

# Rediscovering Central Asia

*It was once the “land of a thousand cities” and home to some of the world’s most renowned scientists, poets, and philosophers. Today it is seen mostly as a harsh backwater. To imagine Central Asia’s future, we must journey into its remarkable past.*

**BY S. FREDERICK STARR**

IN AD 998, TWO YOUNG MEN LIVING NEARLY 200 miles apart, in present-day Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, entered into a correspondence. With verbal jousting that would not sound out of place in a 21st-century laboratory, they debated 18 questions, several of which resonate strongly even today.

Are there other solar systems out among the stars, they asked, or are we alone in the universe? In Europe, this question was to remain open for another 500 years, but to these two men it seemed clear that we are not alone. They also asked if the earth had been created whole and complete, or if it had evolved over time. Time, they agreed, is a continuum with no beginning or end. In other words, they rejected creationism and anticipated evolutionary geology and even Darwinism by nearly a millennium. This was all as heretical to the

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Muslim faith they professed as it was to medieval Christianity.

Few exchanges in the history of science have so boldly leapt into the future as this one, which occurred a thousand years ago in a region now regarded as a backwater. We know of it because a few copies of it survived in manuscript and were published almost a millennium later. Twenty-six-year-old Abu al-Rayhan al-Biruni, or al-Biruni (973–1048), hailed from near the Aral Sea and went on to distinguish himself in geography, mathematics, trigonometry, comparative religion, astronomy, physics, geology, psychology, mineralogy, and pharmacology. His counterpart, Abu Ali Sina, or Ibn Sina (ca. 980–1037), was from the stately city of Bukhara, the great seat of learning in what is now Uzbekistan. He made his mark in medicine, philosophy, physics, chemistry, astronomy, theology, clinical pharmacology, physiology, ethics, and even music. When eventually Ibn Sina’s great *Canon of Medicine* was translated into Latin, it triggered the start of modern medicine in the West. Together, the two are regarded as among the greatest scientific minds between antiquity and the Renaissance.

Most today know these argumentative geniuses, if at all, as Arabs. This is understandable, since both wrote in Arabic (as well as Persian). But just as a Japanese writing in English is not an Englishman, a Central Asian writing in Arabic is not an Arab. In fact, both men were part of a huge constellation of ethnically Persian or Turkic geniuses in

while Britain turned Afghanistan into a buffer to protect its Indian colonies from Russia. China eventually absorbed a big chunk to the east, now known as Xinjiang, the “New Territory.” Ancient traditions of learning had long since died out, and while the Soviets revived literacy, they suppressed free thought in both the secular and religious spheres. A new day for the region began with the creation of five independent states after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, and with the establishment of a new and more modern government in Afghanistan after 9/11.

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mathematics, astronomy, medicine, geology, linguistics, political science, poetry, architecture, and practical technology—all of whom were from what today we call Central Asia. Between 800 and 1100 this pleiad of Central Asian scientists, artists, and thinkers made their region the intellectual epicenter of the world. Their influence was felt from East Asia and India to Europe and the Middle East.

Today, this is hard to imagine. This vast region of irrigated deserts, mountains, and steppes between China, Pakistan, Iran, Russia, and the Caspian Sea is easily dismissed as a peripheral zone, the “backyard” of one or another great power. In impoverished Afghanistan, traditionally considered the heart of Central Asia, U.S. forces are fighting a backward-looking and ignorant Taliban. The main news in America from the rest of Central Asia is that the Pentagon is looking for bases there from which to provision the Afghan campaign. In China, the region is seen chiefly as a semi-colonial source of oil, natural gas, gold, aluminum, copper, and uranium. The Russian narrative, meanwhile, dwells on Moscow’s geopolitical competition there with the West and, increasingly, China. By and large, most people abroad ignore the land of Ibn Sina and al-Biruni, dismissing it as an inconvenient territory to be crossed while getting somewhere else.

Given the dismal plight of these lands in the modern era, who can be surprised at this? Beginning a century and a half ago, Russia colonized much of the region,

Eighteen years on, all of the new states have preserved their sovereignty and Afghanistan is clinging to life. But several of the region’s countries remain destitute, and even the most successful ones are riddled with corruption and still dependent on authoritarian forms of rule. As William Faulkner reminded us in his speech accepting the Nobel Prize in 1950, there is a big difference between *surviving* and *prevailing*. Is the best hope of these lands merely to work their way back up to zero? Or can they possibly reclaim some of the luster of their glorious past, and prevail?

