

From the Caspian Sea to the Altai Mountains

Economic Geography of Central Asia

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Abstract

The study tries to shed light on the geostrategic significance of Central Asia by the naming of the Hungarian country and people abroad, as a motivation, and then describes the natural geography, historical and cultural values, and economy of the region. In Central European context, five lesser-known countries are analysed in some detail: Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. Finally, the study interprets the geostrategic situation in Central Asia in the light of the China-Russia-European Union New Silk Road economic cooperation, stricken with the brilliant US geostrategic checkmate.

Keywords

Central Asia, Heartland, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, geostrategy

Magyaristan (Hungary)

Ármin Vámbéry, a famous Hungarian traveller and orientalist, with the support of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, posing as a Sunni Dervish, travelled through Central Asia from 1861 to 1864. He was the first European in modern history to do so, and published his book about his travels in Hungarian in Budapest in 1865, and in English in London (Travels in Central Asia). Despite this, the Hungarians, even in today's borderless world connected by virtual networks, know little about the region of the 'Stans.' It is the continental 'heart' of our planet, the vast "heartland" of the world, 4 million km². It is roughly the size of 45 times that of Hungary, stretching from the world's only 'inland' sea, the Caspian Sea, which has no connection with the world's oceans, to the snow-capped, huge mountain ranges of the Hindu Kush, Pamir, Tien-San and Altai mountains bordering the Himalayas. Yet, this area is extremely important for the Hungarians, the Central Europeans, and their economies as well.

Recent research on country image and country branding, as well as everyday life experiences, show that the name of a country, as a brand carrier in itself, can arouse emotions that can even give rise to harmful prejudices in cultural, commercial and political relations (Tózsá, 2021). Let us consider the name of Tatarstan or Russia, which has been around for two years now, to mention just the oldest and most recent examples of the negative emotions that a country name can arouse in the USA and the EU. Unfortunately, in the Western civilisation, the name Hungarian is no exception to this, insofar as Hungarians and their country are known by the synonym 'Hun', which is synonymous with 'barbarian'.² In cultures where the word '*hun*' or its derivative '*ung*' is used, this is not a very good recommendation when establishing friendly and business relations. The word '*veng*' is a transition from a direct positive or negative emotion to a name for Hungarians, for example in Polish culture. In all parts of the world, where – apart from our immediate, historical neighbours such as the Czechs, Slovaks, Serbs, Croats, and

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² According to the most respected English-language dictionary, the Merriam Webster Dictionary, '*hun*' = 'a person, who is wantonly destructive; vandal, barbaric'. The author taught for a total of 16 semesters at the International Studies Program of Corvinus University of Budapest between 2004-2016, and in his experience, the Hungarian country name is not primarily associated with the word 'hungry', but rather with the word 'barbarian' (Hun) for students with English mother tongue or education.

up to World War III, which sees Eastern Europe as the antechamber of the Heartland, and which contemporary history confirmed within a couple of years with the war in Ukraine (Tózsza, 2022).

Throughout history, European conquerors such as Alexander the Great, certain generals of the Roman Empire, and later Napoleon and Hitler, have tried unsuccessfully to reach this Heartland. Talented world conquerors such as Attila the Hun, Genghis Khan and his grandsons with the Mongols, and Timur Lenk with the Tatars, dominated the Heartland, but they failed to conquer all of Europe or South Asia within Eurasia. The same could be said of the Russians, who annexed Central Asia in the second half of the 19th century and then ruled it for seven decades in the 20th century, but failed to become world rulers.



*Figure 2. The continental view of the Earth
the ancient, pristine surfaces free from human influence are marked in red.*

Source: Csizmadia, 2021

In his book *American Empire versus European Dream* (2020), György Matolcsy points out that the real driving force behind the geostrategic processes around Central Asia, as the US intended, is the isolation of Asia's (mainly Russia's) resources from Europe's (mainly Germany's)

technology and knowledge. Zbigniew Brzezinski (1997) and George Friedman (2015) have already articulated in the so-called 'grand chessboard' theory. However, the key role of the Heartland is precisely that it is the point of collision where the US, an empire fearful of losing world domination, would clash with the Eurasian pretenders to the multipolar world, such as the European Union, China, and India, the Arab world and Russia. In the first armed conflict of this clash, which broke out in 2022 in Ukraine – essentially in Eastern Europe – the USA and the European Union fully subordinating its own economic interests to the former, confronted Russia. Nevertheless, the geostrategic importance of Central Asia – the Heartland – is immense. The Iranian crisis, the Iraq war, the Soviet and then the US occupation of Afghanistan, the Gulf War, the Syrian crisis and the flood of migrants triggered by the Arab Spring, all took place on the southern edge of the Heartland over the last half century. They did not lead to a breakthrough for American world domination. Now it is on the western fringes of the Heartland that armed confrontation and destruction, this time threatening with a world war, is taking place in Ukraine. It is time to take a closer look at Central Asia, the centre of the Eurasian world.

Central Asia in a broader sense, if we think in terms of states, includes Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Mongolia. Of these, only Afghanistan and Mongolia retained some degree of independence in the 19th century, while the other five countries became part of the Soviet Russian state. The present study outlines the economic geography of these five countries, which achieved independence only at the end of the 20th century and are essentially Islamic. This is because the clash between traditional, historical Asian Islam and the European, Christian character of these countries, mediated by the Russians, has created a unique and distinctive region. As Vámbéry wittily observes as a contemporary at the beginning of the Russian expansion into Central Asia, Central Asian Islam declares any close contact with infidels, let alone learning from them, to be a sinful and forbidden act. 'Hence it is that in Christianity the Russians have as much security for their future as Islam prevents the Ottomans – however many Greek, Slavic and Armenian elements they may have absorbed – from joining the West' (Vámbéry, Á. Nyugat 1915. 11.). After the victory of the Soviet power, the Russians secured this civilising Western influence in the region for nearly seven decades. They did this not through the conquest of Christianity, but through atheistic communist dictatorship, creating the present-day Islamic region of Asia, the land of the five 'stans' in the heart of Asia, not free from Russian (European) influence, but with Islamic roots.

