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## CENTRAL ASIA: THE BENDS OF HISTORY AND GEOGRAPHY\*

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### ABSTRACT

This article aims to highlight the major historical and geopolitical characteristics of Central Asia. Various geopolitical currents highlight the prominence of Central Asia under the geostrategic and global economy. Authors such as H. Mackinder or Z. Brzezinski, stressed the importance of the 'Heartland' (i.e. the Eurasian Balkans), while is 'world axis' and geopolitical space. The central argument is that this is a region of major importance in the current economic arena as a result of its strategic position as a link between East and West, a space of competition and reinforcement of the great powers. By revisiting history and through a literature review, this paper aims to contribute to increase knowledge about a remote region of the world, but of utmost importance in

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the geopolitical and economic context of today. Besides, the region has been, in recent years, attracting the attention of foreign investors due to the existence of large reserves of oil and gas.

**Keywords:** Central Asia; history; geopolitics; post-Soviet space; Central Asian Republics

## ASIA CENTRAL: LO SOBRESALIENTE DE SU HISTORIA Y GEOGRAFÍA

### RESUMEN

Este artículo tiene como objetivo destacar las principales características históricas y geopolíticas de Asia Central. Diversas corrientes geopolíticas destacan la importancia de Asia Central bajo la geoestrategia y la economía global. Autores como H. Mackinder o Z. Brzezinski, destacaron la importancia del 'Heartland' (es decir, los Balcanes euroasiáticos), mientras 'eje del mundo' y espacio geopolítico. El argumento central es que esta es una región de gran importancia en el escenario económico actual, como resultado de su posición estratégica como nexo entre Oriente y Occidente, un espacio de competencia entre las grandes potencias. Al revisar la historia y a través de una revisión de la literatura, este trabajo pretende contribuir a aumentar el conocimiento sobre una región remota del mundo, pero de suma importancia en el contexto geopolítico y económico de hoy. Además, la región sigue, en los últimos años, atrayendo la atención de los inversores extranjeros debido a la existencia de grandes reservas de petróleo y gas.

**Palabras clave:** Asia Central, la historia, la geopolítica, el espacio post-soviético, las repúblicas de Asia central

## ÁSIA CENTRAL: O PREPODERANTE NA SUA HISTÓRIA E GEOGRAFIA

### RESUMO

O objetivo deste trabalho é destacar as principais características históricas e geopolíticas da Ásia Central. Várias correntes geopolíticas enfatizam a importância da Ásia Central sob a geoestratégica e a economia global. Autores como H. Mackinder ou Z. Brzezinski, destacaram a importância de "Heartland" (ou seja, os Balcãs eurasiáticos), enquanto 'eixo do mundo' e espaço geopolítico. O argumento central é que esta é uma região de grande importância no cenário econômico atual, como resultado de sua posição estratégica como enlace entre o Oriente e o Ocidente, uma zona de competição entre as grandes potências. Ao analisar a história e através de uma revisão da literatura, este trabalho pretende contribuir para aumentar o conhecimento sobre uma região afastada do mundo, mas de grande

importância no contexto geopolítico e econômico de hoje. Além disso, a região continua, nos últimos anos, atraindo a atenção de investidores estrangeiros devido à existência de grandes reservas de petróleo e gás.

**Palavras-chave:** Ásia Central, história, geopolítica, espaço pós-soviético, repúblicas da Ásia Central.

## INTRODUCTION

This article aims to highlight the major historical and geopolitical features of Central Asia. The central argument is that this is a region of major importance in the current economic sphere as a result of its strategic position as a link between East and West, space of competition and reinforcement of the great powers.

Central Asia is one of the pivot regions of the world. It is located in the nucleus of the Eurasian continental space and is a crucial link between several robust and dynamic economies, such as China, the European Union, India, Japan and Russia (Competitiveness Outlook, 2011). According to Khwaja, "Central Asia owes its importance to the vast economic potential and geostrategic location it has been endowed with, considering it is progressively turning into a world economic center" (2003: 7).

