geography not as they are but in no small measure as they have been approached in the course of history.¹

One hundred years ago, Sir Halford John Mackinder (1861–1947) presented a bold idea that became the foundation of geopolitics and U.S. foreign policy. Originally presented to the Royal Geographical Society in 1904, but subsequently readjusted for the strategic contexts of 1919 and 1943, Mackinder proposed a model that would put into perspective the competing forces in international politics. By expressing history as “part of the life of the world organism,” he devised a “geographical formula” into which any political balance could be fit.²

Mackinder’s formula focused on the closed heartland of Eurasia. Whoever possessed this great “grassland zone . . . of high mobility” would not only gain rich natural resources, but also would be unassailable by sea power. The heartland’s railroads facilitated the kind of internal communication and transport that would give its possessor the capacity to “fling power from side to side of this area,” from “the greatest natural fortress on earth.” Through sheer location, the region was critical to global stability and the grand strategy

¹ Sir Halford Mackinder, *Democratic Ideals and Reality: A Study in the Politics of Reconstruction* (Washington, D.C.: National Defense University Press, 1996 [1919]), pp. 21–23. This volume also includes Mackinder’s “The Scope and Methods of Geography,” *Proceedings of the Royal Geographical Society*, vol. 9, 1887; “The Geographical Pivot of History,” *Geographical Journal*, vol. 23, 1904; and “The Round World and Winning the Peace,” *Foreign Affairs*, July 1943.

² *Democratic Ideals*, p. 176; notes of the Society’s meeting recorded in Harm J. de Blij, *Systematic Political Geography*, 2nd edition (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1973), p. 286.



Source: CIA Worldbook

of any global power. “The Heartland yields its power to the state which commands it, and it can be commanded from outside or within.”³

Central Asia, the center of the heartland, is the backyard today of the surrounding, and often competing, nuclear powers of Russia, China, Pakistan, and, soon, Iran; as well as India, which has basing rights in Tajikistan; and the United States, which has basing rights in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. Central Asia is also on the frontlines against militant Islam, sitting atop the crescent of crisis that rises from North Africa to Central Asia before descending into Southeast Asia. It is a vital region that demands sustained engagement.

There are two components to Mackinder’s heartland theory: the well-known geostrategic element (i.e., the military might of hard power), and the less well-known geopsychological aspect of man’s local interaction with and perception of geography (i.e., the civil society of soft power). Hitler and Stalin would verify through brute military occupation Mackinder’s famous geostrategic dictum: “Who rules East Europe commands the Heartland: Who rules the Heartland commands the World-Island: Who rules the World-Island commands the World.” Having defeated Nazi Germany’s bid to control the heartland, America would then spend nearly fifty years trying to contain the Soviet Union’s

³ *Democratic Ideals*, pp. 189, 198, 201; de Blij, *Systematic Political Geography*, p. 286; Parker, *Mackinder Geography as an Aid to Statecraft* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), p. 218.

expansion from the Heartland. Geopsychologically, Mackinder demanded respect for the local “realities of the round world on which we must practice the intricate art of living together. . . . In the Heartland, where physical contrasts are few, it is only with the aid of a conscious ideal, shaping political life in the direction of nationalities, that we shall be able to entrench true freedom.”⁴

Uzbekistan is literally at the center of Central Asia, landlocked by Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, and Turkmenistan. Run by an authoritarian regime, Uzbekistan’s 26 million people make up one-third of Central Asia’s population. Ninety percent are Muslim, and 60 percent are under the age of 25 and/or live in rural areas. It maintains the largest and most effective army in the region. By virtue of location and size, it is the center of regional geopolitics and trade. Yet American foreign policy toward Uzbekistan has missed both geostrategy and geopsychology. Washington rediscovered the country only after 9/11, and it continues to endeavor to implement its own civil-society ideology there without understanding the country. Formulating successful U.S. policy toward Uzbekistan requires understanding the Uzbek land and the resulting history, religion, traditions, and culture.

Central Asia

Central Asia is a traditional land of river-fed oases, sweeping grasslands, difficult deserts, and high mountains. It is in Central Asia that southern Asia’s settled peoples meet the nomadic steppe societies to the north. It is also the place where East meets West, where the fabled “Silk Road” (actually several routes) connected Europe and China. Greek, Persian, Chinese, Arab, Mongol, Russian, British and now American empires have clashed and passed there, leaving a legacy of Judaism, Christianity, Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, Islam, and other religions. This has resulted in a syncretic combination of beliefs.