The five states of Central Asia discussed here lie in a vast regional band called the Silk Road between Europe and the Far East, and have long been a crossroads of people, ideas, and trade. Central Asia has a varied geography, including high mountain passes that traverse huge mountain ranges such as the Tien-San, the Hindu Kush, and the Pamirs. It is home to the vast Kara-Kum and Kizil-Kum deserts. The vast, treeless, grassy steppe surrounding the desert regions is a continuation of the steppe of Eastern Europe. Beneath it lie the most extensive untapped gas and oil reserves on Earth! Natural resources are the main attraction of the region, driving the economic forces that determine the development patterns of each country. Over the past decades, since the break-up of the Soviet Union, multinational companies have stepped up their activities in the region.

Political systems are adapting both to the 'traditions' of socialist politics of the old Soviet Union and to new democratic systems, which are subject to high levels of authoritarian rule and corruption in both business and politics. In the names of the countries, the term -stan/stan means 'land'. Central Asia used to be called Turkestan because of the historical and cultural influence of the Turks in the region. The Turks originated in northern Asia and historically migrated through Central Asia on their way to Asia Minor and the Middle East. The Turkic language and heritage has had the most significant influence on the people of Central Asia, as evidenced by

the Ural-Altai language family, which includes most Central Asian languages other than Turkic, except for the Iranian Tajik, and the Finno-Ugric Hungarian language (Table 1). The name Turkmenistan is the most explicit reminder of Turkic roots; it means 'land of the Turkmen'. The name Turkic is attested in the first written references to Hungarians in Byzantine documents.⁴



Figure 3. Satellite images of the natural geography of the Eurasian 'Heartland' countries (Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan)

Source: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/2/2a/Asia_satellite_orthographic.jpg

Most societies in Central Asia were nomadic horse-riding peoples who raised animals on the vast steppes of the region. This way of life continued in the social organisation of various Khanate societies until the 1920s, when the Soviet Union forced them to abandon their nomadic lifestyle and to organise animal husbandry into collective farms, or cooperatives.

The majority of Central Asia's population still culturally identifies with its nomadic past. Central Asians living in the cities still follow a mixture of local and Russian culture in apparel and food more than two decades after independence, due to the mass influx of Russian people. More than six million Russians and Ukrainians were resettled in Central Asia during the seven decades of Soviet rule and, having lived there for generations, are naturally considered local. Russian is therefore still often used as a *lingua franca* in these countries.

The cultural identity of the peoples living here is based on religion. Despite the fact that the Soviet republics did not support religious activities in this area, Islam has still been the dominant religion. The vast majority of Muslims in Central Asia is Sunni.

⁴ The first Byzantine reports of the 10th Century regularly refer to the Hungarians as the 'Turks living by the Danube' (Gyóni, 1938)

*Table 1. Language groups of the Ural-Altai language family.
The languages spoken in Central Asia are members of the Ural-Altai language family,
except for the Tajik, belonging to the Iranian (Persian)
Branch of the Indo-European Language Family.*

ALTAIC LANGUAGES					URALIC LANGUAGES	
MONGOLIAN	TUNGUZ	TURKIC (TURKISH) LANGUAGES			FINNO-UGRIC	SAMOYED
5,2 M Mongolian	11 M Manchu	88 M Turkish	11 M Kazakh	1 M Khorasani Turkic	13 M Hungarian	0,04 M Nenets
0,6 M Buryat	0,03 M Evenki	26 M Azeri	6,5 M Tatar	0,5 M Yakutian / Sakha	5,4 M Finnish	0,0004 M Silkup
0,15 M Kalmyk	0,0007 M Amurian Even	7 M Turkmen	4,3 M Kyrgyz	0,28 M Tuvainian	1,1 M Estonian	0,0001 M Nganasan
0,15 M Monguor		0,9 M Quashqa' i	1,4 M Bashkir	0,001 M Dolgan	0,5 M Udmurt / Vojtyak	0,00002 M Enets
0,1 M Daghur		0,6 M Gagauz	0,6 M Kara-Kalpak	1,8 M Chuvash	0,2 M Komi-Permic	
0,1 M Ordos	SW Turkic group	0,043 M Khakas / Xakas	0,45 M Kumy	Avar extinct	0,1 M Sami / Lappish	0,017 M Mansi / Vogul
0,00002 M Mogol	SE Turkic group	0,04 M Khalaj	0,4 M Crimean Tatar	Hun extinct	0,03 M Hanti Ugric	Volga Finnish extinct
	NW Turkic group	27 M Uzbek	0,3 M Karachay-Balkar	Khazar extinct	The Ural-Altai Language Family (structure, members and native speakers in Million)	
	NE Turkic group	10,4 M Uyghur	0,087 M Nogai	Pecheneg extinct		
	Ögur group	0,07 M Salar	0,0002 M Karaim	Cuman extinct		

