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Author: Robert Canfield

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- Restructuring in Greater Central Asia: Changing Political Configurations · ROBERT L. CANFIELD
- Issues in Contemporary South and Central Asian Politics: Islam, Ethnicity, and the State · IFTIKHAR H. MALIK
- Chinese Perceptions in the Post-Cold War Era: Three Images of the United States · JIANWEI WANG and ZHIMIN LIN
- Emigration and Stability in Hong Kong · WONG SIU-LUN
- Indian Defense Spending: Treading Water in the Fiscal Deep · SANDY GORDON
- Burma in an International Perspective · JOSEF SILVERSTEIN

RESTRUCTURING IN GREATER CENTRAL ASIA

Changing Political Configurations

Robert L. Canfield

Central, Southwest, and South Asia—Greater Central Asia—seem to be restructuring. However, defining the emerging political situation in this vast region and estimating the future direction of developments are impossible tasks if events are viewed merely as unrelated and disparate. A longer view may expose a broad pattern. In this article I venture a tentative and provisional interpretation of events in this region and suggest a trajectory of change whose features should become more clear over the next few decades.¹

Structural change, I presume, is impelled by influences that are not always obvious, indexed in events that collectively reveal that a new turn in relationships is taking place. If we are to identify a trajectory of change in Greater Central Asia in our time, we must look for the “physics” of policy changes, the forces that are now acting upon people and changing the contexts within which policies are set, decisions made, and actions taken.² But identifying such forces requires the favoring of particular developments that seem critical or determinative. I will here stress the importance of certain technologies. Technological innovations build upon one another

Robert L. Canfield is Professor in the Department of Anthropology, Washington University, St. Louis, Missouri. The author is grateful for communications with other scholars who provided details and insights from which this article has benefited, particularly Engin Akarli, Muriel Atkin, Audrey Alstadt, Dale F. Eickelman, Milan Hauner, Jon Anderson, H. B. Paksoy, and Mustafa Pasha.

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1. Some recent considerations of developments in the region are by Graham Fuller, “The Emergence of Central Asia,” *Foreign Policy* 78 (Spring 1990), pp. 49–67, and Andre Gunter Frank, *The Centrality of Central Asia*, Comparative Asian Studies, no. 8 (Amsterdam: V.U. University Press, 1992).

2. Fernand Braudel described the “physics” of policy change operating in 16th century Spain in *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, vol. 1 (New York: Harper, 1972), p. 19.

to give a directional animus to events, and they transform social and political conditions by introducing new possibilities for social and political interaction. This is what seems to be happening in Greater Central Asia in our time; certain technological changes are being introduced that will transform the possibilities for social and political action in the region.

The particular technologies I emphasize here are transportation and communications, which influence social and political affairs in similar ways as both are means of overcoming the social barrier of distance. I will consider the particular ways that these technologies have affected economic and political affairs in the past in Greater Central Asia and how other innovations, as they come into use, will likewise affect the course of affairs in the future. Our task is to consider what those effects might be. A great deal, however, must remain unexamined in this analysis. Nothing will be said about the possible social effects of the rapid growth of population in this region, or the declining average age, or the declining quality of life; nothing about the disastrous environmental and health problems, the abundance of modern weaponry in the region, or the growing narcotics industry.

In the first section, I briefly summarize the political effects of transport and communications technologies in the past; in the subsequent sections I examine the emerging patterns of political relations in our time in relation to the technological conditions coming into use in the region, and then consider possible directions in the future. I will argue that the long established geopolitical configuration in this region that recently collapsed was affected by changes in transport facilities and communications devices, and that the new geopolitical configuration will take form in respect to other changes in these facilities and devices.

Technological Innovations and Transformation of Geopolitical Patterns

European Imperial Power

In the history of Central Asia, certain transport or communications innovations have established new possibilities for social alignment and political behavior. One of these was the development of sea transport between Europe and Asia that deprived Central Asia of the locational advantage it had previously enjoyed. Before the sixteenth century, Greater Central Asia was the locus of heavily traveled routes of traffic between the denser population centers of Eurasia. But when the Europeans found a sea route,³

3. Janet Abu Lughud explains that the real change was less a matter of improved sea-going technology than of the aggressive orientation of the Europeans on the Indian Ocean (*Before*

the wealth of Asia began to move on the high seas and the economy of Central Asia seriously declined.