The only constant is the “dogged stationariness”⁵ of the land’s people. Central Asia is a classic illustration of how geography forms and informs the interaction between man and his environment. The water-fed oasis of an Uzbek’s birth defines his identity and worldview. By 1000 BCE a “hydraulic,” civil society had evolved that, paradoxically, had a community- and family-based culture that also submitted to authoritarian leaders. In order to survive, the group had to work together, under firm direction, to harness irrigation.

This balance between ruler and ruled on the local level was repeated at the regional and international levels. Oasis leaders had to balance other oasis leaders, whom they also needed for trade. Meanwhile, this region of oasis cities almost always found itself on the periphery of some distant ruling empire. What resulted was a society that assimilated those who “conquered,”

⁴ *Democratic Ideals*, pp. 19, 106, 144.

⁵ A. T. Mahan, *The Problem of Asia and Its Effect upon International Policies* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1900), p. 87.

eclectically choosing and embodying the accompanying cultures, religions, and ideologies of the latest invader, while producing city and regional leaders who managed as much as led the local elites. This pattern remains today, written into an Uzbek national identity that is culturally united by an Islam that practices respect for its fellow faiths.

The Uzbek Identity Begins to Form

When Muslim armies first arrived in Central Asia at the close of the seventh century, they encountered a culture that was tolerant and entrepreneurial, organized and taxed by villages, but led by a local ruler who oversaw the allocation of water. This Persian-speaking army of Arabs brought settlers, garrisons, and their Islam faith. In 751 CE they defeated the Chinese at Talas (Kyrgyzstan), securing a regional influence that continues to this day. Local elites retained their power, but there was now an Arab tax collector by their side.

In 1220 came Genghis Khan's Mongol hordes, which, after destroying everything in their path, eventually converted to Islam. Genghis overlaid onto the existing regional and familial clans symbolic forms of kinship, such as gift exchange and ties of office. Upon his death in 1227, each son received a region of the Mongol empire. The second son, Chagatay, received Central Asia, and from this mixed Turkic-Mongol culture emerged the Chagatay language that Timur the Lame (Tamerlane in the West) spoke. After consolidating his power around Samarkand in 1370, Tamerlane extended his empire from China to India to Turkey. As he conquered, he sent the best architects and artisans back to Samarkand. Tamerlane's grandson, Ulug Beg, continued this tradition, establishing Samarkand as an intellectual and theological center of the Muslim world. During his rule, 1407–49, he built the famous Registan Square, which featured madrassas that taught science and Islamic theology. The Timurid rule was administered by local elites who spoke Persian.

Ghengis's grandson, Batu, inherited Western Siberia. By the end of the fifteenth century, Batu's people and region had evolved into the Golden Horde, an empire of its own to which the nascent Russian state paid tribute. In the eastern part of this region—the Qipchaq steppe northeast of the Caspian Sea—the White Horde emerged, among them the Uzbeks. Uzbek leader Abul Fath Muhammad Shaybani Khan (1451–1510) moved his people south and conquered Central Asia and Samarkand in 1500. Shaybani was a spiritual man of great military and intellectual prowess. He borrowed the Persian/Chagatay word for shepherd, *shaban*, to name the dynasty that would rule Central Asia for over three centuries.

The Shaybanids, through different family branches, ruled in Samarkand, Bukhara, and Tashkent while also establishing the khanates of Khiva (based in ancient Khorezm) to the west of Samarkand, and Kokand, to the east. All these branches except Kokand's are in modern Uzbekistan. The society over which they ruled consisted of three layers: the foundation layer of

Persian-speaking rulers, intellectuals, and merchants; the second layer of Chagatay-speaking conglomeration of Turkic and Mongol tribes and fiefdoms; and the Shaybanids, the third layer, which conquered the second in 1500.

While this Shaybanid culture was developing, Vasco de Gama was discovering sea routes around Africa to open up trade between Asia and Europe. These were far preferable to the Silk Road, travel on which was unsafe, and Central Asia began to fade into obscurity. From 1600 to the Russian conquest (1865–81), the region’s khanates became the familiar stereotype of cruel despotism that is now associated with Central Asia. Still, even though there was now a geographic unification of Central Asia, the Russian overseers left the local community to the leadership of indigenous elites administratively and socially. For example, during Russian rule, colonial administrators and settlers built their neighborhoods alongside, but separate from, those of the local people. Not surprisingly, an ethnic consciousness did not emerge among local peoples. Locality and family origin remained more important in determining loyalties than strictly ethnic origin.⁶

Understanding the clans of these oasis societies—regional networks of family and friends who trust and are obliged to one another—is the key to understanding Uzbekistan’s civil society today. As Uzbek President Islam Karimov, the clock-setter in charge of the interlocking gears of the country’s clans, writes: “The ultimate goal of a clan is to push its members as far as possible up into the ranks of the state hierarchy. The feature which distinguishes members of a clan is . . . simply a shared birthplace.”⁷