Source: Dörrbecker, 2009

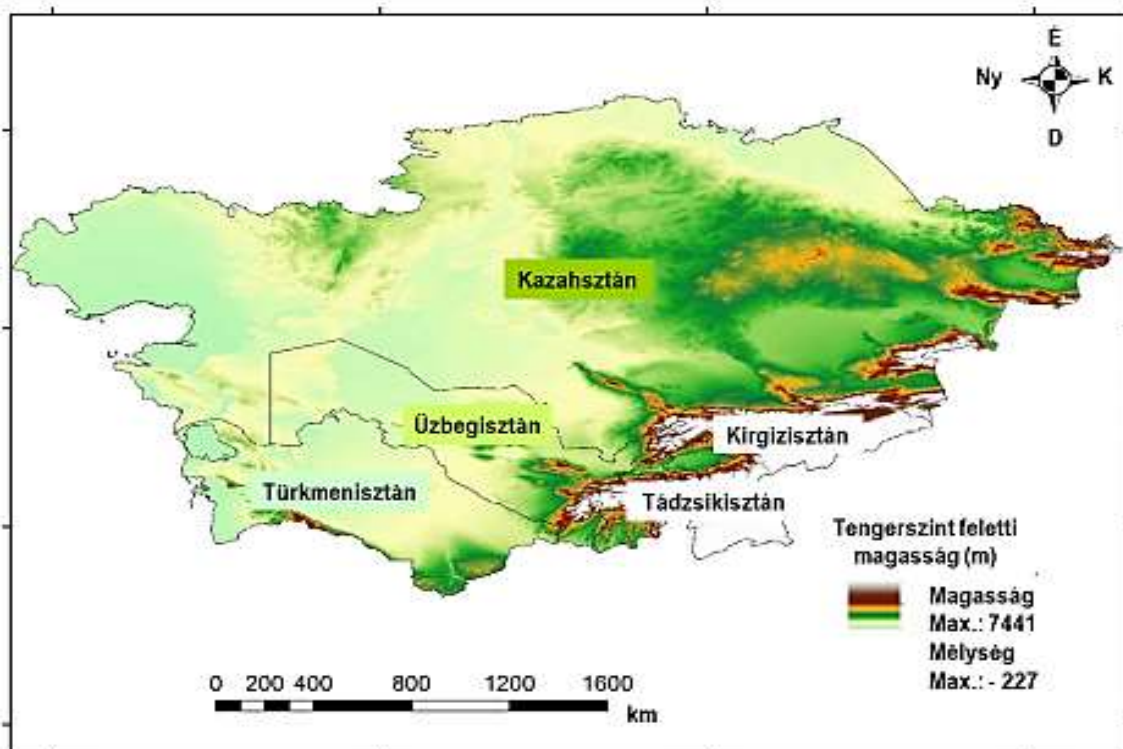


Figure 4. Topography and relief of the 'Heartland' of the world, (Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan) with a difference in altitude of more than seven and a half kilometres (from -227 to 7441 metres)



Source: USG SRTM

<https://indbiz.gov.in/india-central-asia-dialogues-aim-to-boost-bilateral-trade-bilateral-defence-cooperation/>



Figure 5. Ferdinand von Richthofen the world-famous German geographer, in 1877 first described the ancient route through Central Asia to Europe as the Silk Road (Seidenstraße),

Image source: caravan of Marco Polo, Catalan Atlas, 1375

	Kazakhstan / Қазақстан (Quazaqstan)			
	Area: 2 717 300 km ²	Population: 19 million (2021)	Population density: 7 persons/km ²	
	Capital city: Astana	GDP per capita: ⁵ 11 201 \$	Currency: Tenge	

Official languages: Kazakh, Russian. Ethnicities (%): Kazakh (67.5), Russian (19.8), Uzbek (2.8), Ukrainian (2.1), Uyghur (1.4), Tatar (1.3), Azeri, Chuvash, Polish, Volga German, Chechen, Lithuanian (1>)

Source : https://hu.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kazahszt%C3%A1n#/media/F%C3%A1jl:Kazahhstan_in_its_region.svg



Map: <https://geology.com/world/asia-satellite-image.shtml>

The Irtis, Ob, Yenisei, Lena – these are Siberia's largest northward rivers. If we add to these the Irtis's western neighbour, the Volga – which is Europe's largest river – we find that, the vast plain between the two is the most distinctive landscape in Central Asia and encompasses roughly one country: Kazakhstan. The fact that it is 29 times bigger than Hungary is not saying much. Imagine the size of Germany, France, Spain, the British Isles, and the whole of Scandinavia in one! The old Hungarian name for this vast area between the Volga and the Irtis was the Turanian Lowlands.⁶

The continental climate of this vast country means hot summers and cold, dry winters. Its great lakes are the saltwater Caspian Sea, which is a lake in that it is not connected to the world's seas; the Aral Sea, the victim of the greatest ecological disaster of modern times; and the Balkan Sea, which, although only 8 km wide, is 605 km long and 70 meters deep, fresh in the west and salt in the east. The Altai Mountains rise on the eastern edge of the country. The western edge of Kazakhstan, on the other hand, is still part of Europe in natural geographic terms, as the Trans-Volga Rhin desert and the eastern part of the Caspian Lowlands are still European and Kazakh territory. The eastern border of Europe here is the Ural River. It can therefore be said that Kazakhstan is (also) a European country to the same extent as Türkiye, whose western tip lies on the European continent, to the east of Greek Thrace, as far as Drinapolis. The Kazakh

⁵ GDP value: average of IMF, WB, UN (2022) estimates

⁶ This is the origin of the 'Turanian curse' that befell the Hungarians, since north of this area, on the foothills of the European side of the Ural Mountains, there was – according to tradition and the report of Friar Julian – *Magna Hungaria*, which some Hungarians left when they migrated south. Their first place of residence was the Turanian Lowland, and when they left it and headed west towards the Meotis (today's Sea of Azov) and the South Central (the area between the Dnieper, Dniester, Donets, and Don rivers in modern Ukraine), the shamans who stayed there cursed those who left. Those who abandoned their homeland – thus the curse – abandoned their gods, who therefore punished them with eternal discord. The names of the pre-Christian Hungarian gods are indeed not remembered; the question is, did the curse take hold?

steppe is one of the world's largest, if not the largest, steppe plains, which in the south gives way to the Kizil-Kum desert.