Under the new energy atlas, Central Asia is located in a strategic region, with strong ties to neighboring regions. Its development depends, firstly, on the access to the rest of the world. Central Asia is an important part of the political and economic world system, being "surrounded by some of the most dynamic economies in the world, including three of the so-called BRIC countries (Russia, India and China)" (Central Asia Competitiveness Outlook, 2011: 10). As Armando Marques Guedes stresses (2011), "Central Asia is, somehow, a hinge zone", which has "regained undoubtedly an extraordinary importance both structural and conjunctural". According to this expert, "if there were three major milestones of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, conflicts that had an effective impact on the reconstruction and creation of a new international order, these would be Afghanistan, Iraq and the invasion of Georgia by the Russian Federation" (Guedes, 2011). Interestingly, according to the author, "these three conflicts occurred in Central Asia" (Guedes, 2011). Note also that if there is "a conflict that humanity currently fears", this involves Iran, which is no other than "a southern extension of Central Asia" (Guedes, 2011). For centuries, Central Asia has been the crossroads of Eurasia, or, as noted by Jack Caravelli (2011), "the intersection between East and West", which makes, according to this author, the region "interesting". Indeed, it is the point of confluence of four civilizations that have both controlled and been controlled by Central Asian peoples (Asimov and Bosworth, 1998). Moreover, as noted by Xiaojie Xu, "the civilizations that dominate the region have been able to exert their influence in other parts of the world" (1999: 33).

## 1. THE BENDS OF HISTORY AND GEOGRAPHY

Before the arrival of the Russians, Central Asia was an integrated entity at the cultural, linguistic and religious level (Dani and Masson, 1992). The colonization process, initiated by czarist Russia, was the starting point for the fragmentation of the region, and has been specially designed to support the power structure of the colonizer (Bacon, 1966). This logic of fragmentation was continued and strengthened by the Soviets (Encyclopædia Britannica, 2013). Fourniau explains that, from a historical point of view, “the region was either integrated into world-empires, during very short periods, either divided over long periods” (2006: para. 22). The various entities that make up Central Asia, often correspond to “successor states of these world-empires (as the sovereign states today are the successors of the Soviet Republics)” (Fourniau, 2006: para. 22).

According to Gleason, “the first inhabitants of Central Asia were nomads who traveled from the north and from east to west and south” (1997: 27). The regional names ‘Transoxiana’ or ‘Ma Wara’un-Nahr’, among other names for Central Asia have resulted from foreign invasions (Dani and Masson, 1992). The Samanid dynasty of Persia succeeded after the Arab governance during the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> century (Esengul, 2009). The era of the Great Khan of the Mongols, Chingis Khan, began in the thirteenth century (Esengul, 2009). The empire of Chingis Khan left a legacy of Turkish languages which replaced Persian and Arabic (Carrere d’ Encausse, 1967). The Mongols destroyed the main Persian and Arabic centers of learning and trade, which helped Turkish languages become dominant in the region (Dani and Masson, 1992). After the death of the Great Khan in 1227, his descendants divided Central Asia, and the region remained divided until the governance of Timur ‘the lame’, which united the small Turkish tribes in the middle of the fourteenth century (Dani and Masson, 1992). According to Hye Lee “the Russians had a first contact with Central Asia in 1715 when Peter the Great sent the first Russian military expedition into the Kazakh steppe, but the real effort to conquer the region took place in the nineteenth century, around 1860” (2012: para. 5). Since then, the valleys of Central Asia were divided into three khanates: Bukhara (the oasis of Zerafshan), Khiva (downstream of the Amur-Darya) and Khokand (Fergana Valley) (Gleason, 1997).

The foreign invasions were not limited to acts of conquest, to the extent that they generated a vast cultural interaction. Offering a fusion of cultures, languages, religions and people, they contributed in making the notion of identity in the region extremely complex (Dani and Masson, 1992). The main Central Asian informal institutions that have proven to stand the test of time were the tribes and clans (Esengul, 2009). It is not surprising, therefore, that more and more experts in Central Asian affairs highlight the importance of clan politics with regard to the control they exert on the economy and politics of the region (Collins, 2006). Among the Central Asians, loyalty to the family or village is the most important at the sub-ethnic level (Dani and Masson, 1992). This loyalty is based on the core of the political organization of society: the family (Dani and Masson, 1992).