The political impact on the region was a gradual weakening of the Central Asian rulerships, and over the next several centuries they became vulnerable to pressures that were gathering strength in the northwest. In the sixteenth century Muscovite czars began to expand their influence into the inland territories of Asia. With increasing pace in the next century, Russians spread across Siberia to the Pacific and in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries they were pressing southward into Kazakhstan and Central Asia; they reached the north banks of the upper Oxus River by 1900.

In the meantime, the British, who had become the preeminent sea-based imperial presence in South Asia, had advanced northward along the Indo-Gangetic plain into the southern foothills of the Hindu Kush mountains. The Russians and British began to confront each other in the region in the nineteenth century; their rivalry over the intermediate territory gave Central Asia its modern identity as a marginal zone, for their conflicting interests pulled the interior of Asia into two main sectors. In a swath of territory that lay outside the firm control of both, the nation-state of Afghanistan took form toward the end of the century. Because both powers feared the advance of the other in the region, Afghanistan became the locus of anxious counter-political activity. Eventually, in 1907, the empires agreed on a definition of their respective inner Asian spheres of interest. The agreement excluded both from Afghanistan's internal affairs, in effect leaving the country as a zone of underdevelopment separating their domains.

Railroad Imperialism

The second technical innovation that affected Greater Central Asia's political shape was railroads. In the second half of the nineteenth century, the British and Russians both believed that "railways, rather than warships and mass armies, would decide the fate of India, and ultimately of Asia and Africa."⁴ Rails became "the bloodstream of the [British] Raj," reducing by 1869 the travel time between Calcutta and the Northwest Frontier. India's gateway to Central Asia, from three months by road and barge to only three days by rail (it is now two days).⁵ The Russians introduced

European Hegemony [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989]). In any case, from the point of view of Central Asia, it was a shift in technology as well as the route of travel.

4. Milan Hauner, *What is Asia to Us? Russia's Asian Heartland Yesterday and Today* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1990), p. 103.

5. Michael Satow, "38,000 Miles of Track: India's Railway Lifeline," *National Geographic*, 165:6 (1984), pp. 744-49; Paul Theroux, "Foward" in Michael Satow and Ray Desmond, *Railways of the Raj* (New York: New York University Press, 1980).

railroads somewhat later but eventually were laying track at unprecedented speed, dramatically extending their reach across Asia.

As Afghanistan was the natural point of confrontation between the two powers, the rivalry between the Russians and British shaped that country's political relations with the outside world. The conflicts of interest worked to ensure that Afghanistan remained underdeveloped. The British wanted it "to be inaccessible and impermeable, denying the possibility of swift, surprise movements across its frontier." The Russians saw Afghanistan as the crucial route of access into the subcontinent, and in the final years of the nineteenth century made several proposals to construct railroads that would connect key points in Russian Central Asia to India's northwest frontier. All these proposals were rejected by the British because of "past history," they said, and the "prejudices of the two countries."⁶ The Afghans, for their part, wanted both the British and the Russians to stay outside their borders, and according to Ispahani, by a series of policy decisions "denied themselves an advanced, large-scale routing network in order to preserve their freedom."⁷ The tension between the Russians and British over control of Central Asia and the suspicions of the Afghans over foreign intrusion worked to solidify Afghanistan's geopolitical function as a zone of separation between Russian and British spheres of control. The railhead at the borders of Afghanistan materially evinced the political imperatives that shaped affairs in the region.

As a result of these conflicting interests, certain Russian schemes for the further advance of rail in the region were never realized, at least not at that time. Besides those that would have connected Central and South Asia through Afghanistan, there were plans for a north-south trans-Persian railway connecting Central Asia to the Indian Ocean. Such a line would have transformed Bandar Abbas, in the words of a Russian author, into a "Russian Vladivostock in the Persian Gulf"—or, in the words of a worried British historian, into "a second Port Arthur."⁸ This line—at least the Trans-Iranian Railway part between Bandar Shapur and Julfa—was eventually built after World War I and was in place in time to serve a purpose for which no one had dreamed—to carry American lend-lease supplies to the Soviet Red Army in World War II.