The Uzbek State Begins to Form

Eight years before the fall of the Russian empire, Count K. K. Phalen assessed the region for the tsar’s court, concluding:

What I believe to be a genuine contempt is veiled by an appearance of outward submission that somehow suggests inner awareness of a culture and an outlook on life vastly older than our own. . . . The oasis peoples, with a legacy of countless centuries of experience in submitting to irresponsible rulers, appear to be more adept at giving ‘an appearance of outward submission’ than the Kazaks and Kirghiz.⁸

The Uzbeks would prove within the century how right he was. In December 1917, V. I. Lenin and Josef Stalin (then Commissar for Nationality Affairs) addressed a communiqué to “all you whose mosques and prayer houses have

⁶ Geoffrey Wheeler, *The Modern History of Central Asia* (New York: Praeger, 1964), pp. 41, 65; Olivier Roy, *The New Central Asia: The Creation of Nations* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), p. 3.

⁷ Islam Karimov, *Uzbekistan on the Threshold of the Twenty-First Century: Challenges to Stability and Progress* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1998), p. 60.

⁸ Elizabeth E. Bacon, *Central Asians under Russian Rule A Study in Culture Change* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1966), p. 208.

been destroyed, whose beliefs and customs have been trampled upon by the tsars and oppressors of Russia: Your beliefs and usages, your national and cultural institutions are forever free and inviolate. Organize your national life in complete freedom.”⁹ This proved inapplicable to the Uzbeks, who did not yet have a national identity. After Lenin’s death in 1924, as Stalin began to consolidate his power, he sought to seduce the peoples of Central Asia into the Soviet fold by creating previously nonexistent national identities. With his policy of “national in form, socialist in content,” he sought to literally and figuratively map the peoples of Central Asia into the Soviet culture, creating strategic and psychological boundaries for groups of people that had never thought of themselves in terms of being a group.

Central Asia’s contemporary borders make no sense unless viewed according to three results of this demarcation. First, the five Central Asian republics were drawn in such a way as to prevent the future possibility of political loyalty to preexisting structures, such as the khanates. Second, nascent ethnic groups were dispersed and divided so that they would balance each other within state boundaries, preventing them from becoming a unified force. Third, this made the newly aware ethnic groups dependent on Moscow for power and on the Russian language as the *lingua franca*.

Such were the conditions in 1925 as the Soviets began the process of “Uzbekifying Uzbekistan.” Language, alphabets, history, and cultural tradition had to be imposed or invented. Tamerlane, who predated the Uzbek people, had to be made into a national Uzbek hero. State structures—from the secret police to youth leagues—had to be formed to bind the peoples within Uzbekistan together.

Soviet in Structure, Cultural in Content

The imposition of these Soviet trappings of nationhood began a process whereby Uzbekistan, a country of shared Muslim values, would become a self-realized nation based on preexisting cultural elements. These cultural structures—community-based and linked through bonds of kinship, geography, and mutual patronage—simply adapted themselves to this latest empire. Over time, the Uzbeks rewrote Stalin’s slogan, creating an Uzbek-Soviet civil society that was simultaneously Soviet in structure, but cultural in content.

This culture found basic expression in both rural and urban settings. In rural areas, the Soviets imposed the collective farms (*kolkhoz*) and pooled manpower to irrigate those farms, using the rural elites to control the irrigation system. The alternative to the *kolkhoz* was the traditional *mahalla*, through which local elders ruled the village, subdivision, or even apartment building.

⁹As quoted in Richard Pipes, *The Formation of the Soviet Union: Communism and Nationalism 1917–1923* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1954), p. 155.

At its best, the *maballa* is the place where religious and family values are instilled and group members look out for each other, collectively parenting their children, connecting friends and families to jobs, distributing funds to those in need, and submitting to the judgment of the elders. This environment is what most Uzbeks experienced in the Soviet period outside of school and work, where Soviet values prevailed.

The *maballa* has been a place where rich and poor; professional and laborer; Sunni, Shia, and Sufi can meet together. It represents a native neighborhood, as Mackinder would expect and approve, a civil society built on “collective identities and the reciprocal relationships necessary to get things done.”¹⁰ This is Uzbek civil society.

With this grassroots background, newly created Uzbek elites began to “serve” the Soviet Union at various governmental levels, acquiring in the process a taste for power. Keeping and building power meant balancing the desires of Moscow with those of their own nation (as Muslim elites became increasingly proud of being Uzbeks) and clan network. The traditional civil society exerted a powerful pull, demanding protection and preservation. Muslim Party members came to be regarded as protectors, capable of shielding Uzbeks from the full brunt of Soviet policies. Today, the elites still live two social lives, passing from one to the other as effortlessly as they switch from the Uzbek to the Russian language.