The territory of Kazakhstan today lies on the trail of the Migration and Silk Roads, dominated by nomadic Khanates, leaving behind a Mongol and Turkic cultural heritage. The expansion of the Russian Empire under the Tsars from 1848 onwards integrated Kazakhstan. The influx of Russian people and culture had a significant impact on Kazakhstan, which gained independence in 1991 with the break-up of the Soviet Union, making it the world's largest landlocked country, and the 9th largest in terms of land area.

In the Soviet period, the exploitation of the dry steppe, the so-called virgin lands, started in the 1950s. This amounted to 25 million hectares, more than Romania or the United Kingdom. It is used to grow wheat, oats, barley, tobacco, mustard, sugar beet, maize, sunflowers, cotton, rice, fruit and vegetables, sheep, goats, cattle, and camels.

The country's major mineral resources are gold, diamonds, copper, lead, uranium (with 35% of world production and the world's second largest uranium reserves), tungsten, zinc, nickel, mercury, iron (including open-pit mining), chromium, phosphorus, bauxite, coal. Oil and gas extraction is the most important sector of the economy, generating the highest export earnings – especially in the Tengiz Basin, on the north-eastern coast of the Caspian Sea, where there are also significant reserves of oil and gas. Oil pipelines are expanding to transport oil to Black Sea ports and other countries, including China in particular. Kazakhstan's economy is larger than all other Central Asian states combined. Karaganda is the largest industrial city because of its coal mines and steel industry. It is also worth mentioning the huge wind energy potential of Kazakhstan's grasslands, averaging 35-45 m/sec.⁷

Astana is the new capital of Kazakhstan. In the Soviet era, the capital was Alma-Ata, on the country's south-eastern edge, at the foot of the Tien-Shan Mountains. Today it is still the largest Kazakh city. Its name means 'father of apples' and the apple here is as much a symbol of the city as, say, the chestnut is of Odessa. Alma-Ata has the proud title of 'the greenest city in the world' in its city marketing. After gaining independence in 1991, the capital was moved north to Astana to ensure the surveillance of the Russian ethnic minority-populated NE region against the devolutionary forces seeking to secede and become part of the Russian Federation.

The Russian space industry's Soviet-era base – Baikonur – is located in the centre of Kazakhstan; it is still leased and used by the Russian Federation. The country's environmental pollution is also a Soviet 'legacy' – nuclear weapons were tested on the Kazakh steppe, and radiation contamination still has serious health consequences. The breaking up of the virgin lands was followed by wind erosion. The most serious environmental disaster is the destruction of the Aral Sea. Admittedly, this is not a problem caused by the Kazakhs: it is the irrigated agriculture of the Uzbeks and Turkmen that has diverted the water from the rivers that once flowed into the lake, which was once known as the 'sea'. Kazakhstan's natural treasures are found in the Tien Shan National Park, which rises on the western edge of the country, and culturally along the ancient Silk Road, that crosses the country.

In the country's external trade structure, exports are characterised by a predominance of hydrocarbons, metals, and cereals. The main buyers are China, Italy, Russia, the Netherlands, France, and South Korea (2019). In terms of imports, machinery and food products are significant, mainly from Russia and China.

⁷ It is worth noting that the limit for wind energy to produce electricity economically is 12 m/sec (which, unfortunately, is only 4-5 m/sec on average in Hungary).



Figure 6. Present and past: the new capital Astana and a traditional Kazakh yurt



Figure 7. Left: the centre of Alma-Ata. Right: Aktau, the port city on the Caspian Sea



Figure 8. Coexistence of Orthodox Christianity and Islam in Kazakhstan: the Cathedral of the Ascension and the Khazret Sultan Mosque





Figure 9. Baikonur spaceport and traditional Kazakh cuisine (horse meat)



Figure 10. Typical Kazakh steppe

Image source: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kazakhstan>

	Uzbekistan / O'zbekiston			
	Area: 447 000 km ²	Population: 34.9 million (2021)	Population density: 61 persons/km ²	
	Capital city: Tashkent	GDP per capita: 2283 \$	Currency: Uzbek Som	

Official language: Uzbek and regional: Karakalpak. Ethnicities (%): Uzbek (84.5), Tajik (4.8), Kazakh (2.4), Karakalpak (2.2), Russian (2.1), Tatar (2), other (2).

Source: <https://hu.wikipedia.org/wiki/%C3%9Czbeigiszt%C3%A1n#>



Map: <https://geology.com/world/asia-satellite-image.shtml>

Uzbekistan is nearly five times the size of Hungary, about the size of Sweden. Geographically, Uzbekistan borders all the countries of Central Asia. It is the most populous Central Asian country. The eastern border of Uzbekistan extends deep into Kyrgyzstan. In the Soviet era, the border lines were established to give the central government greater control over its republics by politicising the enclaves. Geographers call Uzbekistan a doubly 'land-locked' country because none of the countries surrounding it has a coastline. Its primary source of fresh water comes from the mountainous regions of the east. During the Soviet period, the main rivers were diverted by canals or used for irrigation, so that they almost disappeared into the desert before reaching the Aral Sea.

