Central Asia in International Relations
The Legacies of Halford Mackinder

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CONTENTS

List of Figures
About the Contributors
Acknowledgements

Introduction: Halford Mackinder and Central Asia
Sovia Sharapova and Nick Megnan

PART 1
MACKINDER ON/IN CENTRAL ASIA
1. Mackinder: Imperialism, the Empire of India and Central Asia
   Brian W. Blouet
   39
2. Imperialism and the Heartland
   Gerry Kears
   69
3. From Geostrategy to Geo-Economics: The ‘Heartland’ and
   British Imperialism Before and After Mackinder
   Sarah O’Hara and Michael Heffernan
   91

PART 2
HOW MACKINDER’S IDEAS ‘TRAVELLED’
TO THE HEARTLAND
4. Russia’s Asian Heartland Today and Tomorrow
   Milan Hauner
   117
5. Mackinder on the Roof of the World: Contemporary
   Geopolitical Discourse in Tajikistan
   Kirill Nurchabarov
   149
6. The Intellectual Life of the Heartland: How Mackinder Travelled
   to Uzbekistan
   Sovia Sharapova
   171
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MACKINDER ON THE ROOF OF THE WORLD

CONTEMPORARY GEOPOLITICAL DISCOURSE
IN TAJIKISTAN

Kirill Nourzhanov

Introduction

The term 'geopolitics' has become firmly ensconced in the public mind in Tajikistan since independence. It crops up on a daily basis in the print and broadcast mass media. It peppers speech acts by politicians at all levels, starting with the president and going all the way down to a mayor of a small provincial town. Numerous think tanks, academics and independent analysts purvey courses in 'geopolitics' and cognate areas of 'geostrategy' and 'geo-economics' to eager audiences, which include civil servants. These days senior bureaucrats are expected to sit a course on 'Resource Endowment and Geopolitics of Tajikistan' offered by the presidential administration's Institute for Advanced Learning if they want a promotion.

In most cases 'geopolitics' serves as code for the country's pragmatic multivector diplomacy, similar to Henry Kissinger's usage of the word in the 1970s. One Tajik author equated geopolitics with realpolitik, defining both as 'political balancing to maintain and strengthen the positions of one's state' and highlighting the primacy of political expediency in his country's
PARTICIPATION (OE CONCERN) IN VARIOUS Blocs AND alliances.1 Quiet often the geopolitical label is attached to a particular issue or security threat that seems to have some geographic attributes; for example, 'geopolitics of narcotics trafficking', 'geopolitics of labour migration', 'geopolitics of energy' and so on. As an example, a newspaper columnist discussing the issue of Tajikistan's dependency on imported hydrocarbons concluded his piece with the pithy statement: 'Our geopolitics today consists of having oil and gas of our own'.2

The idiom of geopolitics has also become prominent in Tajikistan's efforts to promote itself on the global arena and draw foreign investment. The country's location and natural resources are key elements in this discourse. A well-known political scientist came up with a series of snappy slogans which, in his opinion, would create an attractive image for Tajikistan:

- 'Tajikistan is a convenient crossroads of Eurasia'.
- 'Tajikistan is a worthy heir to the Great Silk Route'.
- 'The restoration of the Silk Route is the restoration and intensification of the East-West dialogue'.
- 'Tajikistan is the country where the entire periodic table of elements exists'.
- 'Tajikistan is a country whose the light will come across the Orient'.3

Apart from its practical, popular and commercial incarnations, geopolitics as a grand theory of international relations based on the study of the interaction between geographical settings and state power has gained currency in Tajikistan, too. This 'formal' geopolitics (i.e. the discourse 'created by security intellectuals' who produced theories and strategies to guide and justify the statecraft of practical geopolitics)4 constitutes the primary subject of the chapter. Its main concern revolves around the dissemination, interpretation, adaptation and further development of the precepts of classical geopolitics among such intellectuals in Tajikistan. This can be broken down into a series of second-order questions: why have so many local authors taken interest in Mackinderian geopolitics as a cognitive tool to

1 Jalalov, 'Politiccheskaya obshchestva i real'nost politika v sovremennom mir'., 2006, pp. 27–8.
3 Mamadaliyev, 'Predpi3i3'3ivi'3 vmeno bisho3i'3'. 2009.
its inextricable connection to the landscape are constantly present in his magnum opus. Ghafurov’s narrative reads like a story of space conquered and space lost by the ‘Pax Iranica’, earning him opprobrium from Soviet officials and colleagues in neighbouring Turkic republics at the time of publication, but making him an idol in the eyes of nationalist-minded intellectuals in Tajikistan.

