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Central Asia: a term open for discussion

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The term *Central Asia* was coined in 1826 in J. Klaproth's, *Historical painting of Asia* and has appeared in the stories of Russian travellers (N. Muraviev, Ja. Khanykov) to describe the area that stretched from the Black Sea to the Sea of Okhotsk. Since it was first mentioned, however, the term has never been applied again to a clearly defined area.

Over time, the geographical borders of Central Asia have changed in relation to the approaches adopted according to the different perceptions and divided as a result of diverse political and ideological situations, or the different academic backgrounds of researchers. These approaches led to Central Asia being represented as a web of observations and opinions without connections. Historical, linguistic, ethnographical or ethnological, cultural, geographical, economic and political connotations all come into play in the different definitions that have been put forward for Central Asia, as shown by the variety of terms that have never been able to cover the expanse of this geographical area.

With regard to this region, scientific discourse has constantly turned to definitions based on the concept of exclusion. For example, while specialists on Chinese, Iranian and Turkish studies have excluded the former Soviet countries from this term, Soviet specialists on the other hand, do not see Tibet and Mongolia as being part of Central Asia. As G. Imart observed, this method of exclusion paradoxically reflects the multitude of names used to describe Central Asian regions such as Transoxiana, Outer Iran, Outer Mongolia, Mawarannahr and Sinkiang, which all include the concept of being located "outside or beyond something".

Transformed into a buffer zone, broken into cultural areas, whose centre of gravity was elsewhere (for example in the Mediterranean, Turkish, Iranian, Tibetan or Sino-centrist systems) and long plagued by the

“centre-periphery” problem, Central Asia, the crossroads of civilisations, was never recognised as an object of study, except in terms of being influenced by its neighbours.

The complexity of establishing a general vision of this historical-geographical area is manifested by the difficulty in determining clear relations between its various names in different languages (in French: *Asie centrale*, *Asie moyenne*, *Asie médiane*, *Asie intérieure*, *Haute-Asie*; in English: *Middle Asia*, *Central Asia*, *Inner Asia*; in German: *Mittelasien*, *Zentralasien*; in Russian: *Srednjaja Azija*, *Central'naja Azija*, *Vnutrennjaja Azija*; in Uzbek: *Urta Ocië*, *Markazy Ocië*). The same level of difficulty can be seen in the history of developing these definitions on the basis of geographical, geological, climatic, linguistic, ethnological or religious criteria.

The Ptolemaic view of this part of the world, enriched by the topography from Arab-Persian sources, influenced European geography up until the 18th century including the *Sarmatia of Asia*, the *Scythia and the Serique* by Ptolemy which existed alongside the *Country of Gog and Magog* of the medieval tradition; the *Tartarie*, an illustration of Mongolia that was given by travellers in the 13th century, a country divided into *Big and Small Boukharie*, the steppes, highlighting its infinite limits; and *Iran and Touran [Turkestan]*, divided at the *Mawerannakhr* (literally meaning “beyond the river [Amou-darya]”) border or – if one uses the Hellenist term put forward by B. d’Herbelot in his *Bibliothèque orientale* (1697) – in “*Transoxiane*”. The relationship between these terms, as well as their limits, is ambiguous due to several confusing aspects. Cl. Visdelou’s attempt (a Jesuit missionary in China from 1656 to 1737) to introduce the generic name of *Upper Asia* (in the sense of a distant Asia) and precisely determining the scope of these areas has remained unyielding, despite the fact that it had begun breaking down the Ptolemaic myth.

Despite the lack of accurate information on the entire region, the efforts of early Oriental specialists have been successful. They have introduced a topographical terminology that has remained more or less up to date to this day, putting into place structural oppositions, such as those of “sedentary nomads”, “Chinese – Turkish – Indian countries”, the “Upper Asia – Lower Asia” pair, and by aligning the concept of borders between Asia and Europe on the Ural, which was commonly accepted between 1790 to 1810.

