Central Asia: political regimes and the socioeconomic context

List of contents:

Introduction
I. The political regimes of the Central Asian states
II. The socio-economic framework
III. International relations
IV. Conclusion. Bibliography

Introduction
The five independent republics that make up Central Asia cover a surface area of four million square kilometres (some eight times greater than Spain) and have a total population of 55 million inhabitants. Kazakhstan is the largest of the states, and in fact is larger than the four other republics combined; Tajikistan and Uzbekistan are the most densely populated, with approximately half of the region’s population living in the latter country. Most of the Central Asian population speak languages deriving from the Turkic family, with the exception of Tajik, which is Persian in origin. As regards geography, the Central Asian region is made up mainly of arid steppe land and deserts, crossed by the two great rivers, the Amu Darya and the Syr Darya. Created by the dissolution of the former Soviet Union, the five republics share many common features that allow a general, joint analysis, although obviously with some qualifications; above all, they are the object of growing interest in the area of international relations in view of their strategic situation between Russia and China, their proximity to Afghanistan, and their role as a transit route for hydrocarbons and other sources of energy and wealth.

The sources we have used in this article are academic studies, reports published in the media and national and international think tanks, as well as the testimonies of correspondents in situ. These sources are listed in the bibliography at the end of the article.

I. The political regimes of the Central Asian states
Panorama
When describing the set of states that make up the Central Asian region it is usual to begin by stressing their extremely short history, dating from the break-up of the Soviet Empire in late 1991. The reality is rather more complex, as they are not just states that recently gained independence – this was also true for the rest of ex-Soviet republics, and the ones that emerged from the dissolution of the former Yugoslavia – but in fact they had never previously existed as sovereign states (as had the Baltic republics, for instance), or as minimally autonomous entities (like some of the ex-Yugoslav republics). Nor – and perhaps more significantly – had they been minimally identifiable cultural units in the areas they cover today, with the exception of Kyrgyzstan. In fact, in the pre-Soviet era, the identity of the inhabitants of the region had not responded to European cultural patterns such as we know them; the peoples could be “considered to varying degrees as ‘Muslims’, ‘Turks’ or even ‘Persians’ or ‘Russians’, although these categories did not necessarily suppose a greater link of identification and social cohesion than local, tribal, clan, dialectal or religious ascriptions.”

In its early days, the Soviet Union carried out a process of national identification in the peoples of Central Asia “in which the national groups (nacionalnost) were defined according to academic and political criteria superimposed on the

---

1 In this study we focus on the new Central Asian states that emerged after the dissolution of the USSR. Regions such as Xingjian in China and countries like Afghanistan and Mongolia can also be regarded as part of Central Asia but we will not consider them here.


traditional sentiments of cohesion and identification. Over the decades “Central Asia saw its national reality redefined time and again, accepting new groups and new administrative entities where previously there were none, redrawing frontiers capriciously or creating new contradictory criteria for the codification of the ‘new cultures’, now an instrument of the government authorities.”

To sum up, Soviet policy in the region consisted in “breaking down the Turk-Muslim ensemble into distinct administrative units” so as to “avoid any kind of unifying project in Central Asia.” In spite of the resistance of the early days, by the end of the Soviet era “the societies of Central Asia had developed a sense of belonging to their own government and to its symbols”, although it cannot be said that a sense of a separate identity in the region made any contribution to the collapse of the Soviet Union. In fact, all the republics would have voted massively in favour of continuing to be part of the USSR and three of the secretariats of the PCUS of these five republics – those of Turkmenistan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan – “had supported the conservative coup against Mikhail Gorbachev in August 1991”, launched to save the Soviet state (even though this support for the coup met with strong popular opposition in Tajikistan).

So in September 1991 the Central Asian republics found themselves declaring their independence as sovereign states almost against their will, and facing the urgent challenge of constituting a political regime and constructing a national identity. The fact that these countries now have strongly authoritarian regimes is due to a large extent to the manner of their birth. During the Soviet era, the main feature of national construction was “the emergence of a new political elite under the protection of the Communist feature of national construction was “the emergence of a new political elite under the protection of the Communist

The political regimes that emerged from this transition are unanimously considered to be “among the most closed of all political regimes.” Repression and human rights violations is particularly bad in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan while Kyrgyzstan, as we will see below, is the only country that has made some genuine attempt to democratic transition in recent times. Proof of this is that twenty years after the disappearance of the USSR three of these countries still have the same president; in a fourth, the president from the Soviet era died and had to be replaced via a completely obscure and undemocratic process; and as we said, only in Kyrgyzstan have there been two changes of government, which were both the result of popular uprisings outside the framework of the constitution.