Ghafurov was neither a social Darwinist nor a racist, but his followers have come quite close to positing a nexus between soil, culture and state power reminiscent of the German turn-of-the-twentieth-century geopolitik. Their preoccupation with territory, natural resources and living space as factors determining the nation’s political evolution has direct correlation with the notions of werk and Lebensraum as espoused by Friedrich Ratzel and Karl Haushofer. A detailed discussion of nationalist geopolitics in Tajikistan will follow below, but it must be noted here that while its most radical and openly revanchist precepts are rejected by the official state ideology of post-independence Tajikistan, Ghafurov’s historic geo geographic narrative has become an integral part of the official discourse. President Emomali Rahmon (‘Rahmonov’ prior to 2007) referred to it as a ‘calling card of our nation which has performed a commendable service in the cause of national self-awareness and strengthening of the historical thinking of our people’. The vision of the Tajiks as an Aryan people (khvāli arman) who had dominated Central Asia since the dawn of time as its original and most civilized inhabitants but occasionally succumbed to invading barbarians due to the injustice of history is now an unquestioned truth taught at secondary schools.

A strong sense of history constitutes one aspect of formal geopolitics in Tajikistan, and perhaps not even the most important one as far as the country’s ruling elite is concerned. Suddenly independence in 1991 compelled the governing circles to deal with multiple challenges and external security threats, which necessitated a systematic response based on high-level strategic analysis. The hot phase of the civil war in 1992–3 postponed this endeavour somewhat, but as early as 1993 Rahmon called on the local community of security experts and social scientists to equip the government

6 For a concise account, see Chintara-Steune, ‘Space, Geography and Mittelostas in Some Debates of the Early Twentieth Century’, 2008, pp. 185–201; Parker, Western Geopolitical Thought in the Twentieth Century, 1985, pp. 51–86.
7 Rahmonov, Tadzhik v zakhle istochniki, 2000, p. 125.
8 Rahmonov, Tajikon dar azami vaqib, 1997, p. 4.
pivot; it has always been and will forever remain one of the key areas on the planet in terms of geopolitics. The foresight of the Englishman is worthy of respect: in the beginning of the 21st century the importance of the strategic location of the Central Asian region continues to grow.21

Despite a degree of impertinence (in both senses of the word) in this statement, it is broadly representative of the proliferation of Mackinderian concepts and idioms affecting the geopolitical imagination in Tajikistan. The notions of 'pivot', 'heartland' and 'rimland' and their application in modelling the world 'out there' have gained wide circulation. Globalisation, for example, is routinely construed as a drive by the United States and its Atlantic allies for global domination, whereby globalisation is a pre-conceived and rigidly controlled process based on a 'geopolitical doctrine which stems from the Heartland-Rimland theories formulated in the well-known works of the theorist of Anglo-American geopolitics and geostrategy, H. Mackinder.22

In 2003, the SRC was made the top government information-analytical agency in charge of forward strategic planning, and it received additional resources to attract leading experts from other government bodies, universities and the Academy of Sciences. It acquired a near-monopoly on advising the president on geopolitical issues. As a result, Rahmon's public statements on matters of global strategy have acquired an 'uber-realist' tone:

The most dangerous development in the beginning of the 21st century consists of the unprecedented ferocity of geopolitical competition, especially for access to natural resources and control over important geostategic areas. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the dissolution of the socialist camp, the process of re-division of the world between global superpowers has continued until today. Further intensification of this process is fraught with serious danger and even catastrophe for the entire humanity.23

Rahmon further commented on the main focal point of contemporary geopolitics: "This process is fast and foremost a characteristic feature of Central Asia, which in the forthcoming years will become the most important zone of geopolitical and geostategic rivalry among the world's powers.24


CENTRAL ASIA IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Tajikistan’s development effort be prioritised along the North–South and East-West axes. In 2006, Shurbod Sharipov, the SRC director, referred to his country’s earlier focus on Russia and Central Asia as an anomaly caused by the shock of the Soviet collapse, difficult internal conditions and the absence of ‘sufficient diplomatic cadres, analysts and experts’. One of the clearest signs of strategic reorientation to date is Tajikistan’s support for US-sponsored integrationist projects such as the ‘Greater Central Asia Partnership’ (GCAP), which Russia and most other Central Asian republics vehemently oppose.

The ascendency of the nationalist trend in formal geopolitics has resulted in the decisive dismissal of any alliance-making within Central Asia. A typical example was furnished by Tajikistan’s rejection of the latest initiative by Kazakhstan’s president, Nursultan Nazarbayev, to reanimate the idea of the Central Asian Union (CAU) in 2008. Furthermore, a local commentator opined at the time:

This is a rather serious problem, and the confrontation between the ruling elites of Tajikistan and Uzbekistan will never allow us to seek any form of rapprochement with Tjikic states. Even if there are some contacts in this sphere, they will be purely diplomatic or in accomplishment of some intermediate goals. Thus, I believe that the very idea of a Central Asian union is a stillborn baby.