From the historical point of view, Central Asia was called Turkestan, whose literal translation from the Persian means 'the land of the Turks' (Encyclopædia Britannica, 2013). The dominant linguistic group of Turkestan was formed by the Turkish languages such as Turkmen, Uzbek, Kyrgyz and Kazakh (Bruchis, 1984). Geographically, the territory of Turkistan extended from the east area of the Caspian Sea to the Altay Mountains, and from the borders of Persia and Afghanistan in the south, to the Russian lands in the north (Encyclopædia Britannica, 2013). It had been divided into two parts: Western Turkestan and Eastern Turkestan (Dani and Masson, 1992). The Russians occupied the three khanates, having, however, just attached the Khanate of Khokand, and attributed the status of protectorates to the khanates of Khiva and Bukhara (Rywkin, 1963). Thus, the Western Turkestan, which became part of the Russian Empire in 1867 and was known as Russian Turkestan, encompassed the most part of the lands inhabited by Turkic peoples (Turkmen, Uzbek, Kyrgyz and Kazakh), but did not officially comprise the protectorates of Bukhara and Khiva (Bacon, 1966). In turn, the Eastern Turkestan (also known as Chinese Turkestan) referred to the easternmost part of the region, encompassing lands in northwest China, i.e. the territory of the Autonomous Region of Xinjiang (Bacon, 1966).

From 1860 until the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Central Asia was under Russian rule for little more than a century (Rywkin, 1963). Mark Dickens suggests some factors that contributed to the conquest of Central Asia. Let's emphasize "an instinctive impulse aiming to fill the geopolitical gap created by the collapse of the Great Tatar Horde..."; "a historical spirit of re-conquest with regard to the territories conquered by the Horde..."; "a traditional anti-Turkish stance which easily turned into anti-Islamic attitudes"; and "the perception that the few people who inhabited the Asian areas of eastern and southwestern Russia... were an easy target for control and exploitation as the region was conquered" (1989: 2).

Under the Russian leadership which was essentially colonial, locals experienced important transformations (Bacon, 1966). Over time, the term 'Turkistan' had been replaced by the term 'Srednaya Azia' (from the Russian Inner Asia or Central Asia) (Encyclopædia Britannica, 2013). Daniel Pipes believes that "like other colonial masters, the czarist government believed in the overwhelming superiority of its culture", in fact "the Russians insisted on using their own language, despised local habits and culture, in particular Islam, and revealed attitudes characteristic of all European settlers in the Third World" (1983: 6).

The period of Russian dominance was not only marked by the political and economic transition, but, above all, by the dominance of Russian culture and language. In practice, the language of the 'colonial occupier' has become the lingua franca for the Central Asian people (Rywkin, 1963). The 'imposed' popularization of the Russian language was a key element in the grand scheme of social engineering designed by Moscow, which had been carried out at different levels, on the Soviet republics (the so-called Russification or Russifikatsia) (Bacon, 1966). It should be noted that later, the Soviets would develop a theory according to which as long as the socialist society moved forward toward true communism, nations would tend to get closer, at

the same time a new Soviet culture would emerge (Dickens, 1989: 4). In this respect Bennigsen and Broxup explain that:

“A new human being ‘the Soviet Man (Sovetskiy chelovek) will tend to emerge, released from the past, free and happy. There will be no spiritual, intellectual, or even physical differences between Uzbeks and Russians, Estonians and Kyrgyz; they will share the same culture, believe in the same Marxism- Leninism, eat the same food and worship the same leaders. The culture of the Soviet Man consists of an harmonious blend of the best elements of all other cultures” (1983: 3).

Among the reasons that explain the end of czarist domain, let us stress the adverse socioeconomic conditions experienced throughout the empire, compounded by the realities and demands of the First World War (Encyclopædia Britannica, 2013). The insensitivity of the Russians to the needs of local people, their reluctance to adapt to the local culture, and their concern with personal gains gave rise to an atmosphere of constant hostility between indigenous peoples and the Russian colonizers (Bacon, 1966).