The country lies between the Amu-Darya, which originates in the Hindu Kush, and the north-western oriented Sir-Darya, which originates in the Pamirs, with the Kizil-Kum desert, the 'red sand' of the Hunger Steppe, in the west and centre. The country's economy is concentrated on the DK and E border flanks, at the foot of the great mountain ranges, with its ancient, historic cities and the industrial Fergana Basin between the Pamir and Tien-San Mountain ranges. Its centre is Andijan, the base to produce agricultural machinery for cotton cultivation. On the country's southern border, lies Gazli, the world's largest natural gas field with reserves!

Uzbekistan is a land of white and yellow gold. Its cotton industry is based on white gold, cotton: Uzbekistan is one of the world's leading cotton producers and a major exporter to world markets. The central and western regions have a dry, desert climate and rely heavily on fresh water from the mountains for their oases. Agriculture (cereals, fruit, and vegetables) and livestock (silkworms, sheep, and camels) employ a quarter of the population and account for a quarter of gross domestic product (GDP). Gold, copper, coal, oil, and gas extraction are also primary economic activities.

Uzbekistan is also a country of young people: around a third of the population is under fifteen. After the fall of the Soviet Union, Islam has also gained strength here since the country gained independence from the Soviet Union in 1991. This openness is characterised by the Qur'anic teaching that Uzbeks are extremely '*respectful of guests, even if they are infidels.*'

Central Asia's most famous historic cities

The country is named after *Özbek* Khan. The largest city is ***Tashkent*** (the 'stone city'), a 2,000-year-old commercial centre with numerous Islamic monuments, such as the Barak Khan's madrassa. Tashkent is also known as the 'Vatican of Central Asia'.

Samarkand is the second largest city on the country's eastern edge, started as a caravanserai along the ancient Silk Road and became the 'crossroads of the world', a centre of trade with China, India, and Europe. Samarkand was the capital of the world conqueror Timur Lenk (Timur the Lame) in the 14th century. It is home to some 80 madrassas (Muslim seminary) monuments and the tomb of the Gur Emir, or Timur. In 2001, UNESCO declared this 2,750-year-old city a World Heritage Site. Along with Nineveh (now Mosul)⁸ in Iraq, Samarkand is one of the oldest, continuously inhabited cities in the world and the most important city in Central Asia.

Bukhara is the other centre of the Silk Road, an ancient city full of monuments; it is 'the Rome of Islam', according to Vámbéry. Known for its carpet and textile industries, it is also the home of Nasreddin Hodja, the ingenious folk teacher whose tales are known worldwide. Bukhara was shaped by ancient Persian, Greek, Islamic and, from 1868, Russian cultural influences. Among its monuments is the Chasma-Ajab, the fountain of Job.

Kokand, the 'pleasant town', was also a caravanserai on the former Silk Road and, like the previous ones, a cultural and commercial centre. According to Vámbéry's records, in 1863, Kokand was three times and Bukhara four times bigger than Tehran, the capital of Persia!

⁸ Nineveh had 120,000 inhabitants at the beginning of time. And we know this from the Bible. When the Lord sent Jonah to Nineveh to see how sinful the city's population was; whether it should be destroyed like Sodom and Gomorrah, Jonah did not want to be the arbiter, so he hid under the vines of a broad-leaved gourd. But God sent such heat on it that the plant withered, and Jonah questioned why the poor plant had to be destroyed. God answered him, 'You pity this little bush, and shall I not pity Nineveh, where twelve times ten thousand people live?'

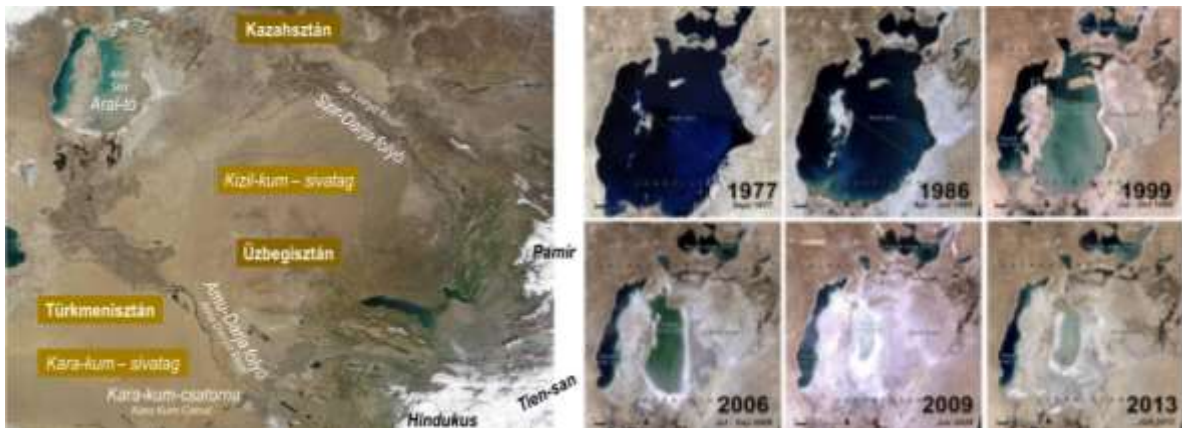


Figure 11. Left: Uzbekistan and the Kizil-Kum desert, ‘sandwiched’ by the Amu-Darya-Syr-Darya rivers, and to the south the Kara-Kum desert, where the rivers were used for irrigated agriculture, thus dooming the once 4th largest lake on Earth, Lake Aral. Satellite images of the Aral Sea dying between 1977 and 2013 on the right (Anchita et al, 2021).