On the other hand, the nationalist endeavour to bring all Persian-speaking countries together in a sort of geopolitical whole has not been particularly successful either. Despite regular trilateral meetings with Afghanistan and Iran and professions of cultural unity and joint civilizational renaissance, considerations of realpolitik have constantly thwarted any meaningful cooperation. Afghanistan is clearly a weak link in the parative alliance, posing a threat to Iran and Tajikistan by virtue of its instability, proliferation of radical Sunni Islamist groups and growing narcotics problem. Presumably, Mamadazimov intuitively reproduces some of Nicholas Spykman’s criteria of geopolitical power. In Mamadazimov’s parlance, these are geographic location, resource endowment, industrial potential, military might, the quality of population and the quality of government (ibid., pp. 126–31).


MACINDER ON THE ROOF OF THE WORLD

sure from the United States also militates strongly against Tajikistan’s engagement with Iran. Mamadazimov recently acknowledged ‘a difference in Afghanistan, Iran and Tajikistan’s foreign policy vectors’ and reiterated his (and now official government) point of view that Tajikistan’s rapprochement with its southern neighbours ought to be pursued primarily on the grounds of economic expediency and diversification of transport routes.

As far as the circle of Islamic countries is concerned, Tajikistan’s place in the global ummah has been recalibrated after 2001. The official geopolitical discourse presently positions it as the epiphon of moderate Islam and an agent of interfaith dialogue between the East and the West that can facilitate a united front against extremism. This portrayal bears strong resemblance to Dr Mahathir Mohamad’s project in Malaysia in the 1990s, with the added bonus of barely concealed anti-Arabism. In 2008, Rahmon announced Abu Hanifa (699–765), the founder of one of the four major Sunni schools of jurisprudence, to be an ethnic Tajik and a year later pushed through legislation declaring the Hanafi madhab the official creed of the country. In Rahmon’s words, Abu Hanifa greatly contributed to the ‘unity of the Muslim ummah, the elimination of all kinds of extremism and excess in matters pertaining to faith and jurisprudence of Islam, and the protection of cultural authenticity of many different peoples of the Muslim world, especially traditional popular customs and mores.’

The Muslim world has by and large ignored this politically correct if not necessarily historically accurate tour de force.

At present a major subject in Tajikistan’s official geopolitical debate that was practically absent circa 1993 is China. China’s growing importance was neatly summarised by the SRC chief specialist, Komilov Jalilov: ‘China will transform itself from a regional actor into a global actor in the nearest future.’ In 2006, the SRC held an international conference to discuss a whole series of geopolitical dilemmas facing the leadership of Tajikistan. One Tajik participant cited a US congressman, Jim Kolbe, who apparently suggested, when visiting Dushanbe in January 2002, that Washington viewed Tajikistan as a military bridgehead against China, ‘the very state which alongside Russia is a serious countervalue to the US in the international


CENTRAL ASIA IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

arena.27 The veracity of this quote or even of the semantic thrust of Kolbe's speech act could not be verified, but this anecdote illustrates an ingrained fear in Tajikistan about two superpower mastodons coming to blows in Eurasia. Another concern registered at the same conference was the potential erosion of Tajikistan's sovereignty as a result of economic penetration and soft power projection by its giant neighbour. The channelling of relations through multilateral organisations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) was identified as a palliative solution to allay such threats.28

The outgoing account of official mainstream geopolitical discourse in Tajikistan perfors oscillates between formal and practical geopolitics, as it focuses on 'security intellectuals' who service the direct needs of the country's foreign policy. Subsequent sections dealing with alternative narratives maintain a high-level of abstraction—esquisite in describing a grand theory—precisely because their authors do not have to dirty their hands with reactive policy prescriptions on a daily basis. However, it is fair to say by way of summary that official geopolitics in Tajikistan is uncompromisingly realist and rationalist, upholds the tenet of permanent rivalry between land-based and maritime powers in the Eurasian heartland and holds a firm belief in hierarchy and the balance of power in international relations. A prominent political scientist from the State University of Law, Business and Politics in Khuand has come up with a telling passage expressing the Weltanschauung of dozens of his colleagues gainfully employed in the industry of strategic forecast:

'It's not just the immediate neighbours of Tajikistan who play an important role in influencing the choice of our foreign policy priorities, but also other political actors for whom Central Asia is turning out to be a vitally important region. The latter countries, if we focus on the strongest of these, include the US and China first and foremost, then Russia and India; Iran, Pakistan, Japan, and members of the EU are less active in cultivating (essentially) our region. A particular foreign policy market has emerged in Central Asia, where grand trade is taking place: 'buyer-states' with their interests and 'vendor-states' with their needs are interacting there.'29


