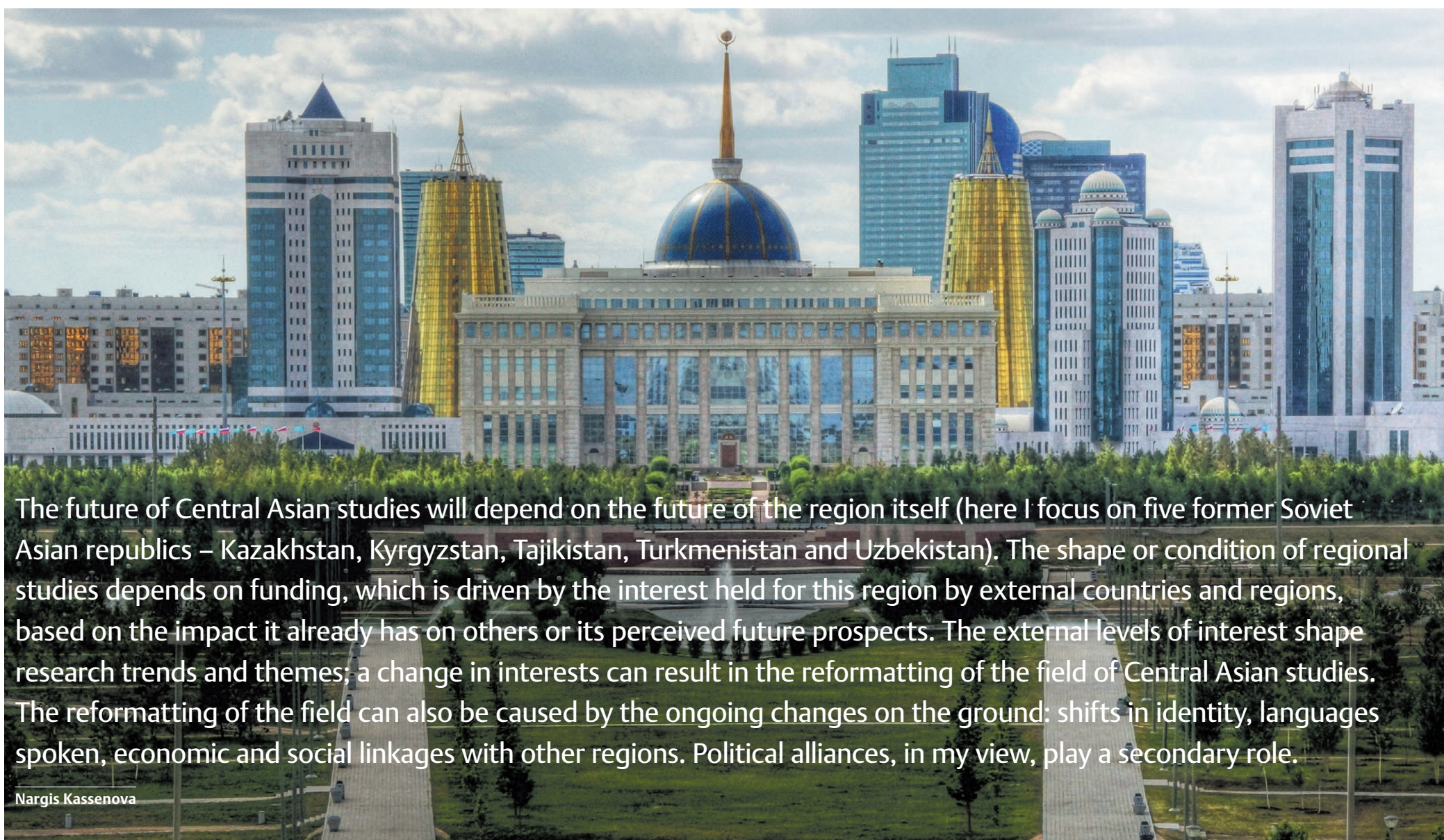


# Scenarios for future Central Asian studies



The future of Central Asian studies will depend on the future of the region itself (here I focus on five former Soviet Asian republics – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan). The shape or condition of regional studies depends on funding, which is driven by the interest held for this region by external countries and regions, based on the impact it already has on others or its perceived future prospects. The external levels of interest shape research trends and themes: a change in interests can result in the reformatting of the field of Central Asian studies. The reformatting of the field can also be caused by the ongoing changes on the ground: shifts in identity, languages spoken, economic and social linkages with other regions. Political alliances, in my view, play a secondary role.

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FULL-FLEDGED REGIONAL STUDIES are only possible when local researchers can effectively interact with the international scholarly community. Thus, the development of local scholarly communities will depend on the level of openness of Central Asian states. The higher the level of their economic and political development, the more appreciation for their knowledge.

I would like to propose three highly speculative scenarios of what can happen in the region over the next ten years, and how that would affect the field of Central Asian studies. The scenarios range from optimistic to pessimistic, and are not assigned any probability percentage. They are developed on the basic conditions and trends that we have been witnessing already, and they are very schematic and limited. Even in the range of the 'known unknowns' I do not consider all the possibilities, for example, an interruption in the rise of China.