So all these countries are characterized by “hyper-presidentialist systems of government with a hegemonic position over all the formal powers of the state”, leading to “a personality cult centred on the leader” in the absence of any genuine system of political parties beyond the ideological debate of any genuine system of political parties beyond the formality of offering support for the president, or of any ideological debate. A good example is provided by the general elections held on 3 April 2011 in Kazakhstan, in which President Nazarbayev was returned to office with a crushing 95.5% of the votes cast. His rivals were three other candidates admitted to the elections out of a list of 22 initial proposals, all of whom were close to the president himself. A year later, Berdymukhammedov has won a political engineering” whose leaders “would be the mainstay of this new ‘national’ consciousness.”

During the transition these elites remained in power in four of the five Central Asian republics (the sole exception being Tajikistan), just as they did in many of the other ex-Soviet republics in that initial period. More surprising, perhaps, is the fact that very little has changed since then.
new five-year term in office capturing more than 97% votes in the 2012 presidential elections in Turkmenistan. In this context of identification of the State with the leader, some leaders take rather eccentric steps: for example, the transfer of the capital of Kazakhstan from Almaty to Astana in 1997; the spiritual guides “written” by the presidents of Turkmenistan (Niyazov’s “Rukhnama”, which the current president Berdymukhammedov plans to replace with the new “Turkmenama”); or the prohibition of headscarves and miniskirts in Tajikistan, whose president abhors right-hand drive vehicles and extravagant weddings and funerals.

Nevertheless, the authoritarian character of the political regimes of Central Asia has not been able to reduce the tensions, rivalries and power struggles in these countries, as the riots in the city Zhanaozen (Kazakhstan) show. These riots, which were badly repressed by police forces and caused several deadly casualties in December 2011, were the final act of half a year of picketing in the central square of the city of some five hundred workers that had been fired from a Kazakhstan-Chinese Oil Company. To a large extent, tensions in the region are due to the competition between regional networks and “clans” which seek to acquire power and wealth and which recognize the presidency of the republic as the sole arbiter. These are not usually tribal or ethnic clans in the traditional sense, but “relations and contacts of interest between individuals with access to economic and political resources (…) even though these individuals (…) may of course be from the same region.” In this way, this is an updating of the old Soviet nomenklatura, expanded to include “a new elite of businessmen and technocrats who have access to the management of resources.”

**Minorities**

The five Central Asian republics are far from being ethnically or linguistically homogeneous; alongside the majority groups that give each one of the countries its name, each state has citizens who on ethnic grounds could be ascribed to another country of the region, as well as other minorities such as Russians. The construction of Homo sovieticus and the use of Russian as a lingua franca tended to minimize the interethnic tensions during much of the twentieth century, but in the new independent states the risks of interethnic conflict, with or without international involvement, are evident. The national identity in the countries of Central Asia has been forged on the basis of “strengthening the position of the ethnic group expressed in the name of the country (to the exclusion of the minorities) and the rejection of the language of the ‘colonizer’ (in the form of policies of de-Russification).” The fighting between Uzbeks and Kyrgyz in the south of Kyrgyzstan in June 1990 and then twenty years later in June 2010 (to which we will return later), exemplifies the risk. The Tajik civil war also had an interethnic component, although ethnicity was by no means the only or even the key issue. However, it should be borne in mind that these conflicts have been the exceptional rather than the rule over these twenty years, and the political regimes of Central Asia deserve credit for having avoided greater confrontation. A good example of this is Kazakhstan, whose elite has curbed the aspirations of Kazakh nationalism (limited as it is by its lack of a strong political organization) and has tried to achieve a certain balance between the country’s different ethnic groups.

**Corruption and organized crime**

All the authors concur that the impact of organized crime and corruption are two of the greatest scourges in the region, with an immensely negative effect both politically and socio-economically.