MACKINDER ON THE ROOF OF THE WORLD

Nationalist Geopolitics

As noted above, there is a relatively long tradition of geopolitical writing in Tajikistan informed by history and identity. While often intersecting with the official discourse, it also departs from it in important ways, prioritising transcendental categories of 'national spirit', 'historical justice' and 'cultural renaissance'. Using a heuristic model suggested by O Tuathail, 'official' and 'nationalist' geopolitics in Tajikistan may both be classified as meso-level constructs: the former is a specific normative vision of the world political map with a strong connection to practical foreign policy; the latter is a form of 'geographic imagination' predicated on national exceptionalism and binary structures of anity and enmity linked to popular geopolitics.30

Pain, suffering, resilience, memories of the 'Golden Age' and hope for redemption constitute the mythos underpinning the geopolitical schema of Bobojon Chalabov's disciples. They come almost exclusively from the ranks of professional historians and philologists with excellent training in their disciplines but practically no exposure to the tropes of political science or international relations. Their rendition of the national historical meta-narrative is straightforward: 'Our ancient [Aryan] forefathers coalesced in the huge Euro-Asian region from the Altay to the Carpathians: what remains today is the 'small modern Tajikistan'.31 Having achieved the zenith of political might and cultural development under the Samanid dynasty in the tenth and eleventh centuries, the Tajiks went into a decline and after the 14th century were deprived of their own pure national government (davlati safi milli khud). Its place was taken by the states run by foreign peoples. Turks, Mongols, Afghans and Russians one after another occupied the homeland of the Tajiks (sarazmimi Tajikon) and set up their rule there.32 The Soviet period did not arrest this negative trend: the handing over of Bukhara, the old Samanid capital, to Uzbekistan sapped the vitality and cohesiveness of a nation deprived of its geographical centre and ultimately led to the civil war in 1992.33

Linkages between history, culture and political geography are most vividly reflected in the works of Rahim Masov, the director of the Institute of History, Archaeology and Ethnography of the Academy of Sciences. In


1. The history of the Tajik people is the history of a struggle between a superiorly cultured aboriginal population and ruthless aggressors at a much lower stage of development.

2. Constant displacement of Tajiks into inaccessible mountain ranges by Turkic and Mongol nomads led to their isolation and separation from each other. They were denied the most important element of national unity—common territory.

3. The Russian colonial conquest put an end to the physical extermination of Tajiks but failed to empower them vis-à-vis Turkic oppressors, leaving the latter in a dominant position (e.g. the collective denomination of Turkestana for territories with a majority Tajik population).

4. The process of national-territorial delimitation between 1924 and 1936 was a travesty which benefited only Uzbeks who claimed traditional Tajik lands and cities for their newly created national republic.

5. Throughout the Soviet period the leaders of Uzbekistan did everything to assimilate ethnic Tajiks using administrative methods with Moscow's connivance. However, the majority of those who ended up being labelled 'Uzbeks' retained their Tajik language and ethnicity, and upheld their superior cultural values.

Masov's overall conclusion amounts to a grand conspiracy theory implicating the Uzbeks (and Turks in general) in the destruction of the Tajik civilization. Despite the creation of an independent sovereign Tajikistan the peril is not over yet. For example, in Masov's analysis, in the early 1990s regular army units from Uzbekistan and local Turkic militias waged an extermination campaign in the south and west of Tajikistan. He is convinced that pan-Turkism 'and its constant companion pan-Islamism' pose a clear and present menace to Tajikistan. Masov offers a clearly defensive strategy to deal with this existential threat. His main prescriptions are focused on domestic consolidation in

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160

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MACKINDER ON THE ROOF OF THE WORLD

Tajikistan, strong government and national unity. He advocates assistance to ethnic Tajiks living in Uzbekistan, mostly in the form of cultural and educational support, and constantly criticizes the Uzbek government for violating their rights. He is sceptical about rapprochement with Iran because it had digressed too far from their common Aryan roots, and considers the Tajiks of Afghanistan a lost cause because they 'have lost their ethnoidility and mother tongue, and have turned into people carrying the non-existent "Aghan" nationality.'