Communications Innovations and Populist Movements

The third kind of innovation that shaped politics in Greater Central Asia was the communication devices that began to be introduced after about

1850. The telegraph and later the telephone (devices that transmitted information from point to point faster than people or goods could travel) and the printing press and later the radio (devices that disseminated information to masses of people) dramatically altered the possibilities for social interaction over great distances and among large populations. They made information an increasing factor in public affairs. Through these devices growing numbers of people became aware of each other's opinions and in other respects developed a sense of shared interests and an ability to cooperate in a common cause.

After about 1880, populations all over Asia began to coordinate and organize activities that became a growing problem to the established empires. Peoples in South Asia, Central Asia, and West Asia began to agitate for such social innovations as a free press, independent local governments, the use of local rather than imperial languages, broadening of education to the masses, and so on. The consequence was a major assault on the imperial governments of Asia. Popular movements gained strength in the latter part of the nineteenth century, were seemingly quenched by the suppressive measures of the imperial regimes, then by the second decade of this century were again rising to a new crescendo. All over Asia, as imperial regimes tottered, new populist movements dominated the political discourse as "nationalist" elites spoke out on behalf of large publics. In India new popular assemblies were instituted as growing numbers of communities became self-conscious and worked in concert. In North Asia, of course, the Russian czars were replaced by the Bolsheviks. In West Asia the Ottoman empire finally collapsed, to be replaced by powerful local movements seeking to establish populist governments.

Throughout the world, information technology was opening new resources for exploitation by government as well as populist leaders. The loudspeaker was being used in Germany with great effect by Hitler, the radio in the United States by Roosevelt and, notably, by Churchill during World War II. In India the British continued to vacillate, as they had for decades, over how free the local press might be. In the emerging Soviet Union, information control became a vital concern. The Soviets not only used the new devices to project their propaganda but also resolutely sought to control from the center the flow of information among the Soviet masses, matching their plans to develop a centrally controlled economy. It was in the wake of the German collapse after World War II that Winston Churchill dubbed the information barrier around the Soviet bloc the "Iron Curtain."

The configuration of power in Greater Central Asia after World War II, therefore, resembled that which had existed for over a century—except that the dominant powers were different. The Soviet Union was ensconced

6. Mahnaz Ispahani, *Roads and Rivals: The Political Uses of Access in the Borderlands of Asia* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1989), p. 95.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 96, also ff.

8. Hauner, *What is Asia to Us?*, pp. 103, 105.

in the north and the successor states of the British empire were situated in South Asia. The United States, taking up the regional concerns of the British, made several attempts to form the states of Southwest Asia into an alliance, a "northern tier" that would serve as a barricade against potential Soviet advances to the south. The Soviets, as the Cold War became more strident, intensified their efforts to seal their populations from outside influences, not only censoring news but also jamming foreign broadcasts. Afghanistan, in the meantime, continued to serve as a buffer state between the Soviet Union and the "northern tier" nations along its southern flank.

The Weakening of the North-South Boundary

This configuration of alignments was being undermined by incremental changes after World War II. The Soviets invested in an advanced infrastructure in their Central Asian republics in order to exploit their mineral and oil resources. They added new rail lines, improved the roads, introduced pipelines for the shipment of oil and coal (in slurry form), increased the number of navigable miles on the rivers, installed electric power lines, and constructed airports. The Central Asian republics were thereby drawn more tightly into the Soviet metropolis, and in the process were made less self-sufficient.⁹ In the southern sector of Greater Central Asia, other improvements in the transport and communications infrastructure were being made, most notably the improvement and extension of highways and rail lines in Iran. Plans for the railways entailed the laying of 10,000 km. of new track that would eventually connect to other countries—to Zahedan, which was already linked into Pakistan's railway system; to Sarakhs in Turkmenia; and to two port cities on the Indian Ocean—Bandar Abbas and Chah Bahar. By the time of the demise of the Shah's government in 1979, a new agreement had been signed to build a connecting railway system within Afghanistan.