Central Asia is a transit and distribution zone for opium and heroin from Afghanistan, and there is also some...
drug production in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. Along with the drug traffic, arms and people smuggling are the source of the proliferation of mafias, which in turn creates rampant corruption at all levels of national government. The institutional weakness of these states is translated into an “overwhelming connivance and confusion between the mafia, the political power and the economic power” which “came in to fill the gap left by the destruction of the Soviet institutions and the failure to create institutions characteristic of market economies.”

Linked or not to organized crime, the corruption of the leading elites constitutes without any doubt the defining political feature of the regimes in the region, and has undeniable repercussions for their socioeconomic solvency. The annual reports of Transparency International for the region make devastating reading. Of a total of 180 countries analysed, of which only 49 “pass” the transparency test, four Central Asian countries are found at the very bottom of the table: Tajikistan (158th), Kyrgyzstan (162nd), Turkmenistan (168th) and Uzbekistan (172nd), with scores ranging from 1.7 to 2 (out of 10). A very short way up the table, in 120th position, is Kazakhstan, with a score of 2.7. The sentence that introduces this classification of the perception of corruption in the world is applicable to the whole of the region: “corruption continues to lurk where opacity rules, where institutions still need strengthening and where governments have failed to implement anti-corruption legal frameworks.” The lack of transparency, the weakness of the institutions and the lack of political will to fight against corruption characterize all the regimes of Central Asia.

Corruption also hits the attempts to introduce social reform. It is a strong deterrent to international stakeholders considering the possibility of funding development projects and “reduces business opportunities”. In Kazakhstan, for example, “it limits the number of foreign companies with the capacity and resources to invest in the Kazakh market and also constrains the development of small and medium-sized local businesses.” Finally, drug smuggling, organized crime, and corruption create a sensation of permanent insecurity among the region’s citizens – especially in the areas away from the main cities in the states where the institutions are particularly weak.

Islam and Islamism
Most of the inhabitants of Central Asia are Sunni Muslims, with a presence of Shiite minorities. Traditional Islam is autochthonous to the region and is compatible with its way of life, but political Islam is practically non-existent and there are no Islamist parties of any significance. One exception is the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT), which has two seats in the national parliament. Founded in 1990, its stated objective is not the establishment of an Islamic state, but the Islamization of Tajik society. Its popularity has grown in recent months thanks to an active policy of community work and social programs, skilfully communicated through media such as Facebook and YouTube. The party’s increasing social presence alarms those who suspect a hidden agenda, but appeals to a population tired of seeing opposition politicians only in the run-up to the elections or in debates organized by foreign institutions.

The IRPT has been linked to the group Hizb-ut Tahir, accused by some of acts of terrorism but generally considered to be a group which “aspires to establish a worldwide caliphate without the use of violence”, just as the IRPT is regarded as a “moderate” party. Fetullah Gullen is another Islamic organization that may have ulterior motives: this religious group, Turkish in origin, has a foothold in Kyrgyzstan and

24 See Sainz Gsell, Asia Central en un mundo en cambio..., cit., p. 124.
26 See TRANSPARENCY INTERNATIONAL: 2009 Annual Report (published October 2010), p. 49. Spain (hardly a model as far as transparency is concerned) is in 32nd place.
27 Ibid., p. 48.
28 The advanced report for 2011 does not show any improvements. Over 183 countries, our region is found in positions 120 (Kazakhstan), 152 (Tajikistan), 164 (Kirgizstan) and 177 (Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan). See TRANSPARENCY INTERNATIONAL: Corruption Perceptions Index 2011, at http://www.transparency.org/publications/publications/other/corruption_perceptions_index_2011 (Consulted February 2012).
29 See Marcos Estevan, A. F. : “El Islam en Kazajstán. La dimensión etnica en el proceso del renacer religioso”, Euroasiática. Revista online sobre Asia Central, nº 2, p. 1
30 See Sainz Gsell, Asia Central en un mundo en cambio..., cit., p. 122
31 See MARCO ESTEVAN, A. F.: “El Islam en Kazajstán. La dimensión etnica en el proceso del renacer religioso”, Euroasiática. Revista online sobre Asia Central, nº 2, p. 1
34 See Ruiz Ramas, Los regímenes neopatrimonialistas..., cit., p. 11
The case of Kyrgyzstan