Masov believes that the Tajiks have to rely only on themselves to survive amid the maelstrom of hostile Turks and predatory foreign powers. He makes a single exception for Russia, which, while responsible for a lot of injustices committed during the colonial and Soviet eras, is the only restraining factor keeping aggressive Uzbeks and their pan-Turkist supporters at bay: 'The prospects of maintaining state sovereignty of the Tajiks of Aryan descent within the family of Indo-Europeans ... are impossible without Russia's support under current conditions.' Compared to some of his scholarly colleagues, Masov is a moderate. A prominent philologist and full member of the Academy of Sciences, Muhammadjon Shakuri, goes much further in his geopolitical script. He once advised the president of Tajikistan 'to offer protection to the autonomous territories of Tajiks in Samarkand, Bukhara, Qashqadarya and Surkhandarya—the clearest call for irredentism coming from any public figure of such stature in Tajikistan.' Shakuri's main treatise is a book entitled Here is Khurasan, where he theorized the need for a Tajik 'national idea' and a sense of mission, the focal point of which will be the cultural renaissance of 'Greater Khurasan' encompassing the core areas of the magnificent Persian-speaking civilisation: Khurasan proper (north-east of Iran), Mawarannahr (Central Asia between Amu-Darya and Syr-Darya) and Tokharistan (northern Afghanistan). Staying within the current constraining national frontiers would be detrimental to the Tajiks of Central Asia, who 'had acquired the form of an incomplete nation, whose national development lacks in many respects, and whose national spirit is not high.'
CENTRAL ASIA IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Shakuri rejects globalisation as a form of Westernisation, and bails the concept of the 'dialogue of civilisations' by former Iranian President Mohammad Kharrami as the only ideology of foreign relations appropriate for Tajikistan. Shakuri has little time for Russia, too: its cultural hegemony in the form of TV and radio broadcasts destroys the Tajik language, which is the fundamental element of national culture.44 The nationalist discourse has not consolidated into a veritable school of formal geopolitics in Tajikistan, but it is well on its way there. Masov, Shakuri and their followers still shy away from tackling the issues of state power and political cartography head-on, preferring the relative safety of their humanitarians disciplines. While their theoretical constructs bear an uncanny resemblance to the staples of geopolitik such as the trio of Volkshod, Sprachhod and Kulturhodern, as well as Raumkultur, they lack clarity, uniformity and strategic prescriptive value—something that had turned disparate romantic dreams about 'Great Germany' into a pseudo-scientific grand strategy of the Weimar Republic a century ago. Nationalist intellectuals in Tajikistan have yet to discover the rich arsenal of European geopolitical theories and agree on common terms of reference and purpose. In the meantime, there is never much love lost between Masov and Shakuri, who were once involved in a very scandalous and public exchange of opinion on Tajikistan's past, present and future, which dragged on for months and was stopped only by the personal interference of the country's president.45 For the time being, Masov-the-statist appears to be in greater favour with the authorities and the public than Shakuri-the-pan-Iranianist. Freshly awarded a high-level government decoration, the former was thus characterised in a recent article on the occasion of his seventieth birthday: 'This scholar, faithful to his ideas of objectivity and impartiality, debunks baseless attacks on Uzbekistan's representatives on many issues and bravely advocates the right of the Tajik people to resolve its problems of political and economic nature.'46 It is unlikely that the author intended irony or felt particularly postmodern when he implied the relative nature of objectivity in this piece.


MACKINDER ON THE ROOF OF THE WORLD

Diversity, Idealism and Humanism: The Political Thought of Iskandar Asadullaev

Dushanbe is a remarkably small place for a city of more than a million, where everyone knows everyone else, especially within the intellectual elite. Iskandar Asadullaev stands out from this tightly knit status group as a true Renaissance man with a solid international reputation. A classically trained philosopher, he has published widely on ethics, aesthetics, dialectics and, most recently and relevantly to this chapter, on the philosophy of politics and international relations. He is also a poet and a regular media commentator, and worked as the president's adviser in 1996–8 and headed the SBC in 1998–2001.

Unlike the geopolitical discourses outlined above, Asadullaev's approach to discussing Tajikistan's place in the wider world is grounded neither in the realist canon nor in historical geography: he takes his inspiration from the civilizational theories of Toynbee, Spengler and Politin Sorokin. In 1993, Asadullaev introduced the notion of a 'border zone' as a defining geopolitical descriptor of that country: 'The territory and people of Tajikistan is a border between different worlds and events in the past and present.'47 Contrary to Samuel Huntington's prediction that 'civilizational faultlines' are fraught with conflict and instability, Asadullaev posits that it is precisely a high degree of heterogeneity that empowers modern sovereign Tajikistan and uniquely endows it to deal with the uncertainties in today's world.

Asadullaev breaks this heterogeneity down into five dyadic structures: Tajiks–Turks, Asians–Europeans (e.g. Russians and other migrants); Muslim values–communist values; religious–secular; Oriental civilisation–European civilisation, and argues that this 'concretely historical social entity' is not an accident and must be maintained, making the 'preservation of internal balance' a categorical imperative of the country's foreign policy.48 The opposition to the nationalist script is only too obvious here, although he agrees with Masov on the unjust nature of the national-territorial delimitation of the 1920s.