The tie that binds elites and *maballas* is an eclectic, respectful, hospitable Islam. Uzbeks know the five pillars of Islam, but generally only practice a couple at a time. Many circumcise their boys and would make the pilgrimage to Mecca if they could afford it. They also, however, drink, and they even celebrate *Nov Rus*, a spring festival whose origins predate the arrival of Islam.

Perhaps the greatest symbol of Uzbek society is found on the Registan’s madrassa that Ulug Beg built in the fifteenth century. Defying conservative Islam’s ban on iconography, this mural displays two sun-tigers chasing two white deer. The sun-tigers reflect the Zoroastrian religion that, like Christianity, was present in Central Asia before the arrival of Islam. The deer represent a sometimes passive and pessimistic people used to being invaded, dependent upon a flexible faith to comfort them. Today, “even though the majority of . . . mullahs do not know dogma, the canonically approved rituals, or the prayers, they serve Islam very well on the daily level, because they know very well what *their* people need. They preserve *their* Islam, which consists of everything that satisfies *their* society.”¹¹ The saying

¹⁰ David M. Abramson, “Identity Counts: The Soviet Legacy and the Census in Uzbekistan,” in David Kertzer and Dominique Arel, eds., *Census and Identity: The Politics of Race, Ethnicity, and Language in National Censuses* (Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 186–99.

¹¹ Sergei P. Poliakov, edited with Martha Brill Olcott, *Everyday Islam, Religion and Tradition in Rural Central Asia* (Armonk: M. E. Sharpe, 1992), p. 106.

“To be Uzbek is to be Muslim” is still commonly used, notwithstanding Soviet efforts to repress Islam.

Regionalism and Rashidov

The above characteristics have been common to the civil society of Uzbekistan for centuries and take particular form in the various regions and clans: the Fergana, Khwarezm, Karakalpakistan, Bukhara, Samarkand, and Sukhandarya-Kashkadarya. The Soviets demarcated these traditional regions with administrative boundaries, thus preserving the preexisting patron-client relations among the Uzbek clans. The power of regional clans depended on their relationships with Moscow. The Jadids of Bukhara were prominent among the first elites running Uzbekistan, but after they were murdered in Stalin’s purges of 1937–38, the Tashkent-Fergana faction came to power. This faction lost influence to the Samarkand faction under the long rule of Sharaf Rashidov (1959–83). After Rashidov’s death, Moscow favored the Tashkent-Fergana clan. The Samarkand clan came back to power in June 1989 with the appointment of Islam Karimov, who has ruled ever since, as Party Secretary.

Moscow’s policy was to place native elites in the top posts in Central Asia, but also to place Russians as their deputies, using an “indirect administration” to run the empire. They also insisted that national elites remain within their Central Asia republics: they were never posted to the western Soviet Union, let alone to another Central Asian republic. With no opportunity for promotion outside of Uzbekistan, members of the Uzbek elite naturally built their own clan network over the course of their communist careers.

The dual nature of the Uzbek-Soviet identity among elites was solidified under Rashidov, who embodied this approach. On the one hand, he worked hard to stay in the good graces of Moscow, telling Moscow what it wanted to hear, especially when it came to cotton quotas. All the while he was building a massive patrimonial network of relationships and contacts. He presented himself, in word and deed, as the national elder—a “subtle psychologist . . . wise and experienced”—who “understands the power mechanisms in a society that, in the main, lives according to the deeply ingrained laws of a rural community.” When it became clear to Moscow that it had been hoodwinked by Rashidov over the years, and that he had kept cotton profits for himself and his clan-network, he died of a purported sudden heart attack.¹²

The Soviets had finally realized that their vision of a “new Soviet man” was incongruous with the culture of Central Asia. Between 1984 and 1987, coinciding with Gorbachev’s rise, they replaced 90 percent of the ruling elites

¹² Demian Vaisan, “Regionalism and Clan Loyalty in the Political Life of Uzbekistan,” in Yaacov Ro’I, ed., *Muslim Eurasia: Conflicting Legacies* (London: Frank Cass, 1995), pp. 109–10. On whether Rashidov was a nationalist or party stooge, see Gregory Gleason, “Sharaf Rashidov and the Dilemmas of National Leadership,” *Central Asian Survey*, vol. 5, 1986, pp. 133–60.

in Uzbekistan, in what became known throughout the Soviet Union as “the Uzbek affair.” Moscow denounced the Uzbek clans as “localism” and “Rashidovism.” Several Soviet newspapers denounced Rashidov as a “latter-day Uzbek khan with a party card.”¹³