The political situation of Kyrgyzstan deserves special attention. The country has traditionally been considered “the most democratic of the five states” and the only one to have found a certain “international legitimacy.” In 2005 and 2010 it underwent two of the only three transfers of power in the region since independence, both of them due to revolutionary processes outside the constitutional framework: according to Ruiz Ramas, in both cases, due “more than any other factor to conflicts between clans.” In the case of the Bakiev government, the timid democratic thaw of the 2005-2007 period ended with the establishment of another authoritarian and personalist regime, which fell on the night of 7 April 2010 with the assault on the presidential palace and the constitution of an interim government presided over by Roza Otunbayeva, “a figure of recognized standing in her country and with a long political and diplomatic career.” The new government embarked on a process of democratic change. Its efforts were complicated by the fact that Bakiev, the deposed dictator, did not leave the country initially but sought refuge in the south, the region of his birth, and the fact that the party that supported him, Ata Yurt, demonstrated a surprising capacity of mobilization in the parliamentary elections held in November 2010, the region’s first ever genuinely democratic elections. In any case, if one element characterizes the new parliament is its fragmentation, since the 120 seats are divided quite evenly among five political formations: Ata Yurt has the most, with 28 seats, and the smallest party, Ata Meken, has 18. Parliamentary pacts have been inevitable and an alliance has been produced between the social democrats and the conservatives of Ata Yurt; in fact, this pact was also necessary from the regional point of view, because isolating Ata Yurt would have heightened the risk of secession in the south of the country, where the Uzbeks rival the Kyrgyz in terms of population. Tensions between the two groups led to serious interethnic confrontations in June 2010, although the area has remained quiet since then.

Later, in agreement with the 2010 Constitution, which cuts the powers of the president and reinforces those of the parliament and the prime minister, the Kyrgyz parliament called the country’s first presidential elections for 30 October 2011. Otunbayeva immediately declared that she would not stand for election and would leave her position as interim president of the republic on 31 December 2011 – a step totally without precedent in the region. Then Prime Minister Atambayev won a comfortable victory, obtaining 62% of the votes cast, though this official result was contested by the other candidates. The OSCE, which had overseen the process, issued a preliminary report praising the preparation of the elections (that is, the registration of the voters, the campaign) and the absence of violence on Election Day. However, it drew attention to grave errors in the counting of the votes. Overall, though, it appears to have sanctioned the result.

38SWANSTROM, cit., p. 47: “Fundamentalism has increasingly become a serious threat to all states in the region”, although this claim is only valid because he includes Afghanistan in his analysis. In any case, the same author recognizes that “much of the problem lies in the growing unemployment; weak government sponsored health care, social welfare at large, as well as a lack of belief in the future” (ibid).
39See Ruiz Ramas, Los regímenes neopatrimonialistas..., cit., p. 11.
40See. Sainz Gsell, Asia Central en un mundo en cambio..., cit., p. 126.
41Ibid., p. 15.
42Ibid., p. 12. The first president, Akayev, was from the north, and after his replacement power was transferred to the south, the region of Bakiyev, the new president. See MATVEEVA, A.: “Kyrgyzstan: Balancing on the Verge of Stability”, EUCAM (www.eucentralasia.com), nº 19, July 2011, p. 1.
45Ibid., p. 3.
46See Sánchez, although the question of ethnic coexistence in Kyrgyzstan has always been regarded as a possible focus of conflict, the truth is that “there is no major tradition of ethnic confrontation in the republic, not even between the Kyrgyz and Uzbek communities, the protagonists of the recent conflict; peaceful coexistence, mixed marriages and friendships between the members of the two communities have characterized the relationship, with the exception of the violence which spread in the city of Osh in 1990 due to disputes over land”. See Sánchez, L.: “Kirguistán: ¿Transición democrática o descenso al caos?”, cit., supra, p. 244.
II. The socio-economic framework

Panorama

On the basis of data from the European Development Bank, Mañé and De la Cámara have qualified the countries of Central Asia as “mutant economies”. In spite of their formal support for the market economy, these systems preserve features that recall their Soviet past, “such as planning, populism and a major state sector that has not been restructured”. They also lack “a basic market infrastructure” and the transition towards a genuine market economy is still in its infancy.