The Soviet Union was built on the remains of the Russian empire, and continued the same colonial way of his predecessor (Mandel, 1942). Therefore, the Soviet Union would strengthen and complete the processes started by Tsarist Russia, introducing at the same time, some new concepts and projects, characteristic of the communist doctrine (Silver, 1974). At the moment when Bolsheviks had won the Civil War, all the old Russian Empire, its protectorates and colonies were in an extremely difficult socioeconomic situation (Encyclopædia Britannica, 2013). The famine that followed the war caused the death of thousands of people. Such conditions were even more severe in Turkestan, which had been colonized by the Russian Empire (Wheeler, 1977). Given such circumstances, according to Chinara Esengul, “the strategy –more friendly and inclusive– of the Soviet authorities who sought to implement a process of korenizatsia (‘assimilation’) appeared to be promising” (2009: 47). According to the author, “the main objective of the korenizatsia policy was to incorporate local cadres along with the Russians, in the management process, as well as in other areas of production and industry” (2009: 47). This process was limited by the low level of literacy, even among the regional elites. The creation of the Republics, in 1924, was an attempt by Moscow to ‘kill two birds with one stone’ (Rywkin, 1963). In other words, this meant pacifying the masses and nationalist elites in Central Asia, giving them formal autonomy and independence, retaining at the same time, control over the politics and economics of the region (Rywkin, 1963). This delimitation was an extension of the principle ‘divide to rule’, previously adopted by Tsarist Russia regarding Turkestan (Mandel, 1942). The process of building new Republics was intended to prevent the Central Asians to unite into a single pan-Turkic or pan-Islamic entity (Encyclopædia Britannica, 2013).

The Soviet period was characterized by an intensive process of ‘state-building’ ... the Soviet state (Anderson, 1997). At the same time, the nation-building was well planned by the center

that assigned to the new states “formal languages and culture, and administrative structures” (Anderson 1997: 47). However, the process of creating an ‘ethno-national’ identity was limited by and subject to development-oriented policies of supranational identity: the ‘Soviet people’ (Mandel, 1942). The Soviet nationalities’ policy advocates an eventual fusion with the Soviet culture (Carrere d’Encausse, 1978). According to Mark Dickens, “although the Sovietization and Russianization were, in theory, two different processes, in practice they often seemed to coincide” (1989: 5). The Russians perceived themselves as civilizing agents in Central Asia during the Tsarist era, and this self-perception would change little during the Soviet era (Wheeler, 1966). However, Dickens warns of “the importance of recognizing that the Soviets made quite remarkable achievements [in Central Asia]: they reduced illiteracy, higher education has become accessible to a larger percentage of the population, medical services have improved significantly, and agricultural and industrial production raised the standard of living compared to anywhere else in the Islamic world” (1989: 5).

From the outset, Islam had proved more sensitive regarding Moscow relations with locals, being perceived by the Soviets as incompatible with the Marxist doctrine (Thrower, 1987). Considerable efforts have been made to eradicate the cult of Islam (Mandel, 1942). After all, this was considered a potential unifying political force against the Russian governance, and seen, from then on, as a threat to the Soviet domination and to the communist doctrine (Rywkin, 1963). However, the destruction of mosques and the total ban of the cult in the late 20s did not produce the expected results (Encyclopædia Britannica, 2013). On the contrary, it forced people “to live a double life during the Soviet era; publicly pretending to revere their Communist leaders, while in private, nurturing their pre-communist culture” (Olcott, 2002 : 7).

From an economic standpoint, the region, which had been transformed into a source of raw materials under the Tsarist leadership, remained as such in the Soviet era. The “white gold” (cotton) continued to capture the interest of the Soviets in terms of regional economy (Mandel, 1942). These were not particularly active in what concerns the development of industry in the region, as a matter of fact the Central Asian economies were totally dependent on donations from the center, as well as from other Republics regarding staple foods (Encyclopædia Britannica, 2013). Such an economic policy “seriously affected the environment of the region” (Anderson, 1997: 116). Indeed, the excessive use of fertilizers and water resources to improve the crops of cotton would result in an environmental disaster, as evidenced by the degradation of the Aral Sea (Regional report of the Central Asian States, 2000).

The last decades of Soviet rule were important for two reasons: a) the liberalization initiatives (1985-1991) of Mikhail Gorbachev, the perestroika and the glasnost established “the immediate political context and a catalyst for the early stages of regime transition in Asia Central [and other Soviet republics]” (Collins, 2006: 103), b) this period is characterized by “negotiating pacts between the main political forces in each Central Asian state” (Collins, 2006: 50). This had been a time of change in the power configuration.

It is interesting to note how the vision of Russian domination affected the writing of history during the Soviet era (Dani and Masson, 1992). Prior to 1930, "the official line was that the Russian conquest of the non-Russian areas had been 'an absolute evil' (absoliutnoe zlo)" (Dickens, 1989: 6). Thus, those who resisted Tsarist forces were considered patriotic heroes. During the 30s and 40s, "Russian expansion turned to be seen as a 'lesser evil' (naimen'sheie zlo), compared to what could have happened to the people if the Turks, the Persians, or the British had conquered them" (Dickens, 1989: 6). By 1950, "the official view was that the Russian conquest had been an 'absolute good' ", and those who had fought against it would now be condemned (Dickens, 1989: 6).