Uzbeks took exception to being labeled corrupt and saw the crack-down as an ethnic vendetta designed to break up the traditionally Islamic native societies and the networks of local officials. The crackdown failed because the clan networks were too entrenched, but also because the people had a different concept of corruption than Moscow did: one person’s corruption is another’s coping mechanism in a state that cannot provide for its people.¹⁴

The Uzbek affair evidenced the persistence of long-existing civil society patterns, and also set the stage for more of the same in the post-Soviet era as Uzbek nationalism finally began to form, especially among Tashkent intellectuals. The *Birlik* party, formed in 1988, became a voice for Uzbek issues vis-à-vis Moscow’s policies.

Karimov and National Consolidation

In 1989, Moscow began to lighten up on the Uzbeks and Islam. Uzbek-Meskheti Turk ethnic violence in June 1989 in the Fergana Valley, however, led Gorbachev to appoint a new first secretary, Islam Karimov. A technocrat and economist, Karimov had no visible connection to the Uzbek affair and, most important, possessed no inherent power base. The last person from whom one would expect political acumen, he was soon cherry-picking *Birlik’s* issues, rehabilitating Rashidov, defining himself against Moscow, and taking a page from Rashidov, cultivating his own network as he consolidated his power. By 1993, Karimov was the unambiguous leader of Uzbekistan.

The peoples of Uzbekistan respected the stability he brought to a turbulent beginning. In the early 1990s, with ethnic riots rocking the Fergana Valley, the Soviet Union collapsing; and militant Islamists pushing Tajikistan into civil war, Uzbeks came to view their leader as a patriarch. As one educated Uzbek told me: “Traditional Uzbeks have an acceptance of someone who has more power and has the last word. President Karimov is the head of the Uzbek household.” Karimov has been legitimately popular for much of his rule.

While the West sees in him only another Central Asian authoritarian, Karimov himself still has to account for and balance the regional elites. Maintaining the loyalty of regional forces and stability in general requires

¹³ Roy, *The New Central Asia*, p. 125; James Critchlow, *Nationalism in Uzbekistan: A Soviet Republic’s Road to Sovereignty* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1991), p. 43; quote in Critchlow, “Prelude to ‘Independence’: How the Uzbek Party Apparatus Broke Moscow’s Grip on Elite Recruitment,” in Fierman, ed., *Soviet Central Asia*, p. 135.

¹⁴ Gregory Gleason, “Fealty and Loyalty: Informal Authority Structures in Soviet Asia,” *Soviet Studies*, vol. 43, no. 4, 1991.

achieving a “fine balance between concessions and reprisals.”¹⁵ As Karimov is reported to have said: “The clans are the first thing I think about when I get up in the morning.”¹⁶

U.S. Civil Society vs. Uzbek Civil Society

Several Western observers have noted the special nature of Uzbekistan’s community-oriented civil society. The late Donald Carlisle, a well respected Uzbekistan expert from Boston College, observed that Uzbekistan’s “domestic political geography and internal regional politics provide the best framework for understanding how national and ethnic relations unfold.” Martha Brill Olcott of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace argues that understanding the clan networks is “perhaps the single most crucial element” in understanding Central Asia, especially that clan politics ‘covey privilege’ and ‘responsibility.’ And the *Atlantic Monthly*’s Robert Kaplan has concluded from his travels in Uzbekistan that “Islamic identity . . . engender[s] community-mindedness. Though Islamization has proved fertile ground for terrorists, it also offers a path toward civil society that former-Soviet Central Asia desperately requires.”¹⁷ Washington, however, not only failed to recognize Uzbekistan’s geostrategic importance until 9/11, but has also failed to grasp the geopsychological importance of, let alone work within, this preexisting civil society. Mackinder anticipated this failure in 1919: “Our view of geographical realities is colored for practical purposes by our preconceptions of the past.”

Geostrategic Failure

The speed with which Uzbekistan achieved independence in 1991 caught American analysts and policymakers by surprise. In fact, the George H. W. Bush administration would have preferred that the map remained the same. Focused on preventing the widespread chaos that usually accompanies the death of an ideology and empire, the administration preferred the known map to the unknown map. President Bush and Secretary of State James Baker worked urgently to maintain the status quo. Upon returning from Yugoslavia in June 1991, Baker reported to the Freedom Forum that there was a “distinct air of unreality, an inability on the part of several of the republic leaders to

¹⁵ Ilkhamov, “The Limits of Centralization,” in Pauline Jones Luong, ed., *The Transformation of Central Asia: States and Societies from Soviet Rule to Independence* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), p. 161.