Asadullaev has developed another concept, the 'expansion of the similar', to describe the international dynamics affecting Tajikistan. It is not clear whether he was influenced by Durkheim's organisational analysis or some other established theory of social entropy, but his conclusion is that all

47 Asadullaev, Tadjikistan: pogranichnaya zona i ekspansia pobedchivosti, 2000, p. 25.
48 Ibid. p. 103.
CENTRAL ASIA IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

international actors, both state and non-state, cultivate similarity beyond their original constituency in order to increase systemic homogeneity. Asadullahov identifies this impulse as sui generis; there may not be direct benefit to the source of similarity. It may take the form of violent imposition, evolutionary diffusion, political or economic pressure or voluntary acceptance. It may result in artificial universalisation or broad consensus based on tolerance of sub-system variation (cf. Durkheim's mechanical and organic social solidarity). His further geopolitical discourse is dedicated to assessing the behaviour of the 'border zone' vis-à-vis different instances of the 'expansion of the similar'.

Asadullahov agrees that a push to the south and opening up to Pakistan, Iran and Afghanistan could be economically beneficial to Tajikistan, but he argues that the price to be paid in terms of 'becoming similar to them' might be prohibitive. He points to the contradictory nature of globalisation as a process of democratic normative transfer distinguishing between its narrow Western procedural-legalistic avatar and broad humanist intentionality, rejecting Jefferson in favour of Gandhi and Grotius. He refers to Russia as a Machiavellian and hypocritical brute, but is somewhat warmer towards engagement with China because 'the PRC does not impose its models of state order or any other geopolitical compositions which affect Tajikistan's interests'. He is against Tajikistan's participation in binding alliances, especially if they have the potential to upset third parties. The only bloc he speaks approvingly of is the CIS, because it is such an amorphous organisation with a weak mandate. His position in regard to the GCAP is typical: Tajikistan should neither jump headlong into the US-sponsored scheme, nor discard it following Russia's lead, but 'maintain differences in positions, understand contradictions, yet still move forward' on the basis of some compromise.

In sum, Asadullahov's writing is a paean to staying above the hurly-burly of geostategic competition in Eurasia and provides substantive theoretical justification for Tajikistan's practical multivector diplomacy. He comments

68 Asadullahov, Ekonomsia podderki, demokratii i Tadzhikistan, 2002.
72 Ibid., p. 293.

MACKINDER ON THE ROOF OF THE WORLD

Rahmon's improving skills in political communication with international interlocutors and encourages him to maintain a 'space of indeterminacy' when engaging with great powers, following the example of Uzbekistan. As a final comment, there are two interesting observations that Asadullahov has made in line with classical Western geopolitics. The first involves Razel's Raammatime—according to Asadullahov, the Islamic world had developed a distinct 'spatial concept' by the 1990s, becoming an active participant in the struggle for global hegemony. This struggle unfolds in the Eurasian heartland, where the Islamic axis has replaced the USSR as the challenge to maritime powers. Secondly, Asadullahov concurs with Mackinder that the heartland's borders shift, and, contrary to practically all scholars in Central Asia, he opines that the region has not always been at the heartland's forefront, but moving in and out. Tajikistan is 'in' now, but its 'fifteen minutes of fame' are almost up, as the threat of radical Islam, extremism and international terrorism in the region gradually recedes and the Muslim world demobilises. In general, Asadullahov tends to think that the Atlantic bloc is ascendant in Eurasia and will not face serious resistance from any land-based power, be it Russia, China, the Islamic world, or a combination thereof, for many decades. Unfortunately, his comments on this matter are rather sketchy—it is the earliest stage of a work in progress for him and a handful of his followers, clustered in the Institute of Philosophy, the Tajik State University and a few independent think tanks.

The Eurasianist Redux

At present the only systematic and ongoing scholarly effort to read Mackinder and other classics of continental and US geopolitics and critically apply their theories to the case of Tajikistan is associated with the name of Victor Dubovitskii, the deputy director of the Institute of History, Archaeology and Ethnography of the Academy of Sciences and a chairman of the Council of Russian Companions in Tajikistan. He is also a professor of international relations at the Russian-Tajik (Slavic) University (RTSU) in Dushanbe, where he teaches a major in geopolitical studies—the only one of its kind in the republic. RTSU has a dedicated Centre for Geopolitical Stud-

58 Asadullahov, Politicheskoe svyazanie i idey, 2009, p. 22.
60 Asadullahov, Politicheskii Islam v Tadzhikistan, 2009, pp. 44-5.
ies, which organizes seminars and conferences for students, staff, and the general public.

Dubovitskii uses the notion of a 'geopolitical power field' (GPF) to assess the relative power of Tajikistan. The GPF is a space controlled by the state through the mobilisation of political, economic, military, and other means, which possesses a complex time-space paradigm reflected in a special geopolitical code—Dubovitskii makes an explicit reference to Geoffrey Parker's concept of 'core area' as the starting point for his analysis. Tajikistan's GPF is characterised by three important elements which enable it to maintain sovereignty and balance off its neighbours. First, it is the country's position at the head of the region's river system that projects its GPF on to Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Afghanistan and even Kazakhstan. Second, Tajikistan is a focal point of Greater Khurasan—in Dubovitskii's interpretation exerts nationalist, this means that the country plays the role of an interface between the Iranian world on the one hand, and the Turkic world and Russia on the other hand; there is no rigid opposition between the three. Finally, the growing Tajik diaspora replenished by labour migration provides Tajikistan with an extra lever of influence abroad.