And glorious it was. It is hard to know where to begin in enumerating the intellectual achievements of Central Asians a millennium ago. In mathematics, it was Central Asians who first accepted irrational numbers, identified the different forms of cubic equations, invented trigonometry, and adapted and disseminated the decimal system and Hindu numerals (called “Arabic” numbers in the West). In astronomy, they estimated the earth’s diameter to a degree of precision unmatched until recent centuries and built several of the largest observatories before modern times, using them to prepare remarkably precise astronomical tables.

In chemistry, Central Asians were the first to reverse reactions, to use crystallization as a means of purification, and to measure specific gravity and use it to group elements in a manner anticipating Dmitri Mendeleev’s periodic table of 1871. They compiled and added to ancient medical knowledge, hugely



**Central Asia from 800 to 1100 was a wealthy trading region and a renowned intellectual center, boasting mathematicians, chemists, astronomers, philosophers, and musicians. The circle describes the extent of the ancient region, while the borders delineate present-day countries.**

broadened pharmacology, and passed it all to the West and to India. And in technology, they invented windmills and hydraulic machinery for lifting water that subsequently spread westward to the Middle East and Europe and eastward to China.

But wasn't this the great age of Arab science and learning centered at the Caliphate in Baghdad? True enough. There were brilliant Arab scientists such as the polymath and founder of ophthalmology Ibn al-Haytham (ca. 965–1040). But as the Leipzig scholar Heinrich Suter first showed a century ago, many, if not most, of those "Arab" scientists were in fact either Persian or Turkic and hailed originally from Central Asia. This is true of the mathematician and astronomer Mukhammad ibn Musa al-Khorezmi (ca. AD 780–850), who was from the same Khorezm

region of the Uzbekistan-Turkmenistan border area as al-Biruni, hence "al-Khorezmi." Algorithms, one of his many discoveries, still bear his name in distorted form, while our term "algebra" comes directly from the title of his celebrated book on mathematics. Similarly, Abu Nasr al-Farabi (ca. AD 872–961), known in the West as Alfarabius, whose innovative analyses of the ethics of Aristotle surpassed all those of Western thinkers except Thomas Aquinas, was a Turk from what is now Kazakhstan, not an Arab.

The extraordinarily important role of Central Asian intellectuals in Baghdad is less surprising when one bears in mind that the Abbassid Caliphate was actually founded by Central Asians. True, the caliphs themselves were Arabs who had settled in the East, but in the process they had "gone native" and

embraced the Persian and Turkic world in which they found themselves. One caliph, al-Ma'mun, refused for years after his appointment in AD 818 to leave Central Asia, ruling the Muslim world instead from the splendid oasis city of Merv in what is now Turkmenistan. When he eventually moved to Baghdad he brought with him, along with his Turkic soldiers, the more open and ecumenical values of Central Asia, with their blend of influences from the Persian and Turkic cultures.

The movement from Central Asia to the Middle East recalls the ancient brain drain from the centers of Greek learning to Rome. The difference is that even as some Central Asian scientists and scholars were moving to Baghdad, Arab intellectuals were also being attracted to the great centers in Central Asia. In a kind of reverse brain drain, the extraordinarily enlightened city of Gurganj (where al-Biruni lived), in what is now Turkmenistan, became a magnet for Arab scientists, as did the well-financed and opulent court at Ghazni in eastern Afghanistan. Nor did all Central Asians who had been lured to Baghdad choose to stay there.

What territories should we include in this "Central Asia" that produced such a flowering of genius? Certainly all of the five "stans" that gained independence in 1991: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan. No less central to this flowering of the intellect were the great cities of what is now Afghanistan: Balkh, Herat, and others. Add also modern Iran's northeastern province of Khorasan, whose capital city, Nishapur, produced long ranks of innovators during those bounteous years. The boundaries of this "zone of genius" also extend across what is now the western border of China to embrace the ancient city of Kash-

gar and several other great centers that have always fallen within the cultural orbit of Central Asia.

It is one thing to draw a circle on the map, but quite another to explain why this region, call it Greater Central Asia, should have produced such a cultural flowering. Booming cities provided the setting for cultural life. A traveling Arab marveled at what he called the "land of a thousand cities" in what is now Afghanistan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. The

ruins of mighty Balkh, once the capital of this region, still spread for miles and miles across the plain west of modern Mazar-i-Sharif in Afghanistan. In its heyday Balkh was larger than Paris, Rome, Beijing, or Delhi. Like all the great regional centers, it had running water, baths, and majestic palaces—and solidly built homes of sun-dried brick for non-palace dwellers.

It was also richer, thanks to continental trade. Merchants from Balkh and other Central Asian commercial centers journeyed to the Middle East, Europe, China, and deep into India. Traders from those lands brought goods to the sprawling commercial entrepôts in Greater Central Asia. Since slavery thrived throughout the Muslim world and beyond, the bazaars also included large slave markets. Gold, silver, and bronze currency from these thriving hubs of commerce traveled all the way to Gotland in Sweden and to Korea and Sri Lanka.