¹⁶ Author interview with senior Uzbek official; see also Karimov, *Uzbekistan on the Threshold*, pp. 60, 62.

¹⁷ Donald S. Carlisle, “Geopolitics and Ethnic Problems of Uzbekistan and its Neighbors,” in Ro’I, ed., *Muslim Eurasia*, p. 72; Martha Brill Olcott, “Islam and Fundamentalism in Central Asia,” in *ibid.*, p. 25; and Robert D. Kaplan, *The Ends of the Earth: A Journey to the Frontiers of Anarchy* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), p. 278.

understand . . . the dangerous consequences” of seeking independence. Soon thereafter, President Bush told a Ukrainian audience desperate for American recognition that Washington preferred to work through President Gorbachev. Within a month of this speech, Uzbekistan declared independence after the failed putsch against Gorbachev; by the end of the year the Soviet Union was dead. The heartland had been reconfigured anew and was once again up for empire grabs.¹⁸

To conceive of Central Asia not as part of the Soviet Union, but as a region with its own rich and distinctive heritage was difficult for Washington, as well as academia, at the time. The majority of the 1990s literature is cast in regional generalities about the geopolitical and religious-cultural landscape, almost always in the context of the former Soviet south, ignoring the granularity of the particular Central Asian countries and their historic connections to South Asia. This general approach was mirrored in policymaking circles, especially during the Clinton administration. Central Asia was an afterthought to Undersecretary of State Strobe Talbott’s “Russia first” policy. This inability to refashion the geostrategic map of the heartland was manifested in the organization of U.S. agencies, as well. The State Department grouped Central Asia first under the category of “former Soviet Union” and then the reconceived “newly independent states.” Today, Central Asia falls under the State Department’s Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs, which indicates that the East-West preconception of geography continues.

The only U.S. government institution to rethink its geostrategic perspective was the Department of Defense, which in 1998 assigned Central Asia to Central Command (CENTCOM), with its North-South area of operations (from the horn of Africa through the Middle East, Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan) rather than to the larger EUCOM. Anthony Zinni, then the general in charge of CENTCOM, believed that it made much more sense to include Central Asia in CENTCOM, since the region shared a common issue with the rest of CENTCOM’s area: radical Islam.¹⁹ President Karimov observed that:

Among some Western analysts and Islamic scholars it has become increasingly popular to treat fundamentalism as something not harmful to the world community, as something primarily directed against the fundamentalists’ own states. . . . Don’t these people fully comprehend the real situation in the Muslim East, repeatedly subject to disintegration, discord, and humiliation?²⁰

While continuing to envision Central Asia as “the former Soviet Union” was organizationally natural for most U.S. officials, it was also intellectually lazy, and it proved Mackinder right again. Meanwhile, Uzbekistan was marginalized in U.S. policy until 9/11.

¹⁸ James Baker III, Address to the Gannett Foundation Freedom Forum, June 26, 1991, Rosslyn, Virginia, *Federal News Service*, Federal Information Systems Corporation; Terence Hunt, “Bush Warns Republics Against ‘Hopeless Course of Isolation,’ ” *AP*, Aug. 1, 1991.

¹⁹ Author interview, Mar. 7, 2000.

²⁰ Karimov, *Uzbekistan on the Threshold*, p. 27.

Geopsychological Failure

Few have understood Uzbekistan's geopsychological landscape. Uzbek dissident Abdumannob Polat has written that "the basis for creating civil society does not yet exist in Uzbekistan"; Roger Kangas, an Uzbekistan expert at the U.S. Army's Marshall Center in Germany, noted that "a framework conducive to establishing a civil society remains largely non-existent"; and Patricia Carley, a senior analyst at the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, wrote that there are "many complex reasons for the absence of civil society."²¹ Among these reasons, per Marianne Kamp, history professor at the University of Wyoming, is that "rather than adopting the model used by much of the developed world for the implementation of welfare through professional social workers, Uzbekistan has chosen a community-based system that depends on character, knowledge and inherent fairness of elders in the community."²² In 1999, Stephen Sestanovich, ambassador-at-large and special advisor to the Secretary of State for the Newly Independent States, remarked that "absence of democratic traditions, of a civil society, of business experience and of strong national identities has made the years since independence tough."²³ This attitude still prevails. The U.S. Agency for International Development, whose mission it is to implement civil society in Uzbekistan, announced in 2003 that civil society was only then "beginning to develop in Uzbekistan," citing the more than 500 non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that had been established.²⁴

The conventional definition of "civil society" put forward by American political theorists in the early 1990s and adopted by Washington was the outgrowth of Western political thought. Thus Boston University's Adam Seligman defined civil society as that space where "free, self-determining individuality sets forth its claims for satisfaction of its wants and personal autonomy."²⁵ Another leading expert, Larry Diamond, Senior Fellow at the Hoover Institution, defined it as the "realm of organized social life