It was the improvement of the transport and communications infrastructure within Afghanistan in the period after World War II that most dramatically marked the changing possibilities for the alignment of powers in Greater Central Asia. In the period from about 1955 to 1979, the government of Afghanistan, aided by the Americans, the Soviets, and other European nations, invested heavily in an improved transport and communications infrastructure. It constructed hydroelectric dams, large canals

9. Victor Mote, "Afghanistan and the Transport Infrastructures of Turkestan," in Milan Hauner and Robert L. Canfield, eds., *Afghanistan and the Soviet Union: Collision and Transformation* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1989). This is not to say that the population was integrated into the wider Soviet society (see William Fierman, ed., *Soviet Central Asia: The Failed Transformation* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1991).

and irrigation systems, telegraph and telephone systems, airports capable of servicing large commercial aircraft and, eventually, airstrips in the provincial capitals for a newly established internal airline company, an extensive system of paved highways, and a national radio station. Through this aggressive program of development, many of the dispersed and isolated populations of the country became much more accessible to each other, the central government, and the outside world. With little notice, Soviet Central Asia and South Asia, which had formerly been separated by a zone of underdevelopment, were becoming more accessible to each other through technological improvements within Afghanistan and Iran. By the 1970s, the setting for a major geopolitical restructuring was in place.

The Breach of the Afghanistan Barricade

The most notable events that exposed the new spatial structure in Greater Central Asia were, of course, the Iranian Revolution and the Soviet-Afghanistan War. The revolution in Iran marked the collapse of the "northern tier" policy, humiliated the United States, and inspired Islamic activists all over the Muslim world. It was mainly owing to concern about the strength of the uprisings against a new Marxist regime in Kabul that the Soviets decided to intervene in Afghanistan. That decision turned out to be catastrophic, as the war that ensued broke open the Soviet side of the barricade and became an increasing embarrassment to the Soviets.

Gholam Ali Ayeen¹⁰ has pointed out that empires characteristically have maintained control through intimidation and an appearance of invincibility. But embarrassing defeats, even if militarily inconsequential, have weakened the strands that bonded empires, exposing frailties in their systems and emboldening disaffected elements to express their frustrations openly, in some cases to revolt. The Afghanistan resistance inspired disaffected elements within the Soviet bloc to test the power and resolve of the central administration. The Eastern Europeans were in fact watching the Afghanistan resistance with great interest in the early 1980s and took heart for their own causes. The Poles were the first to express their dissent, soon to be followed by many other dissenting groups who collectively undermined the integrity of the Soviet system.

Perhaps the main contribution of the Afghanistan war to this process was the breakdown of Soviet information management.¹¹ Frustration and

10. Gholam Ali Ayeen, "Afghanistan wa Sarnawisht-i Imperaturiha! Aya Tarikh Tikrar Khahad Shud?" [Afghanistan and the destiny of empires! Is history repeating itself?], *Mujahed Wollas*, vol. 5.

11. Many Afghans believe that their resistance caused the collapse of the Soviet Union. This is hubris, but the effect of that prolonged and painful war on the Soviet people should not be minimized.

disenchantment grew among the Soviet peoples as increasing numbers of dead soldiers were brought back from the war and as the surviving veterans returned with stories differing markedly from official reports. Also, by the mid-1980s Afghan resistance groups were injecting their own propaganda among the Muslim peoples of Central Asia by means of cassette tapes and tracts. These informal sources of uncensored information opened a rift in the Iron Curtain. Gorbachev's *glasnost* policy was obliged in part by the rising flow of uncontrolled information about Afghanistan. As the Soviets withdrew their troops in 1988 and 1989, they also introduced radical policies inside the Soviet Union, easing censorship and ceasing to jam foreign broadcasts. The Soviet peoples, for the first time under Soviet rule, had relatively free access to outside and inside news. The Iron Curtain was finished.