The post-Soviet era would show that the policy in Central Asia had nothing to do with ideology but with the control of economic resources by the major clans. One of the reasons for the discontent of most Central Asians is economic, in that "the Central Asian Republics were heavily subsidized by Moscow" (Esengul, 2009: 52). On the other hand, "there was not a strong nationalist sentiment (civic or ethnic)", which "conditioned the society's passivity in terms of political participation and social mobilization during the years 1990-1991" (Esengul, 2009: 52). Loyalty concerned the subnational identities linked to the clans and family (Encyclopædia Britannica, 2013). As for Islam, after the efforts of the Soviets in eradicating it, this would no longer be a political force susceptible to mobilize people (Encyclopædia Britannica, 2013). Let us now draw some brief considerations on the geography and geopolitics of the region.

According to Olivier Roy, "Central Asia is an area of variable geometry, which can refer simply to the Transoxiana or to the cultural space defined by the Turkish-Persian civilizations, stretching from Istanbul to the Xinjiang" (2000: 1). Central Asia is bounded by the Caspian Sea, Siberia, Mongolia, Tibet and the Hindu Kush. It is, as Rafael Kandiyotti explains, "an interior region surrounded by a huge land mass that covers a vast territory of steppes, deserts and mountains, occupying more than the space of Western Europe and about half the area of the United States" (2008: 76). From a geographic perspective, Central Asia includes Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, while Central Eurasia groups the aforementioned countries plus the three states of the South Caucasus (Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia).

In the opinion of Doris Bradbury (2011), Central Asia is "a more stable region than Afghanistan, Iran and the Middle East in general", although, as the author states, a large portion of people demonstrate "unawareness towards this region" that lies "between some of the major political powers". Among the several common features to the Central Asian republics, it must be said the fact that "they're all 'inner' states" (Fourniau, 2006: para.17). Moreover, as Vincent Fourniau stresses, "it is nonetheless interesting to note that Central Asia is the region of the world with more inner/isolated states (or landlocked, if we prefer), when added to the five states of post-Soviet Central Asia, Afghanistan and Mongolia" (2006: para.17). Uzbekistan, for example, is "a double- isolated country" since "it is surrounded by states that are themselves isolated" (Fourniau, 2006: para. 18). The fact that the Central Asian Republics do not benefit from direct access to the ocean exerts a major influence on their economic development, this being therefore a topic



of great interest. This does not mean that Central Asia is a 'dead end' in a globalized world. The region, which includes the "Great Silk Road", is, as Levent Hekimoglu regards, "an intersection of global routes, coming essentially from all corners of the planet" (2005: 76).

Returning to Fourniau, this author stresses that "unlike the Indian, Chinese, Ottoman or Russian peoples, Central Asia is not the result of a major political construction, previous or current" (2006: para. 22). Indeed, this expert points out that "history has no record of a single Central Asian state" and, moreover, "the unification of the region was due to forces of conquest, mainly exogenous" (2006: para. 22). According to Abdul Hafeez Khan, "Central Asia has been, at various times, divided, fragmented and conquered, but rarely has served as a seat of power to any empire or influential state" (2011: 62). Therefore, this author believes that "the region has proved, above all, a battleground for outside powers, than actually a power in its own right" (Khan, 2011: 62).

Central Asia is a region that, *stricto sensu*, only began to be analyzed, from the geopolitical point of view, in terms of field research by Western scholars, since 1991, following the collapse of the Soviet Union (Banuazizi and Weiner, 1994; Ferdinand, 1994; Fuller, 1990; Mesbahi, 1994). The term Central Asia characterizes a vast historical set, built around several subunits, as well as an amalgamation of economic, political, cultural situations, of identity processes and ethnic communities. The fact of constituting an important meeting point for economic, geopolitical, religious and ethno-linguistic interests, makes Central Asia an area endowed with an extraordinary historical depth, in the heart of the major global challenges nowadays.