The region’s natural wealth and agriculture allowed these republics to recover from a first decade after independence that had been disastrous in macroeconomic terms. Growth rates are currently near two figures. But these growth rates have not been accompanied by an increase in welfare among the populations – quite the contrary. According to the last report by the United Nations Programme for Development, the countries all fared poorly in the human development ranking; Kazakhstan did best, in 66th place, and Tajikistan worst, in 112th (with Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan not far above Tajikistan). All the countries had fallen slightly over the previous five years and had recorded negligible increases in their human development rates in absolute terms in the same period.

Interestingly, however, their human development rate is notably higher than their per capital GDP would suggest because of the good performance of the life expectancy and education indicators, which of course are linked to the Soviet past: an inheritance which, as we shall see below, is gradually disappearing. The most serious issue, however, is that there are credible reports that accuse the region’s most opaque governments, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, of fabricating the data and the indicators they submitted to the international bodies, which, of course, makes it very difficult to assess the real situation of human development in these countries.
Deterioration in the areas of health and education

Experts concur that “slowly but surely, the material and human infrastructure of Central Asia is disappearing: the roads, power plants, hospitals and schools, along with the last generation of specialists, who were in charge of their functioning and who were trained by the Soviets.” This diagnosis can be applied practically across the board to the five countries in two areas that are particularly sensitive from the social point of view: health and education. A few years ago, it was stated that “the Central Asian republics inherited a difficult (socio-economic) situation from the Soviet era, since this area was in general the poorest of the former Soviet Union.” Today, people look back on that era with fond nostalgia.

The panorama described by the International Crisis Group in the areas of health and education could hardly be more bleak. With regard to health, the main problem is human resources: due to low salaries, the ageing of doctors and health staff, and the inadequate structures for training new professionals to replace them, the countries in the region are suffering a progressive decline in qualified health care. In Tajikistan only half of the posts for general practitioners are occupied, and in Kyrgyzstan the number of paediatricians fell by two thirds between 1998 and 2008. In Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan the problem is especially serious in rural and socially depressed areas, and the situation is similar in Kazakhstan. Public funding for the health services covers less than half of the costs, which have to be complemented by the patients themselves; this means that people from the lowest income groups are excluded (in fact, Tajikistan abolished the entitlement to free health care in 2003). In all these countries, the construction of highly specialized new hospitals, above all in the capitals, may have dazzled well-meaning but gullible foreign donors but it cannot hide the physical decay of the immense majority of the facilities offering basic health services.

In the education sector, the current situation of human resources is fairly similar: low salaries and low social and professional prestige for teachers, many of whom are about to retire with no generation of new staff ready to replace them. Schools are overflowing, most of the pupils have no course books, and the syllabus is obsolete. Though the figures for enrolment are acceptable, there is rampant truancy, estimated at around 120,000 pupils in Kyrgyzstan and 100,000 in Tajikistan. Only Kazakhstan escapes this criticism, although the universal access to primary and secondary education is undermined by its poor quality. To quote the ICG report, “although the Kazakhstani education system is performing better compared to its neighbours, it does not have the capacity to educate a generation capable of making the country one of the world’s most competitive economies, as the government intends.” Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan do not have a shortage of teachers but the quality of teaching is extremely low, added to the dilapidated facilities, frequent power cuts and a lack of drinking water and sanitation. As in the field of healthcare, the decline of the educational services is combined with the proliferation of elite higher education institutions like the American University of Central Asia in Kyrgyzstan, financed by international donors like George Soros.

This panorama coincides with the dwindling public expenditure on basic education and health services. Mañé and De la Cámara quote the following data from the EBRD for 2009:

---

60 See SAINZ GSELL, N.: “Asia Central en un mundo en cambio…”, cit., p. 123.
61 See INTERNATIONAL CRISIS GROUP: Central Asia: Decay and Decline, cit. supra, p. 3.
62 See INTERNATIONAL CRISIS GROUP: Central Asia: Decay and Decline, cit. supra, p. 21.
64 See International Crisis Group: Central Asia: Decay and Decline, cit. supra, p. 17.
68 See Mañé Estrada, A. - De La Cámara Arilla, C.: Asia Central: una región en transición hacia la pobreza energética, cit. supra, p. 49.
As a comparison, Spain spends around 9.5% of GDP on education – a GDP which in turn is far higher than that of any of these republics. In the area of health, the Spanish percentages also double those of this region.