The definitive choice of the name “Central Asia”, created at the beginning of the 19th century, can be attributed to A. von Humboldt. In 1843, in keeping the term, Inner Asia, to describe the areas bordered in the south by the Himalayan chain and in the north by the Astrakhan line – Orenbourg – southern Siberia – Haut-Irtych – Amour, he suggested,

classifying the region between high plateaus and low regions, basing his theory on the reliefs. The central part of this Inner Asia border is bordered in the south and north by the “Anglo-Hindu and Russian-Siberian countries”, under the area defined by the Balor [Kâfiristân] or Kashmir meridians, Lake Baikal and the meandering of the great Yellow River. The natural features of this Central Asia are similar to those of Upper Asia (high plateaus), but contrary to northern Asia or Touran (low lands).

In 1877, F. von Richthofen included important details, marked by environmental determinism, in this map. He divided *Inner Asia* into three areas according to purely geological parameters, such as the characteristics of soil stratification, salt deposits and the river regime. This included: 1) the central zone, hydrographically closed and “centripetal”, where water evaporates without flowing and where all the products of geological destruction lie at the surface of the basin; 2) the “centrifugal” periphery that opens out to the ocean; 3) the transition zone. Here, the name *Central Asia* is reserved “for Han-hai dried cavity [the Xinjiang + the Djoungarie + the western edges of outer and inner Mongolia] and the entire Tibetan plateau region”. The Aralo-Caspian depressions, as well as the Amou-darya and Syr-darya basins are included in the western part of the transition zone.

Russian scientists did not accept this map, particularly N. Khanykov, who put forward another vision of Central Asia, of which subdivision was independent on the upland – lowland relationship. Under the inspiration of Russia’s geopolitical interests, Richthofen’s Central Asia, and the heart of Inner Asia, shifted to the Turkestan region of Russia. Furthermore, the dividing of the region into two names – Middle Asia [*Srednjaja Azija*] and Central Asia [*Central'naja Azija*] – was to distinguish and define the Turkestan region of Russia and the bordering regions likely to be attached to the empire in future. This last distinction made by the Russians, as well as the divided view of the Asian region [*Small – Near – Middle – Far East*], follows on from Russian geopolitical projects of the 19th to the early 20th centuries. They were formed after the 1860s, but their definitions remained obscure until the 1910s. From a Western point of view, the use of these terms by Russian specialists illustrates that the discourse has moved from a scientific stance, based on environmental determinism, to a geopolitical stance because the borders of *Middle Asia or the Asian region of Russia* were set up during region’s invasion and during the Great Game (1860-1900), without “legitimate” and “natural” reasons (geography, ethnography, languages). However, the pair, *Middle Asia – Central Asia* remains relevant to this day and marks the distinctive characteristics of the Russian – then Soviet – tradition in the same way as the use of the terms, “*Central Asia* [the four Soviet Republics] and *Kazakhstan*” defines national borders from 1924 until 1936.

To conclude, we can note that both the natural and socio-cultural indicators are insufficient to define this area precisely. We are still faced with several virtual border scenarios. The maximalist point of view tries to encompass the Caucasus, the five Central Asian republics (Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan), the Siberian plains to the northern borders, the Russian Far East, Mongolia, northern China (with the Chinese part of Turkestan, Inner Mongolia and the Manchuria), Tibet and northern regions of Pakistan, India, Afghanistan and Iran, and even the European Russia to Kiev. This central part of Eurasia (in the geographical sense) corresponds to what some researchers (D. Senior, G. Imart) deem as “Inner Asia”, whose possibilities extend to the Tropic of Cancer. The minimalist scenario limits itself to former Soviet republics, which, in accordance with the political situation, are named *Central Asia* or *Middle Asia*, or the former *Russian part of Turkestan* (in contrast to the *Chinese* and *Afghan part of Turkestan*). The confusion surrounding the term, “mid-continent” is still an obstacle when it comes to studying this particular region, which is constantly reduced to a peripheral area.