The territorial division and the administrative status of the units that compose the region, show certain heterogeneity. The current definition of Central Asia, which views it as being formed by the Republics that once made up the USSR (i.e., Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan), was developed in the mid-twentieth century, in order to distinguish these five Central Asian Republics. Shortly after independence, specifically in 1993, "this definition has been officially recognized by the Central Asian Republics, as well as by the international community" (Malik, 1994: 4).

In turn, for UNESCO, the Central Asian groups "the five former Soviet Republics (Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan)", but also "Afghanistan, Mongolia, western China and several parts of Pakistan, Iran and India" (Asimov, 2001: para. 2). It should be noted, like Michael W. Cotter (2008), that despite the economic and political heterogeneity of the region, Central Asia is, for all purposes, considered a 'geopolitical entity'. Several post-Soviet studies continue to interpret Central Asia as being limited to five former Soviet Republics: Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan (Menon, 2007). This design leaves thus outside the above areas, even if these are deeply intertwined geographically and historically (Naby, 1994). In the Soviet era, the region was called "Sredniaia Azia" (which, when translated, means Middle Asia), comprising "Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan", and leaving out Kazakhstan (Lewis and Wigen, 1997: 179).

It is interesting to note that while Western experts use the term 'Central Asia', the Russian authors, in turn, did not (yet) abandon the old expression 'Middle Asia', although, unlike the past, this includes today Kazakhstan (Ismailov and Papava, 2010). The fact that there are multiple interpretations of the concept of Central Asia, thus attests to the lack of consensus about this.

The boundaries of the region were defined and delimited by the Soviets in 1924, at a time when the Central Asian nations were mentioned in Soviet documents as "a Muslim/Turkish issue" (Koichiev, 2003: 48). Such references were relatively frequent. In fact, according to Petra Steinberger, Islam was perceived as "a differentiating factor between the local population and the newly arrived foreigners, like the Russians, Ukrainians and other settlers during the tsarist and Soviet domination" (2003: 235). So with the arrival of the Russians into Central Asia, Islam became an ethno-religious category, because they considered all the peoples of Central Asia as Muslims. Before the arrival of the Russians, various ethnic groups of the region, such as the Kyrgyz, Kazakhs, Uzbeks, Uighurs, the Dungan, had coexisted in "khanates and multiethnic empires" (Lowe, 2003: 108). Such coexistence under these premodern supraethnic entities was only possible due to the loyalty shown by many people regarding the supraethnic identity, Islam.

According to Chinara Esengul, "for almost seven decades of Soviet rule, the Central Asian peoples were economically, politically and socially united as citizens of a single state (the homo sovieticus)" (2009: 3). However, in 1924, before the unification under the Soviet regime, they were divided by Moscow, into five Soviet Republics. On the one hand, as Chinara Esengul mentions, "this strategy –ambiguous– had created artificially, political units based on ethnicity"; on the other hand, "loyalty should belong to the supranational unity: the Soviet state" (2009: 3). Therefore, "none of these elements had been well developed; the existence of the Soviet supra-state suspended, for several decades, the process of nation building"; moreover, this policy of national delimitation had serious consequences, since "these states were 'artificially' created, rather than develop organically" (Esengul, 2009 : 3).

On top of that, let us mention the fact that the region's infrastructure operates, from the economic point of view, under the strict control of Moscow, for the benefit of the centralized economy. There was little trade between Central Asian Republics themselves, and their economies were considerably subsidized by the central budget. In the early 90s, subsidies from the metropole, constituted "a fifth of gross domestic product (GDP) of Uzbekistan", and "one-seventh of the GDP of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan" (Sarygulov, 1999: 240).

That said, the collapse of the Soviet Union brought to the Central Asian nations not only independence and freedom that they had never experienced, but above all, the end of subsidies, as well as "a widespread negative economic impact on the lives of most people in this vast region of the world" (Linn, 2004: 1). This was the moment when a series of political rifts emerged between the Central Asian states. Besides the democratization of the state structure (Tolipov, 2007), of the ethnic minorities and borders, and the collapse of the common security system,

“one of the most pressing issues in the region is the issue of religious extremism and terrorism”, analyzed among others, by Mariya Omelicheva (2010). The problem of drug trafficking is also urgent in the region, and well-illustrated, among others, by the study of Timothy Krambs (2013). Erika Marat stresses in this regard that “as is the case in other spheres of organized crime, the Central Asian Republics were not prepared to deal with the increase in drug trafficking, and with the problems associated with this” (2006: 45-46). In turn, the issue of water management ranks first among the economic and environmental problems of the region, since, as mentioned, for example, by Mañé Road and Campins Eritja, “Central Asia is a transnational region with a use of shared water, but with an asymmetric distribution of resources” (2012: 2).