Map: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/2/2a/Asia_satellite_orthographic.jpg

Uzbekistan's foreign trade structure is dominated by exports of white and yellow gold (cotton and gold), metals, textiles, foodstuffs and, of course, natural gas. Its main partners are Switzerland, the UK, Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Türkiye, and Kyrgyzstan (5% <). The Uzbek economy imports mainly machinery and equipment, mainly from China, Russia, South Korea, Kazakhstan, Türkiye, and Germany (5% <).



Figure 12. Uzbek national dishes of manti (meat pelmeni) and plov (rice meat); embroidery and pottery



Figure 13 Cotton harvest in western Uzbekistan





Figure 14. Monuments in Samarkand and Bukhara



Figure 15. The Aral Sea today; Uzbek highway; Tashkent.

Image source: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Uzbekistan>

	Turkmenistan			
	Area: 488 100 km ²	Population: 6.1 million (2021)	Population density: 10 persons/km ²	
Capital city: Ashabad	GDP per capita: 10 786 \$	Currency: Manat		

Official language: Turkmen and Russian as an intermediary language. Ethnicities (%): Turkmen (85), Uzbek (5), Russian (4), other: Azeri, Armenian, Tatar (6)

Source : <https://hu.wikipedia.org/wiki/T%C3%BCrkmeniszt%C3%A1n>



Map: <https://geology.com/world/asia-satellite-image.shtml>

South of the Amu-Darya River, Turkmenistan is a desert country stretching from the Caspian Sea in the west to Afghanistan in the east. Turkmenistan's geographical area is more than five

times that of Hungary. Three-quarter of the country is covered by the Kara Kum, the driest desert in the world (the 'black sand'), about 350,000 km² which is roughly the size of Germany. The country is bordered by the Kopet-Dag Mountains and the Hindu Kush in the south and the Pamirs in the east. Its main rivers are the Amu-Darya, the Mugabe and the Kara-Kum Canal, more than 1000 km long, which was built during the Soviet period. Its western border is the Caspian Sea.

Until the 20th century, the area was dominated by Turkish Oguz, Arab, Mongol, Tatar, and Bukhara Khanates, and from 1880 onwards, Russian influence grew. From 1924 it became a Soviet state until 1991. After independence, an authoritarian political leadership with a traditional Islamic culture came to power in the decade and a half following independence. Since 2006, the country has continued its transition to a democratic state, although the dynamics of corruption and authoritarian rule remain.

In the country's economy, cotton is grown in oases and along rivers. The most important livestock breeds are sheep and horses, especially the world-famous Akhal-Teke horse breed, which is also featured on the country's coat of arms. Quality Karakul wool and silkworm breeding are the basis of the traditional Turkmen carpet and silk industry. A world record of a 200 m² carpet was made here.

Turkmenistan has the 4th largest natural gas reserves in the world. After Russia, Iran, and the United States. Natural gas exports account for most of the country's revenue. As Turkmenistan is landlocked, its government has been forced to collaborate with Russia to use its pipelines for natural gas exports. Turkmenistan, especially after the outbreak of the war in Ukraine and the imposition of sanctions against Russia, understandably does not want to rely on Russia's pipeline monopoly and has built and is building more pipelines to India and China. Many international companies are also looking to Turkmenistan, as well as the whole of Central Asia, to acquire interests in the exploitation of its vast natural resources. Corporate colonialism is extremely active and has contributed to high levels of corruption in both the government and the business sector.

The largest city and capital of Turkmenistan is Ashabad, which grew out of a small village founded in 1818. It has thriving cotton, textile, and metal industries. As a result, Turkmenistan's exports are oil and gas, cotton and textiles to China and Turkey. Its imports consist of machinery and equipment, foodstuffs. Its partners are Turkey, Russia, China, UAE, Kazakhstan, Germany, and Iran (5% <).



Figure 16. One of Turkmenistan's newest landmarks is the 'Hell Gate', a 70-meter diameter cavity in the desert caved in after a Soviet exploratory drilling, which has been burning gas since 1971.



Figure 17. Left: an oil rig in the Caspian Sea; right: Ashgabat, the capital city





Figure 18. Turkish folk costume; pishme (fried dough) and the world-famous Akhal-Teke horse



Figure 19. The Kara Kum Desert; camels and the world-famous Turkmen carpets

Image source: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Turkmenistan#>

	Tajikistan / Тоҷикистон			
	Area: 143 100 km ²	Population: 8.9 million (2017)	Population density: 56 persons/km ²	
	Capital city: Dushanbe	GDP per capita: 1076 \$	Currency: Somoni	

Official language: Tajik Persian and Russian as an intermediary language. Nationalities (%): Tajik (84.3), Uzbek (12.2), other: Kyrgyz, Turkmen, Tatar, Ukrainian, Russian (3.5)

Source : <https://hu.wikipedia.org/wiki/T%C3%A1dzsikiszt%C3%A1n>



Map: <https://geology.com/world/asia-satellite-image.shtml>

The eastern region of Central Asia has the highest mountain ranges, and Tajikistan is about 90% mountainous and only 7% flat. More than half of the country lies at an altitude of 3,000 m or more above sea level. This is where the Hindu Kush meets the Altai and the Tien-San. The high mountain range formed here is the Pamir, meaning 'the top of the world'. The peaks of the Pamirs exceed 7,000 m (the highest is Tajik Peak, 7495 m). The Himalayan yeti, famous from the world of legends, lives here, too.