The Joining of North and South Central Asia

At this writing, further evidence is appearing of the collapse of the once firm boundary between the northern and southern portions of Greater Central Asia. Political and commercial ties are developing among various nation-states across this divide, surely to be followed by infrastructural investments that will materially bridge it. Indeed, the nineteenth century vision of a network of rail lines connecting Europe, India, and the Russian "heartland" would seem to be an emerging reality. Iran is making plans to lay the tracks that will be the final links in the system as originally conceived. In May 1990 it inaugurated a project to build a rail line between Bafq and Bandar Abbas that will connect the existing system to the Indian Ocean, and in 1991 Pakistan and Iran agreed to improve and expand their highway and railroad interconnections. Once these are completed, Pakistan will enjoy direct rail access to West Asia and Europe, and Iran will have direct access to South Asia. Indeed, the agreement was made in the context of a more general agenda, which was to foster closer cooperation among these two nations and the new republics of Central Asia.

These moves are being made as a growing number of business interests and governments in the world are examining possibilities for investment and development in the Central Asian republics. The several nations in southern and western Asia vying to establish profitable ties to the newly formed successor states of the Soviet empire are establishing relations that will become materially evident in improved transport facilities, some of which will reach across the divide between North and South Asia. Turkey has offered help to the republics of Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenia, and Kazakhstan in the financing and construction of new transport linkages to the West. The Iranians are introducing textile mills, rebuilding

mosques and madrasas, turning Tashkent into an airline hub in Central Asia, instituting development projects in Azerbaijan and Turkmenia, and installing direct telephone connections to, as well as opening a consular office in Tajikistan. Before his eviction from office, President Najibullah of Afghanistan was making overtures to the successor states in Central Asia—not to offer help, of course, but to obtain it. And Pakistan as early as 1990 was arranging with Uzbekistan to facilitate religious publication, educate students, and exchange Islamic scholars through its International Islamic University in Islamabad.¹²

A most striking indication that the former north-south divide is being bridged is Pakistan's new policy toward Afghanistan. Pakistan decided in early 1992 to try to persuade its Afghan clients, who have been the most intransigent Islamists among the *mujahedin* resistance groups, to come to terms with the Kabul regime. Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's administration has even distanced itself from Pakistan's own Islamists, once a vital base of his support. The impulse behind this policy shift is the desire to develop ties to the Central Asian republics, whose leaders are essentially secularists and regard Islamism as potentially disruptive and destabilizing; clearly, they would not welcome a radical Islamist regime in Kabul. In addition, Nawaz Sharif's government has been retouching its image to project a more moderate Muslim appearance, more like Turkey than Saudi Arabia, and stressing its strong Sunni heritage, like the Central Asians and unlike the Shiite Iranians. Pakistan's new interest in Central Asia could eventually be expressed materially in improved transport facilities, including (according to some official statements) railroads. This change in policy expresses how definitely the configuration of strategic options has changed. In its own interest, Pakistan must tie its economic future to Central Asia. The republics, for their part, are interested in access to the international commercial system, which is possible through Pakistan.¹³

12. These new alliances are not without their contradictions. Iran can cultivate the Azeris as Shiite Muslims but not as Turkic peoples, for the Turkic-Persian divide within Iran is still sensitive. For the leaders of the Central Asian republics, who are essentially secularists, the development of ties with Iran or Pakistan could invite problems with the Islamicist elements within those countries.

13. Apart from attempts to develop ties by government leaders in the nations of Greater Central Asia, various other elements of the successor republics have tried on their own to develop ties with other societies. Opposition groups in Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan, for instance, have been looking for help from the outside. Also, there are natural affinities for similar cultural groups on the opposite sides of boundaries and a growing interest in knowing cultural compatriots. The Tajiks have a natural interest in the Persian speakers in Iran and Afghanistan, where the old Persianate tradition persists in a less diluted form than in their homeland; and the Turkic peoples of Uzbekistan, Turkmenia, and Kirghizia have a strong sense of cultural affiliation with each other as well as with Turkey.

If railroads are constructed between Pakistan and Central Asia, the easiest route would be through Afghanistan—either via Kandahar and Herat to Kushka or the more challenging route through Kabul and Salang to Termez. The current political uncertainties in the country will delay infrastructural decisions by the Afghans, but assuming the country remains intact, whenever the situation stabilizes the new leadership will be faced with outside offers to assist in reconstruction. As long as unresolved internal issues override external concerns, the government could take different postures toward neighboring countries, depending on its internal composition: a Tajik-Uzbek coalition in Kabul would favor the Central Asian neighbors, whereas a Pushtun coalition would likely favor Pakistan. But once a government is firmly ensconced in Afghanistan, its policies will be shaped by international issues. Whatever its initial inclinations might be, the new Afghanistan government will be inclined to keep its stronger neighbors at bay even as it accepts their economic support.