²¹ Abdumannob Polat, "Can Uzbekistan Build Democracy and Civil Society?" in M. Holt Ruffin and Daniel Waugh, eds., *Civil Society in Central Asia* (Seattle: Univ. of Washington Press, 1999), p. 135; Roger D. Kangas, "State Building and Civil Society in Central Asia," in Tismaneanu, ed., *Political Culture and Civil Society in Russia and the New States of Eurasia* (Armonk: M. E. Sharpe, 1995), p. 271; Patricia M. Carley, "The Legacy of the Soviet Political System and the Prospects for Developing Civil Society in Central Asia," in *ibid.*, p. 292.

²² Marianne Kamp, "Between Women and the State Mahalla Committees and Social Welfare in Uzbekistan," in Luong, ed., *The Transformation of Central Asia*, p. 56.

²³ Stephen Sestanovich, Remarks to the Asia-Pacific Subcommittee, House International Relations Committee, Washington, D.C., Mar. 17, 1999.

²⁴ U.S. Government Assistance to and Cooperative Activities with Eurasia—FY2002, Country Assessments—Uzbekistan, at www.state.gov.

²⁵ Adam B. Seligman, *The Idea of Civil Society* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), p. 3.

that is voluntary, self-generating, (largely) self-supporting, autonomous from the state, and bound by a legal order or set of shared rules,” at its best when “it is dense, affording individual opportunities to participate in multiple associations and informal networks at multiple levels of society.” Necessarily, under this model, it is hard for civil society to function in places such as Central Asia, where “civil traditions were weakest and predatory rule greatest.”²⁶

But this definition is based on a Western-oriented set of beliefs and values focused on the individual. David Rieff, noted journalist and Senior Fellow at the World Policy Institute, has criticized this view for presuming that where (Western) civil society is absent, “repressive, tyrannical, even genocidal forces are supposed to have a freer hand” and that civil society exemplifies a “set of inherently democratic values.” Rieff links this approach to “the dominant ideology of the post–Cold War period: liberal market capitalism.”²⁷

The Western traditional approach does not leave room for engaging religion and the existing structures or elites. In particular, American policymakers and civil society theorists have had a hard time understanding the role of religion in international affairs. “The sweet dream of American political thought—reborn in each generation, it seems—is that cultural factors like religion will shrink into insignificance as blessed pragmatism finally comes into its own.”²⁸ Since the Enlightenment, Western states have generally separated church and state, with good result. But the casualty has been analysis of the relationship between the two. While “moral values” has been the subject of much domestic debate since the 2004 presidential election, in which they were said to have played a prominent part, religion as a legitimate factor of realpolitik abroad is all but ignored. To the extent that religion is considered, it is often framed as a simplistic ideology (e.g., conceptualizing of other societies as hostile to freedom) and source of conflict, rather than a complex worldview that forms and informs a culture.

Americans need to find a way to participate in this discussion in Uzbekistan, preferably with Uzbeks. It is extremely difficult for the American conception of civil society to allow for existing traditional structures—e.g., clan networks and the *maballa*—that are tied to religion.²⁹ These do not resonate for most American policymakers, who view preexisting cultural mechanisms as part of the problem, instead of as a congruent form to the American conception of civil society. Owing to this disconnect, the U.S. government promotes NGOs that act as single-issue advocacy platforms. Unfortunately, these NGOs simply do not do as well in places like Uzbekistan as elsewhere.

Daniel John Stevens, in his recent dissertation at the University of London, considers the role of Western donors in promoting civil society in

²⁶ Larry Diamond, “Rethinking Civil Society: Toward Democratic Consolidation,” *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 5, no. 3, 1994, pp. 14–15.

²⁷ David Rieff, “The False Dawn of Civil Society,” *The Nation*, Feb. 22, 1999.

²⁸ Jack Miles, “Religion and American Foreign Policy,” *Survival*, Spring 2004, p. 25.

²⁹ See Alec Rasizade, “Entering the Old ‘Great Game’ in Central Asia,” *Orbis*, Winter 2003.