Pamir is the source of the Amu-Darya River and home to the longest glacier outside the Arctic, over 70 km long. The rivers of the Pamirs offer excellent opportunities for hydropower generation: in Tajikistan, the world's highest dam (280 m) was built on the 40-meter deep Vahs River. Cotton, grapes, and fruit are grown wherever possible. The country is characterised by the giant maize, which grows to 5-6 meter high, and cantaloupes weighing up to 40-50 kg in the Vahs River valley. Sheep and cattle are raised in the mountains. The country's exports include coal, oil, gold, silk, cotton, and electricity.

Tajikistan is the smallest country in Central Asia, only one and a half times the size of Hungary. Only about a quarter of the population is urban and a third of the population is under 15 years old. 80 percent of the population is Sunni Muslim. The Tajiks are an Iranian people of Persian origin – unlike the other Central Asian peoples of Turkish origin. Alexander the Great founded the empire of Bactria, which spread Greek culture in the heart of Asia and lasted for centuries.⁹ The territory was ruled by the Emirate of Bukhara until the Soviet occupation in 1929, which lasted until 1991. Although the country is rich in resources, its economy is not developed enough to realise its economic potential. Half of its workforce is employed abroad. Dushanbe is both the capital and the largest city. The town is known for its Monday markets (Dushanbe

⁹ The Hungarian aspect of Bactria, according to legend, is that the last wife of Attila, the Hun king who caused the death of the great king, was brought from Bactria. 'Now they brought him the daughter of the king of Bactria, named Mikolt, who was beautiful beyond all human measure.' (Thurocz Chronicle)

means ‘Monday’ in Tajik). Like Ashabad in Turkmenistan, Dushanbe was a small village that was built under Soviet rule and became a centre for cotton and silk production. The Soviets also transformed the cultural and ethnic make-up of the town by resettling tens of thousands of people from Russia and other regions of Central Asia in Dushanbe.

After Tajikistan's independence, a period of what could be called peaceful Soviet repression was replaced by a civil war that killed more than 100,000 people between 1992 and 1997. There were border clashes on the Kyrgyz border in 2021 and 2022. Political instability and corruption continue to hamper the growth of the market economy. Debt restructuring with Russia and an influx of development loans from China are helping the ailing economy. The US aid has also contributed to infrastructure improvements to support the US military operations in Afghanistan.

Tajik foreign trade exports include aluminium, electricity, cotton, fruit, textiles, and is destined for Türkiye, Switzerland, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and China. The main imports are machinery and equipment, petroleum and foodstuffs from China, Russia, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan (5% <).



Figure 20. The Altai and Pamirs and Lake Karakul at 3900 m



Figure 21. View of Dushanbe, the National Library, and a Muslim madrasa





Figure 22. Tajik folk costume, a market and a table setting



Figure 23. Traditional dish qurutob (bread salad with cheese), a market, and an ancient castle (Hisor)

Image source: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tajikistan#>

	Kyrgyzstan			
	Area: 199 951 km ²	Population: 6.7 million (2021)	Population density: 27 persons/km ²	
	Capital city: Biscuits	GDP per capita: 1560 \$	Currency: Kyrgyz Som	

Official languages: Kyrgyz and Russian. Ethnicities (%): Kyrgyz (70), Uzbek (14.3), Russian (7.7), other: Tajik, Uyghur, Kazakh, Tatar, Ukrainian, Turkish, German (8)

Source : https://hu.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kirgiziszt%C3%A1n#/media/F%C3%A1jl:Kyrgyzstan_Topography.png



Map: <https://geology.com/world/asia-satellite-image.shtml>

The Kyrgyz lived in essentially independent nomadic states in the high mountains of Tien-San until the 20th century; Russian influence began to appear in 1863. Between 1925-36, the violent, now Soviet, presence in Kyrgyzstan made it a member republic of the Soviet Union. Its territory is twice the size of Hungary. The backward economy, based mainly on sheep farming, began to develop in 1930 under the leadership of the founder of Kyrgyz industry, the Czech Julius Fučík. His memory is still honoured today. He founded the Kyrgyz machinery, textile, and food industries.

Kyrgyzstan's capital was named after a Soviet general, Frunze, and after more than half a century of Soviet rule, the country gained political independence at the end of 1991 with the collapse of the Soviet Union – when the capital was renamed Bishkek.

The rugged landscape of this mountainous region includes the high ranges of the Tien-San Mountains (highest point is Victory Peak, 7439 m), which cover about 80 percent of the country. Snowfall in the mountains provides fresh water for agriculture and hydroelectric power through large rivers with high waterfalls, the production of which began in Soviet times. Cereals, sugar beet, tobacco, cotton, and poppy are grown in the valleys, in the few lowland areas. Half the population works in agriculture, and food production in the countryside is self-sufficient.

In the mountains, there are deposits of metals and minerals: coal, mercury and antimony are mined, which add to the national wealth. Petroleum and natural gas reserves are also available for extraction. The government is seeking foreign aid and investment to exploit these resources.

About a third of the population is under 15 years old and a third is urban. The western border with Uzbekistan and Tajikistan is winding due to the high mountainous terrain, creating numerous ethnic enclaves and exclaves. In the 2010s, clashes between the Uzbek national minority and Kyrgyz led to riots in major cities. Indeed, Kyrgyzstan's transition from a Soviet republic to independence has not been smooth. The loss of the state social safety net before the 1990s pushed the economy into the informal sector, where small transactions for personal survival are common. Shortages of consumer goods are concentrated in rural areas and small towns. Where, as in the Caucasus, the low standard of living occurs in a multi-ethnic state, it is now historical experience that only dictatorial or autocratic political leadership can maintain social stability.