Moving from the regional to the global level of analysis, Dubovitskii develops a sophisticated and richly textured narrative with a distinctly Mackinderian flavour, creatively mixing history and grand strategy. The titanic struggle between land-based and sea-based powers in Eurasia has been waged for millennia, with Greater Iran being its main battlefield: As a representative of agricultural civilisations, it has been and continues to be the most important element of Telianocratic forces on the planet. Examples of Telianocratic assaults on Greater Iran include the wars of Alexander of Macedon; British colonial expansion in the 1830s resulting in the loss of Herat and outlying territories of Khurasan; the partition of Badakhshan in the 1890s; the anti-Mossadeq coup of 1953; and finally the relentless demonisation of the Islamic Republic of Iran since 1979 which culminated in its incorporation in the 'axis of evil' by George W. Bush in 2002. Dubovitskii is at his apocalyptic best when describing the possible ramifications of the invasion of Iran by a Western coalition:

35 Dubovitskii, 'Geopoliticheskoе silovoe pole (GSP) Tadzhikistana: analiz megamotiva', 2006, p. 34.

MACKINDER ON THE ROOF OF THE WORLD

The US will achieve control over the main part of Greater Iran, which will create favourable perspectives for the cardinal success of Telianocratic, namely—the fragmentation of the Iranian state into Persia proper, Azerbaijan, and a row of small territories where independence à la Kosovo will be proclaimed. In this case the setting up of an Anti state with a contiguous territory ... From Turkey to Turkmenistan becomes inevitable. Seistan and parts of Hormuz may be ceded to Pakistan—in this case the US and its Western allies will gain control over the Strait of Hormuz, hence ensuring safety of the maritime export route for oil from the Persian Gulf.

The creation of an unbroken chain of Turkic states will once again reanimate the pan-Turkic policy of Turkey—the US's main creature in the Middle East (part from Israel) and will settle the fate of Armenia to the point of its liquidation as a nation-state.

In this scenario, only one state with a titular Iranian nation will be left—Tajikistan. Tajikistan would not be able to hold off the onslaught of the Western bloc, and it might be only a matter of time before other continental powers, China and Russia, succumb. Dubovitskii's proposed solution is a pre-emptive action: 'The most effective way out of the existing situation is the creation of a political union between Russia, India, China and [Greater] Iran (RIC). An immediate obstacle to its formation is Afghanistan, which cannot qualify for membership in Parsi-speaking Greater Iran on account of the majority Pushvin population. However, Dubovitskii expects to see a quick disintegration of this artificial and utterly failed state as early as 2012, upon which its territories populated by Tajiks and Hazaras may enter the warm bosom of Greater Iran.

Dubovitskii's geopolitical imagination bears strong correlation with the views of the leader of modern Russian Eurasianists, Alexander Dugin. According to the latter:

Tajikistan must become a geopolitical bearing point of the entire geopolitical strategy of Telianocracy ... The Heartland must declare a firm positional geopolitical war on Turkey and the bearers of 'pan-Turkianism', in which Russia's main ally will be the Azeri Iran ... The actual border between Tajikistan and Afghanistan should not be treated as a line set in stone. It is not a historical given but a geopolitical chal-
CENTRAL ASIA IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

lege, because it is in the Heartland’s interest to abolish all rigid lines of any kind
here, pushing the strategic frontier far to the south.”

This is not a coincidence: Dubovitski holds active participation in the
Eurasianist movement itself, and maintains close personal as well as pro-
fessional ties with Dugin. The share of Russian funds as the belief in
geography as destiny, optimism about the multipolar resistance against
US-led mondialism and deep conviction about the ultimate triumph of
land-based powers. Their main point of disagreement appears to be the role
of China and India: Dugin reluctantly consents to the Thalassocracy-controlled
Rimland, while Dubovitski is much more sanguine about their participa-
tion in the joint heartland project, as seen above.

Dubovitski holds strong views on globalization, interpreting it as a
strictly Atlantocentric project aimed at the eradication of national-cultural
specificity and, more significantly, the entrenchment of the exploitative and
unequal division of labour. At an RTSU roundtable in 2006, he polemici-
cied with his Western interlocutors, including the US ambassador, claim-
ing that globalization was turning Tajikistan from a developed industrial-
agrarian country into an ethnographic theme park specializing in honey,
geranium oil, and exotic tourism. This incentive made quite splash in
Tajikistan’s mass media at the time.