Uzbekistan, observed several disturbing trends. First, Western donors appear to lack a common definition of civil society. For most, it is interchangeable with “democracy-building” and usually results in a “focus on NGOs as proxy for civil society.” Western donors are reluctant to engage traditional structures that seem to be at odds with the Western values the donor is trying to inculcate. “The [adjective] ‘civil’ in ‘civil society’ parallels the ‘good’ in ‘good governance’—they both refer to a set of assumptions about the way societies are best run. The civil society to be created is far from value-free or pluralistic, but an attempt to create a constituency that is able to bolster and advocate for neoliberal reforms.”³⁰ Stevens also suggests that a more communitarian approach to civil society is needed, one that would support premodern communities,

. . . valuing their functions of solidarity and sociability and allowing them to structure participation in both a parochial sense, in projects of community development, and politically, seeking to help their elites represent the community interest at the state level. Such an approach is skeptical of the extent to which modern associational forms can exist except on the foundations of pre-modern affiliations.³¹

David Abramson, an anthropologist who has studied Uzbekistan extensively, believes that this Western civil society ideology “does indeed seem to foster a particular hegemony in which ‘civility’ is symbolically opposed to accommodating an Islamic political culture.”³²

An experienced USAID employee told me: “USAID doesn’t deal directly with the *maballa* system, except to seek its approval for local and micro-finance loans and its influence with delinquent loanees.” Another USAID employee told me that before 9/11, USAID was focused on developing NGOs along “classic, cookie-cutter” lines, teaching people how to fundraise, develop a staff, etc.³³ It never focused on the NGO’s actual mission and operations (although this has begun to change since 9/11). Stevens concludes that, like Lenin’s vision for the vanguard of the proletariat (discussed in his 1902 treatise, “What is to be Done?”), the aim of Western donors has been to “foster a professional elite of civil society activists, workshop trained and clearly versed in ‘what is to be done’, to assume the leading role in the transition” to Western civil society.³⁴

Because of these attitudes, one is hard pressed to find any U.S. program that regularly engages Islam, the *maballa*, or the elites. As one

³⁰ Daniel John Stevens, *Conceptual Travels Along the Silk Road: On Civil Society Aid in Uzbekistan*, Ph.D. Thesis, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 2004, pp. 100–11. See pp. 245–46, Appendix 2 for a chart showing how the various Western agencies define civil society.

³¹ *ibid.*, p. 52.

³² David Abramson, “A Critical Look at NGOs and Civil Society as Means to an End in Uzbekistan,” unpublished paper, p. 20. See also Laurence Jarvik, “Uzbekistan: A Modernizing Society,” in this issue of *Orbis*.

³³ Author interviews, Tashkent, Apr. 2004.

³⁴ Stevens, *Conceptual Travels*, p. 121.

senior U.S. embassy official told me at the end of a three-year tour: “It’s amazing how little we know about the internal politics.”³⁵

Conclusion: “The Blind Talking to the Deaf”?

There have been extensive human rights violations in Uzbekistan since the Karimov regime took power, which cannot be condoned. The question is how these abuses should be addressed. They cannot be addressed in a way that pays no heed to the religion, culture, and traditions of the Uzbeks, lest remedial efforts be received by the people who live there as another form of imperialism. “The blind talking to the deaf,” as one Uzbek official describes U.S.-Uzbek relations, is no way to proceed.

This article has sought to identify the geostrategic and geopsychological factors that limit the U.S.-Uzbek relationship. Mackinder sought to balance the hard power of military might with the soft power of civil society, because “democracy refuses to think strategically unless and until compelled to do so for purpose of defense.”³⁶ He would certainly both support the furtherance of freedom in Uzbekistan and insist that it be done in a manner congruent with the culture.

Mackinder’s formula still provides a “political balance” to international relations. It is a useful aid to winning the war of ideas that will determine whether we defeat the terrorists. What Mackinder has to say about civil society has critical implications for the policies we formulate to win the war of ideas in places not yet under the sway of political Islam, as we must in a geostrategically vital country such as Uzbekistan.

It will take shrewd engagement. “The transformation of a traditionalist society can proceed only by traditional methods.”³⁷ Islam will be imperative, as it is “unlikely that anything akin to civil society will develop and prosper in Uzbekistan without the cultural and moral framework provided by resurgent Islam.”³⁸ If we can understand the civil society as it varies locally, then perhaps we can sustain a “reliable forepost”³⁹ of rule-of-law that bolsters democracy in Central Asia while serving as a bulwark against radical Islam.



³⁵ Author interview, June 2002, Tashkent.

³⁶ *Ideals and Reality*, p. 17.

³⁷ Poliakov, *Everyday Islam*, pp. 4–5.

³⁸ Reuel Hanks, “Civil Society and Identity in Uzbekistan,” in M. Holt Ruffin and Daniel Waugh, eds., *Civil Society in Central Asia* (Seattle: Univ. of Washington Press, 1999), p. 174.

³⁹ George Dobson, *Russia’s Railway Advance into Central Asia: Notes of a Journey from St. Petersburg to Samarkand* (London: W. H. Allen, 1890), p. 425.