The road and rail networks are less developed due to the topography and there is also a large role for domestic air transport with small aircraft. Kyrgyzstan is an isolated country, both geographically and economically, working to integrate into the global economy through technology and modernisation.

The 'Kyrgyz Sea', Lake Issyk-Kul, is in fact a reservoir created at an altitude of 1600 m above sea level, surrounded by 3000 m high mountains. Thanks to the geothermal springs in the valley floor, the lake does not freeze over in winter and its name means 'warm lake'. It is ten times the size of the Hungarian Lake Balaton, measuring 177 x 57 km, but its depth reaches 70 metres. Of its 580 km of shoreline, 300 km is sandy, with radium and sodium-rich therapeutic mud.

The minerals make Issyk-Kul the 'bluest lake in the world' and it has a huge tourist potential. The 40 rays of sun on the country's flag represent the legendary forty 'manas' tribes of the Kyrgyz people. The most famous epic poem in Central Asia is also called *Manas* – the life of a Kyrgyz folk hero. This epic legend is an integral part of the culture and festivals of Kyrgyzstan.

The main export items in Kyrgyzstan's foreign trade structure are wool, cotton, meat, tobacco, hydropower, and ores (gold, mercury, uranium). Exports are mainly destined to Switzerland, Kazakhstan, Russia, Uzbekistan, Türkiye, and China (5% <). Imports include oil and natural gas, machinery, equipment, and foodstuffs. The main importers are China, Russia, Kazakhstan and Türkiye (5% <).



Figure 24. Traditional Kyrgyz hunting with eagle and the performance of the folk epic Manas



Figure 25. Kyrgyz Yurt, the Issyk-Kul coast and Bishkek, the capital



Figure 26. The first phase of the production of koumiss (fermented horse milk) at the Toktogul hydroelectric power plant



Figure 27. The laghman (a Kyrgyz noodle dish), a market, and a Kyrgyz girl



Figure 28. Kyrgyz landscape with wild horses

Image source: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kyrgyzstan>

Summary

Central Asia is getting more and more valued for investors. The geostrategic map in Figure 29 shows how Central Asia is being valorised today. Referring to the special satellite map in Figure 2, where Central Asia, billed as a ‘pristine resource’, is surrounded by a similar region. The schematic drawing in Figure 29 shows the arrows of the great powers competing for it. Europe (the European Union) and Russia are in the best position. China has announced and begun to build the continental New Silk Road in a swift geopolitical action that would link Russia and the European Union, the three major global players, in a geostrategic position of advantage in Eurasia. The US, as the most powerful global superpower, has of course also tried to reach the ‘Heartland’ through Afghanistan, which has been under occupation for two decades.



Figure 29. Central Asia in the focus of the great powers: geostrategic trends in the 2020s, which, after the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, will thwart Sino-Russian-European Union economic cooperation in Central Asia in the geostrategic interests of the EU with the Russian invasion of Ukraine – thus defending the US superpower position.

Source: own editing

Clearly, once the base in Afghanistan had to be abandoned, a drastic step would have been needed to prevent the Sino-Russian-European cooperation that was the hallmark of the New Silk Road and that threatened the US superpower position. This drastic step was taken, miraculously, by Russia, and the European Union, even against their own economic interests, had supported and is still supporting the block of the Russian section of the New Silk Road because of the Russo-Ukrainian war.

Under these circumstances, if China were to continue to insist on an economic bridge to the European Union, bypassing Russia, it would have to be built through Central Asia, bypassing the Caspian Sea from Turkmenistan in the south, to Iran. From there to Iraq, from there to Syria, bypassing the explosive zone of the Kurdish region, to Türkiye, or from Iran to Türkiye via Azerbaijan, the rail and high-speed rail link to Europe. For all this, there is a lack of links between China and Tajikistan, Iran and Azerbaijan, and Georgia and Türkiye (indicated by the grey line in the lower part of Figure 30). The construction of a new Eurasian continental high-speed rail link, with the Russians excluded, is an undertaking that must exceed China's strengths and potential (Figure 30). Instead of the Sino-Russian-European Union economic cooperation, attention will focus on Central Asia with the entry of India. Not in the form of Sino-Russian and EU cooperation, but separately, with the competitiveness of the EU, subordinated to the US, which for the time being seems to be successfully defending its position as a superpower (Figure 29).

The alternative for the open small Hungarian economy in this geopolitical cavalcade is either to give up its national sovereignty and join the ranks of the EU countries and hold out for US economic aid; or to try to maintain its national sovereignty and engage in foreign trade with the Central Asian 'stans', building on the 'Magyaristan' sympathy for it. As all five Central Asian 'stans' import a large part of their machinery and equipment, Hungary could supply them with high value-added machinery in exchange for energy independence and raw materials, e.g. electric cars, or even... batteries. Though some Hungarians think that the country is becoming a 'battery colony,' while the government's intention is to turn into a 'battery superpower.' Lithium batteries will play a key role in the next generation of car production and solar energy storing in the near future.



Figure 31. Central Asian identity, founded on a blend of European Christian-Russian and Asian Islam, and liberated from seven decades of communist dictatorship, has become so strong and unique that it is visible in the most sensitive area of modern women's fashion. This unique identity has enabled Eurasia's 'Heartland' to maintain its sovereignty in the face of the great powers and multinational companies.

Image source: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/countries/tajikistan>

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