Historically, Afghanistan has looked to India to counter the influence of Pakistan and to other nations of the Middle East, notably Turkey, to counter the influence of Iran. Relations with India are tense at present, as the *mujahedin* leadership in Kabul is furious with India for siding with the Afghan Marxists. The imperatives of Afghanistan's external politics will, over the long term, likely induce the new Afghan leaders, whoever they are, to develop stronger ties with Turkey and eventually even with India. In any case, as the critical problem of legitimacy is resolved and a government firmly established, the Afghans will become attracted to the possibilities of development. Because of its strategic location, Afghanistan will eventually welcome aid to improve its infrastructure; as that takes form, the country could become a vital bridge between the northern and southern sectors of Asia.

The trajectory of change in Greater Central Asia is toward infrastructural improvements that will give the region a more central place in the transport pattern of Eurasia. Elsewhere in Asia there are other plans for development that will add further importance to the location of Greater Central Asia. That is, in the distant future, the United Nations' proposed Tumen River basin project in Korea and China—which is supposed to create a kind of Rotterdam on the Pacific—could increase substantially the overland traffic between East Asia and other parts of Eurasia. Already Japan has become Pakistan's largest trading partner, and as the infrastructure of overland transport improves in Central Asia it will be more heavily used. The South Koreans are already a major source of high-tech investment in Kazakhstan and Kirghizia, and their interests will likely enlarge as the region develops.

As new ties are formed between Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the Central Asian republics, Greater Central Asia will become strategic to the formation of a huge economic trading region. It could regain an importance it has lacked since before the rise of maritime trade in the sixteenth century. The emerging political restructuring of the region will be manifested in, and further enhanced by improvements in transport and communications facilities. The vestiges of the once critical boundary between northern and southern Eurasia will disappear as large capital investments in transport and communications facilities connect the several isolated parts of the region with each other and the wider world. The populations of South Asia, Europe, and East Asia will have faster and cheaper access to each other by land through this intermediate zone. What was once a boundary will become a corridor.

New Technologies of Cultural Transmission and Their Potential Impact on Popular Consciousness

Improvements in the transport infrastructures of Central Asia constitute one kind of innovation that is opening up new possibilities for political and social interaction in Greater Central Asia. Other innovations now, or soon to be, diffusing into the region are the new technologies of communications—cassette tapes, television, videos, copiers, computers, microchip telecommunications systems, and other information technologies. These devices are transforming the ways information and other cultural materials are managed and disseminated. All over the world they are creating new industries, new forms of enterprise, new forms of social relations, new elites, and new means of exerting influence. Although they already seem to be considerable, the precise social and political effects of these devices over a long period are as yet unclear anywhere in the world.

The broadcast media—radio and television—which are becoming more widely available to the populations of Greater Central Asia, have been in use for some time, of course, but the programming now coming into use is relatively new and different.¹⁴ Now that Soviet jamming of the radio frequencies has ceased, the BBC, Voice of America, Radio Free Europe, and Radio Liberty are widely heard as well as the "official" state radio broadcasts. Not only have more radio sources of information become available, but for the time being many of those sources appear to be carrying more reliable information. Millions of people in this part of the world are becoming more aware of developments elsewhere through these less con-

14. Chingiz Aitmatov, "The Influence of Information Technology on the Economic and Cultural Life of Soviet Central Asia," *Impact of Science on Society*, no. 146 (1987), pp. 183–87) is an obviously idealized report but it contains some interesting information.

trolled broadcast media, and aware of how their local interests are affected by events elsewhere.