Better Red than … Globalised?
The final strand in Tajikistan’s geopolitical discourse to be touched upon in
this chapter is associated with a group called “Tajik Academics of Socialist
Orientation”, which, as the name suggests, espouses left-wing views on
social processes. It consists primarily of political scientists, publishes a quar-
terly journal called Socialism: Theory and Practice, and is led informally by
Shodik Shabodinov, a candidate of economic sciences and a long-serving
chairman of the Communist Party of Tajikistan (CPT).

Being true Marxists, members of the group have little time for Mackinder
or classical geopolitics in general, regarding it as a masking ideology
that distracts the working masses from matters of class struggle which live at the

168

MACKINDER ON THE ROOF OF THE WORLD

heart of international relations. As Professor Ibror Sharipov noted,
such “charming” concepts as “Atlantist”, “core area”, “zone of influence”,
Lebensraum, etc. demonstrate manipulation by Western intellectuals-
turned-politicians. They peddle this junk to other nations and less-
developed countries. Socialist academics regard the process of globalisa-
tion as an exercise in imperialism by the world’s richest nations and
transnational corporations. According to Professor Hoji'mohammud Umarov
from the Institute of Economic Studies, “we have become hostages to inter-
national financial organizations … Our republic is in danger of becoming a
colony.” In 2006, Shabodinov described the key trait of economic globali-
sation as follows: “the international financial oligarchy is degenerating into
a cancerous growth on the living tissue of world economy” he then con-
fidently predicted the impending global financial crisis.

Shabodinov has a clearly defined stance concerning Tajikistan’s position
in the world. He is against any form of integration or bilateral or multilateral
cooperation that perpetuates liberal capitalism. It comes as no surprise
that he calls for leaving the World Trade Organization and urges extreme cau-
sion in dealing with the United States. What is slightly more unexpected is
that he pronounces the CIS dead in its present form and criticises Russia
for nurturing a speculative and socially irresponsible market economy dur-
ing the Yeltsin era and afterwards. Shabodinov believes that unless Tajikistan
forms an alliance with countries possessing planned regulated economies
like Belarus and China, it may face a bleak future in the increasingly glo-
balised world. As a note in the margins, Shabodinov’s leaning towards
Beijing is illustrated by the fact that the CPT has excellent working relations
with the Communist Party of China, while its ties with the Communist
Party of the Russian Federation are rather weak.

The socialist alternative has the potential to develop interesting new geo-
political narratives based on theories of post-colonialism or world-systems
analysis. However, this is not likely to happen in Tajikistan. Shabodinov and
his colleagues are very few and nearing retirement, and there is no evidence
that their views are being passed on to the new generation of intellectuals.

168

Sharipov, “Duas Mili geopoliticheshchki izmenenii pod raspada SSSR”, 2009,

169


168


169

Conclusion

Geopolitical discourse is robust and thriving in Tajikistan. The country's intellectuals concerned with long-term strategy have been creatively digesting elements of classical geopolitics and generating new insights. Yet it is clear that on many occasions their engagement with Mackinder and other Western stalwarts of the discipline may have been somewhat patchy, often superficial, sometimes intuitive and nearly always mediated by Russian translation. There are several reasons for this, but the paucity of resources would probably rank as the most important one. Dubrovskii commented recently that the Internet is the only source of information readily available to interested scholars—since 1991 the country's libraries have simply stopped adding relevant books, journals and electronic databases to their collections. Whatever textbooks that are available for the teaching of the discipline at the university level are invariably of Russian extraction, where works by Dugin and Gadzhiev take the lead. Nonetheless, it is fair to say that Mackinderian geopolitics is the paradigm of choice in theorising international relations in today's Tajikistan. The long view of history, the importance of geography to political power, the global level of analysis, the juxtaposition of sea power and land power, the existence of the heartland and its crucial importance to the destiny of Tajikistan and the world are commonly accepted, and this augurs well for the discipline's future in the country.

One discursive thread that was not covered in this chapter is what may be called 'Islamic geopolitics'. In recent years the Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT), which is the only legal religious parliamentary party in all of Central Asia, has produced a corpus of literature examining Tajikistan's relations with the world as well as major global trends and developments. The party's leader, Sayyid Abdullo Nuri, who died in 2006, was instrumental in putting the process in motion. However, this geopolitical discourse has as much to do with the epistemology and ontology of Sayyid Qutb and Syed Abul Ala Maududi as it does with Mackinder and Haushofer, and thus warrants a separate study.

Cited in Dubrovskii, 'Novye geostorii', 2006.
29 Dugin, Geopolitika postmoderna, 2007; Gadzhiev, Vvedenie v geopolitiku, 2002.
30 For a sample of Nuri's geopolitical views, see Kabiri (ed.), Mijaddadi arw, 2007.