The resources available, including those supplied by international donors fearful of upsetting the political elites in the respective countries, simply disappear because of the rampant corruption in the system or are spent on facilities like the highly specialized hospitals in Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan, which benefit only a tiny percentage of the population and which lack doctors trained in the use of the technology they purportedly offer. The International Crisis Group’s damning conclusion is that “in five to ten years there will be no teachers to lead classes and no doctors to treat the sick”.

### III. International relations

If anything has characterized the external relations of the Central Asian states in recent years it is that, facing clearly common problems that can only be resolved through cooperation and agreement, they have opted for a policy of divergence and steadfast resistance to any multilateral management. This is clear in the relations of individual states with the others inside the region and is also manifested, to varying degrees, in their relations with other states and international stakeholders. We will now look at the relations of these states with each other (ad intra) and with the rest of the world (ad extra).

#### Ad intra

The common past of the five Central Asian republics, far from aiding the situation, has created “serious obstacles for the development of (common) structures of international cooperation”. First, “to reaffirm their independence, the new states tend to prioritize those elements of their identity that distinguish them from the rest.” To this we should add a certain rivalry between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan (the region’s largest and most populated countries respectively) for leadership of the area, and the natural competitiveness of independent states in defence of their national interests. Cross-border and interethnic tensions which had remained submerged under the Soviet umbrella re-appeared with full force after independence. This atmosphere of conflict between regions is particularly acute in the area of natural resources. Specifically, there is a reluctance to apply the equation “water for energy”, which could resolve the deficits and surpluses of the different countries in the region without any great difficulty: the countries upriver lack energy, while those that possess energy resources lack water. The experts make the same diagnosis with regard to security, in the broader sense of the term, because the lack of intraregional cooperation in this matter is the result of the importance attached to the respective “national interests” and (especially) to the high level of mutual distrust between the different countries. Only the deterioration of the situation in Afghanistan has been able to unite the five countries against a common threat.

#### Ad extra

A shallow analysis of the foreign policy priorities of the five republics highlights the same phenomenon and the difficulty of speaking of the region as a geopolitical unit. As a region of transit with enormous energy resources, the area has geostategical interest for the world’s great powers, be they neighbours (Russia and China) or located further afield.
(United States or the European Union), and for medium-sized regional powers such as Turkey, India or Pakistan. While the great powers look towards the region, the countries of the region are also looking outwards – but they are not looking in the same direction, or with the same intensity.

The region’s three great economic partners are Russia, the European Union and China. Of these powers, it might appear natural that Russia should maintain hegemony in the region, given the countries’ common history under the Soviet umbrella and Russia’s “essential influence for the modernization and cohesion of the societies of Central Asia, subjected to an enormous European cultural influence through the Russian presence, both administrative and human.” This is clearly the case of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, where, significantly, Russian remains an official language, and also in Tajikistan, where Russia even sent troops to intervene in the Civil War between 1992 and 1997. In contrast, the Federation’s relations with Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan “have been increasingly distant and strained.” In general, experts tend to think that Russia’s influence in the region, though still important, is on the wane. Quite the opposite can be said of China, above all with regard to economic relations: the Asian giant has just overtaken the European Union as Central Asia’s main trading partner, although its presence in these countries is limited to the energy and raw materials sectors. Among the great world powers, the European Union is the one that appeals least to the countries of Central Asia. Its economic and commercial importance is beyond dispute, as we noted above, but its political influence is limited to the promotion of human rights (where, it must be said, its involvement has met with little success).

In this panorama, Turkmenistan stands out somewhat from its neighbours. Its regime is the least transparent of the five in the region; it shuns the few multilateral commitments that exist in the area, and its main international interlocutor is Turkey. In fact, Turkey is the preferred destination of the mafias involved in people smuggling from Turkmenistan. As we said, Turkmenistan is the least Russophile of the five and, aside from Turkey, its foreign policy looks towards China, Iran and the United States. A significant move is the recent construction of two new gas pipelines towards Iran and China, the latter via the territory of Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, states which thus enter the equation of the region’s two great powers, China and Russia. Uncharacteristically, Turkmenistan also reached an agreement with Washington to provide logistical support for US troops deployed in Afghanistan. For its part, in a unique display of even-handedness, has both a Russian and a US military base on its territory.