Radio is the important broadcast medium in the region now, but television is becoming more available. The privately owned AsiaSat I satellite has a footprint stretching from Iran to Japan and a potential audience of 2.3 billion people. Its signal can be captured by anyone with a dish larger than 2.5 meters in diameter. Already the demand has escalated. The Gulf War generated a huge appetite for outside news, and this was quickly followed by a demand for more entertainment. CNN, the BBC's World Service Television, and local channels based on AsiaSat I are already operating. Local entrepreneurs in India have begun to set up privately owned satellite dishes in order to sell cable television to their neighbors. Recently, when U.S. Secretary of State Baker visited the republics, virtually all the Central Asian leaders wanted to know how to get access to CNN.

Radio and television are broadcast technologies that can reach large and dispersed audiences sharing a common language. Just as the advance of printing enabled elites to reach wide audiences and eventually helped nationalities become self-aware and organize into powerful social movements, the broadcast technologies, through their ability to reach larger audiences, similarly will affect the political sensibilities of the peoples of Greater Central Asia. These media will enable the scattered populations of the region—the Turkic speakers (Uzbeks, Turkmens, Kirghiz, Kazakhs, and Azerbaijanis) and speakers of the Persian dialects (Farsi, Tajik, Dari)—to become more aware of commonalities.

Television is the more powerful medium. As it becomes more available, it will strongly affect the public consciousness of the peoples of Greater Central Asia as it has done elsewhere, introducing new tastes, ambitions, heroic images, and expectations. So far, the programming has been government controlled and almost universally boring, but other sources of the kind of television programming that has been popular elsewhere, much of it produced in the West, are becoming available in South Asia and will soon come on line in Central Asia as well. The introduction of the stylized caricatures so effectively portrayed on the screen will give a new shape to popular tastes and virtual images.

But not everyone will accept Western programming, which will necessarily challenge and sometimes offend the sensibilities of people in these cultures. One of the motivating impulses of the Islamic "fundamentalist" movements has been frustration over the growing influence of Western culture on popular tastes in the Muslim world. "Television comes in for most of the blame," says Immanuel Sivan, "because it brings the modernist message in the most effective, audiovisual form into the very bastion of

Islam—family and home. But the same holds true for radio and for tape cassettes."¹⁵

Cassette recorders, along with videos and telephones, are "narrowcasting" devices, that is, means of making direct contact with specific individuals and audiences. They are also different from national radio and television broadcasting systems in that they are less expensive and more accessible to the private sector and to individual use. These "low tech" devices are becoming more available all over Greater Central Asia. Cassette tape recordings have already been an inexpensive means of distributing recorded sermons, lectures, recited poetry, and speeches, not to mention music. But the content of such tapes is not limited to religious or political topics; cassette recordings of Michael Jackson are reportedly popular in Central Asia.¹⁶ Videos, although less accessible in Central Asia itself, are well entrenched elsewhere in Eurasia and cannot be but a few years from being standard fare all over the Asian continent. The video industry is already booming in India, where one can buy videos produced locally and also videos of films and television programs filched from satellite broadcasts.

The social and political consequences of the introduction of these "low tech," narrowcast technologies are hard to predict. Narrowcast technologies enable self-conscious and special interest groups to disseminate their ideas to targeted individuals and communities. They can be effective in socializing new recruits and are already being used by the various Islamic interest groups such as the Shia, the Ismailis, the Sufi orders, and other activist groups.¹⁷ But broadcast and narrowcast technologies are potentially alike in one respect: they can weaken loyalty to nation-states. Neither of these technologies favor the interests of states. State boundaries that do not coincide with linguistic boundaries are easily bridged by broadcasting, and governments can no longer effectively jam broadcast signals as was done before; also, narrowcasting devices are easily smuggled across state lines. In the emerging world, governments will likely be unable to control the flow of information as before; indeed, nation-states will likely find these devices a threat to their ability to manage their internal affairs. Perhaps a historian in the future will see in retrospect what our generation can grasp only vaguely: that we also are as strongly "acted upon" as have been the generations of the past.

15. Immanuel Sivan, *Radical Islam: Medieval Theology and Modern Politics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), p. 3.

16. Mark Saroyan, "Waiting for the Islamic Revolution in Soviet Central Asia," First annual Nava'i Lecture in Central Asian Studies, Georgetown University, 1991, p. 3.

17. David Edwards, "Summoning Muslims: Print, Politics, and Religious Ideology in Afghanistan," paper presented at the annual meeting, American Anthropological Assn., 1987.