Since the collapse of the USSR, the Central Asian Republics have been undermined by instability. With a history based, in large part, on the life of clans, a relatively new and inexperienced leadership, and an incalculable potential of energy resources, Central Asia has experienced, as Philip Shishkin notes, “significant problems of corruption, abuse of human rights, civil unrest and conflict” (2012: 4). Afraid of the historical divisions within each country, as the result of belonging to clans, and of the growth of Islamic fundamentalist movements in neighboring countries such as Iran, Iraq and Afghanistan, the Central Asian leaders have become dictators under the pretext of maintaining stability at all costs (Diuk and Karatnycky, 1993). However, as already stated by the New York Times in a 1999 article, but very timely, “such artificial and temporary stability ends, often, in explosive action” (1999: para.1). Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan have been particularly affected by internal conflicts, although as noted by Philip Shishkin, “of all the Central Asian republics, Tajikistan is the one that probably faces the most troubling set of threats regarding stability” (2012: 14).

Political regimes established in the Central Asian Republics are all authoritarian, even though levels of authoritarianism vary according to the countries in question. Following a more precise fashion and as Alexander Warkotsch regards, “Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are semi-authoritarian states, while Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan are run by authoritarian –if not dictatorial– regimes” (2008: 62). Central Asia is indeed one of the most authoritarian and corrupt regions of the world, as evidenced by evaluations carried out, for example, by Freedom House and Transparency International. Indeed, Freedom House (2012) ranks Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan as “non free” in what regards political rights and civil liberties. Moreover, these three countries occupy the last positions of the Corruption Perception Index of Transparency International (2012). The central and unifying feature of these states lies, in practice, on the patrimonial aspects of their regimes. In fact, the main political dynamic (albeit informal) is represented by the relation between the Heads of State and certain interest groups rather than by the rule of law, or the relationship between the government and its people. In other words, “the power of government results from the patronage of powerful networks, tycoons of the world business and regional groups” (Azarch, 2009: 65-66). Therefore, “maintaining the status quo in the region is in the fundamental interests of the Central Asian Governments”, since “the transformation of political and social structures may inevitably lead to the loss of power of the current regimes” (Azarch, 2009: 66).

The region has been, in recent years, attracting the attention of foreign investors due to the existence of large reserves of oil and gas in three states: Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan (Babak, 2006; Kenisarin, 2004). However, their authoritarian regimes, and the high levels of corruption, an underdeveloped fiscal and banking system, the non-protection of property rights, and many other institutional problems, harm, of course, the investment climate in the region (Starr, 2003; Marat, 2006).

## CONCLUSIONS

The Central Asian Republics, with their considerable energy and human potential are, as Johannes Linn regards, confronted simultaneously with “a challenge and an opportunity”, insofar as the “Eurasian economic space is an active part of a new phase of global integration” (2007: 5). In fact, Central Asia is, in the understanding of Guo Xuetang, “the region where the effects of geopolitics and the competition between the great powers have been the most salient compared to any other part of the world” (2006: 117). Indeed, according to this author, “ethnic and religious conflicts, energy competition, the strategic positioning of various actors and political unrest in the region, have proved a recurring feature in Central Asian regional context” (Guo Xuetang, 2006: 117-118).

According to the Consul Fernando Melo Antunes (2012), there are three fundamental reasons that explain “the importance of Central Asia to the great powers”. Firstly, “[the area] has energy resources in relevant amounts in both oil and gas” (Antunes, 2012). In this respect, Zehra Akbar (2012: para. 14) states that “regional and transregional states are well aware of the importance of the energy potential of Central Asia”. The region is, in fact, about to become “a major global supplier of energy” in particular “in the sectors of oil and gas” (Akbar, 2012: para. 14). Returning to Fernando M. Antunes (2012), the second reason for the importance of the region to the major powers, is due to the fact that their neighbors, “namely China, Russia, the Caucasus and Europe” encounter “transportation problems” (meaning logistic terms), likely to be resolved and/or mitigated by “the countries of Central Asia”. Finally, the region is significant, since it is composed of countries which have gained independence about 20 years ago, “have a very significant potential of economic growth” (Antunes, 2012).

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