At the institutional level, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization is the closest thing to a pan-regional security forum (in spite of the absence of Turkmenistan). Significantly, two of its members are Russia and China. The five states in the region are also members of supraregional international organizations with an emphasis on security like the OSCE, and have formed part of the Alliance for Peace of the Atlantic Alliance. Turkmenistan was the only one of these countries whose participation in this Alliance was purely symbolic, as it never committed itself to any specific form of cooperation or placed any defence infrastructure at NATO’s disposal.

---

87See Mongrenier, Du Turkménistan au Sin-Kiang..., cit., p. 2.
88Ibid.
89Pakistan, India and Iran, in addition to Mongolia, have observer status in the SCO, which endows the organization with great potential as a forum for regional decision-making, above all in matters linked to human security.
90See Mongrenier, Du Turkménistan au Sin-Kiang..., cit., p. 1
IV. Conclusión
The five independent republics of Central Asia have shared a common history, first under the Russian Empire, and then inside the Soviet Union. The main ethnic and linguistic groups in the area are spread across the borders of the five countries, a situation that has the potential either to raise bilateral tensions or to favour cooperation. Indeed, neither the multiethnic mosaic nor the majority presence of Islam in the region will necessarily lead to conflict or instability, although, in combination with other factors, they may well have negative repercussions both domestically and at inter-state level. Similarly, the unequal distribution of the region’s natural and energy resources might initially have helped to strengthen the cooperation between the states, but in fact the opposite has been the case.

Indeed, certain features that are endemic to the region conspire against any collaborative management of their common interests: the authoritarian nature of the political regimes of the five republics, with the recent exception of Kyrgyzstan; the weakness of the institutions and the clan-like nature of the regimes; and the rampant corruption against a background of widespread organized crime. Perhaps it is not a coincidence that the country with the fewest natural resources and raw materials, Kyrgyzstan, is the only one with a genuine interest in something resembling a democratic transition. In any case, all these factors have had a disastrous impact on the standards of health and education in the five countries, in spite of the potential and the wealth that, to a greater or lesser extent, almost all of them possess.

Meanwhile, the countries in the region are aware that the world powers see them, either directly or indirectly, as providers of energy resources and little else. This is hardly an incentive for political and social transformation. If the priorities of the international community in the region were centred on aspects such as the promotion of democracy and respect for the rule of law and human rights, it is quite likely that the quality of life of the peoples of Central Asia would improve, both in political and socioeconomic terms, and that there would be a greater integration of the common interests of the five states. Sadly, no such policy towards the region seems to be on the international agenda at present.

Barcelona, 29th February 2012

Jaume Saura Estapà
Profesor Titular de Derecho Internacional Público
Universitat de Barcelona
Bibliografía


DADABAYEVA, G.: El nacionalismo kazajo en el contexto euroasiático, Euroasiática. Revista online sobre Asia Central, nº 2

DE LA CÁMARA ARILLA, C.: Seguridad económica en el espacio post-soviético de Asia Central, ARI nº 84/2009 (28/05/2009)

DE PEDRO, N.: Kirguistán después de las elecciones: ¿lo peor está por ocurrir?, Notes internacionales CIDOB 22, November 2010.

DE PEDRO, N.: Revueltas populares en el mundo árabe: ¿ópróxima estación Asia Central?, Opinión Asia 111, March 2011


INTERNATIONAL CRISIS GROUP: Central Asia: Decay and Decline, Asia Report nº 201 – 3rd February 2011


MARCO ESTEVAN, A. F.: El Islam en Kazajstán. La dimensión étnica en el proceso del renacer religioso, Euroasiática. Revista online sobre Asia Central, nº 2


SANSÓ-RUBERT PASCUAL, D.: Criminalidad organizada transnacional en Asia-Pacífico: repercusiones para la seguridad regional e internacional, UNISCI Discussion Papers, Nº 26, May 2011, p. 159-190


SWANSTRÖM, N.: Traditional and Non-Traditional Security Threats in Central Asia: Connecting the New and the Old, China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly, Volume 8, Nº 2, p. 35-51


© Central Asia Observatory
The opinions expressed here are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the positions of the Central Asia Observatory (CAO). The institutions that constitute the CAO are not responsible for the use of these contents.