## Scenario 1: 'Eurasian bridge' (optimistic)

The dream of turning Central Asia into a bridge connecting rich European markets with bustling Asian ones finally comes true. This happens with the help of external actors. Most importantly, China has been able to alleviate some of the contradictions in its system and maintain economic growth and further invest in its Silk Road Economic Belt initiative. Russia-led post-Soviet integration efforts have not been successful due to a lack of sufficient resources and dynamism in the Russian economy and political mistakes resulting from imperial/great power illusions, and Moscow has no choice but to accommodate itself to the new situation of China having an upper hand. The West is present and appreciated in the region as the source of modernization, investments and technological transfers, and as the second pole of power preventing full Chinese dominance.

The main beneficiary of such a scenario in the region would be Kazakhstan, whose economy proves to be the most prepared to benefit from new opportunities. Uzbekistan, with a time lag, starts opening up within this scenario. These changes have a positive effect on Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Turkmenistan retains its isolation, but finds it necessary to create better conditions for investors and to develop some transit potential as well. None of the Central Asian economies demonstrate miracles, but they show an adaptive capacity and manage to stay afloat. Labour migration remains a staple of smaller economies.

In political terms, the situation is more complex. Nation-building processes, including strengthening of national languages and identities, are juxtaposed with further fragmentation of societies in social and economic terms. Central Asian personalised authoritarian regimes have been unravelling without major upheavals, and the decentralisation of power is accompanied by growing political pluralism and youth activism. Since both internal and external forces are interested in

stability in the region, states do not fail or crack, yet they cannot escape or suppress the challenge of round-the-corner Arab-spring-style mass uprisings.

This scenario would be conducive to the development of full-fledged regional studies, due to the emergence of local resources for research and integration of the local knowledge infrastructure with international ones. Central Asian studies can become an attractive and fruitful area allowing for the crossbreeding of ideas and discourses put forward by European, American, Russian, Chinese, Indian, Japanese and other scholars. Local scholars can greatly benefit from these exchanges.

The relative vibrancy of the region would also stimulate a broader approach to the region in terms of themes and topics: from the macro-level of globalisation, political economy and regime change to the micro-level of individual and group identity. The role of a geographical bridge can help Central Asia retain its identity as a region, although Kazakhstan will continue to insist on its mixed Euro-Asian identity (similar to that of Turkey) and having as much in common with Russia and Eastern European states as with its Central Asian neighbours. The openness of the region will also challenge the now prevalent insulation of the field of Central Asian studies and force more research on linkages with other regions and cross-regional trends.

## Scenario 2: 'Muddling through' (slowly eroding status quo)

This scenario implies that the Central Asian states and societies are unable to mobilise and generate change for the better. States remain dysfunctional to varying extents and societies remain fragmented and apathetic with marginalised pockets of dissent. The economies and institutions are extractive in nature. However, due to the lack of external and internal actors interested in destabilisation, the states manage to muddle through without major upheavals, although this order is fragile. If within the first scenario, destabilisation potential comes largely from the processes unleashed by modernisation and transformation, within this scenario it is mostly drawn from underdevelopment and stagnation. Central Asian countries join the ranks of chronically failing states.

In this case Central Asian studies will be good for comparativists with a particular interest in underdeveloped areas: former colonies, resource-cursed and dysfunctional for many possible reasons. Matters of social and cultural change, Islamic revival processes, and identity formation will continue to be central themes for social, political and anthropological research in the region. Security and development communities will also find this area attractive. Political scientists interested in the study of political regimes will find it challenging to do first-hand research, since Central Asian regimes, being fearful of dissent and foreign meddling, will become even more paranoid and protective.

Overall the field, within this scenario, might not be of major interest to the international academic and policy community, and will have its niche in various broader research programs (Eurasia, Asia, etc.). A partial Western withdrawal and loss of interest in the region will be no help either. At the same time, interest from China and other Asian countries for more research on the region will remain and to some extent will offset the decrease in funding and interest from the West.

## Scenario 3: 'Conflict zone' (pessimistic)

The last scenario assumes that one or several Central Asian states implode under the pressure of accumulated problems and challenges, or due to a conflict between regional states over natural resources. External factors that can contribute to this scenario are spill overs of instability from Afghanistan and South Asia and/or highly hypothetical Russian interference along the lines of the Georgia and Ukraine crises.

The region will be more and more considered part of the 'South' and 'Greater Central Asia', which includes Afghanistan. The discourse on Central Asia would include this area into the 'arc of instability' and the region might be excluded from the European security architecture zone and treated as a problematic periphery that needs to be sealed off as much as possible.

This negative scenario implies that the field of Central Asian studies will be dominated by research on conflict, conflict prevention, conflict resolution and related matters. This will bring some interest and funding to Central Asian studies programmes. However, overall it is the most negative scenario for the field. It will be difficult for scholars to conduct research in the area due to a higher level of personal risk.

## General trends

No matter how affairs unfold, and which scenario presents itself, it seems likely that we will see the following general trends in Central Asian studies:

- 1) There will be growing interest and funding from Asia. This shift will result in more research on Central Asia from the Chinese, Indian, Pakistani, Japanese, and Korean perspectives.
- 2) The young generation of local scholars who received training in the West and abroad will substitute the Soviet cadre. This will result in better communication and more fruitful collaborative research between local and foreign scholars.
- 3) More research will be conducted through the use of national/local languages. The role of Russian as the lingua franca of the region will slowly decrease and the role of English as the international language of communication and science will increase.

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Above: Presidential Palace, Astana, Kazakhstan. Image reproduced under a Creative Commons license, courtesy of Mariusz Kluzniak on Flickr.com.