Central Asia lay at the junction of all the routes connecting the great cultures of the Eurasian landmass. This network of routes, today often called the "Silk Road," in its heyday transported a huge variety of goods in every direction. Glass blowing spread from the Middle East to China via Central Asia, while papermaking and sericulture (the production of silk) went from China westward. But the Central Asians



were not passive transmitters. For half a millennium, Middle Easterners and Europeans esteemed Samarqand paper as the best anywhere, while the treasures of more than one medieval cathedral in Europe consist of silk manufactured in the Fergana Valley of what is now mainly Uzbekistan.

Traders also carried religions. Greek settlers in the

depicting the Buddha in sculpture. About the same time, Jewish communities were formed, Syrian Christian bishoprics established, and Manichean communities founded across the region. In a stratum beneath all these religions lay the region's core faith, Zoroastrianism, with its emphasis on the struggle of good and evil, redemption, and heaven and hell. Zoroaster,

who probably lived in the sixth or seventh century bc, came from the region of Balkh, but his religion spread westward, eventually to Babylon, where Jews encountered it and fell under its influence. From Judaism its concepts spread first to Christianity and then to Islam.

So when Islam arrived with the Arab armies in the late seventh century, it encountered a population that was expert in what we might today call comparative religion and philosophical analysis. Many Central Asians converted, but others did not, at least not until after the period of cultural effervescence had passed. Muslim or not, they were expert codifiers, and one of them, Muhammad ibn Ismail al-Bukhari (AD 810-70), brought together and analyzed the hadiths (sayings) of Muhammad, the compilation becoming regarded as Islam's second most holy book after the Qur'an. Secular ideas also wafted back and forth across the region. The astronomer al-Khorezmi wrote a book comparing the utility of Indian numerals (and the concept of zero) with all other contenders, while others mined Indian geometry, astron-

omy, and even calendar systems for good ideas. Earlier Central Asians had tested various alphabets, including ones from Syria and India. Several local languages opted for an alphabet deriving from Aramaic, the language Jesus spoke. It is hard to imagine a more intellectually open region anywhere.



The great polymath Abu Ali Sina (facing page) hailed from the city of Bukhara, in what is now Uzbekistan. Above is a leaf from his most famous work, the *Canon of Medicine*.

wake of Alexander the Great (356-23 bc) brought the cults of Athena, Hercules, and Aphrodite to their new cities in Afghanistan. Then Buddhism found fertile soil across the region, and spread from there to China, Japan, and Korea. Along the way, Buddhist artists picked up from immigrant Greeks the idea of

What distinguished Central Asians from both the Arabs and the Chinese is that they were polyglots. They considered it normal to live amid a bewildering profusion of languages and alphabets, and managed

guide religion, not vice versa, and certainly not be constrained by it. Still others were outright skeptics who dismissed religion as fine for the mass of society but a farce for intellectuals. This was the view of Omar Khayyám

(1048–1123), the brilliant mathematician who is known today mainly for his poetry, a collection of which was introduced to the West in the 19th century as the *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám*.

All this adds up to the possibility that intellectual boldness owed less to what religion did than to

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somehow to master whichever ones they needed at the time. Thus, when the Arab armies arrived bearing a new religion, it was natural that at least some officials and intellectuals would learn the Arabs' strange language to see what it offered. Traders soon thereafter began arriving with writings newly translated from classical Greek. Often the work of Christian Arabs, these translations suddenly opened challenging new ideas in philosophy and science to Central Asians. In due course, they were to master and even go beyond their ancient Greek mentors.

The flowering of Greater Central Asia was thus a product of "location, location, location," both with respect to the trade-based prosperity that it generated and to the welter of religions and ideas that came on the back of that trade. But trade alone would not have given rise to the intellectual awakening that occurred, for not all trade unleashes genius. Perhaps it is best to think of trade as a necessary condition for intellectual takeoff, but not a sufficient one.

**H**ow important was religion to this explosion of creativity? For many, Islam was the crucial factor. When al-Bukhari embarked on his life-work of scholarship he was doubtless moved by deep piety, as were scores of other great thinkers. Al-Farabi never doubted that his research into the basis of ethics would strengthen formal religion. Others agreed with al-Farabi but insisted that free inquiry and research should

what it did not do. This is important, given the struggle that existed at times between religion and science in the West. But one senses that someone like al-Farabi, who tossed off a major study on musical theory in addition to all his other works, needed neither permission nor encouragement to treat the whole world as his oyster.

Pinpointing the causes of Central Asia's golden age is all the more difficult because the great minds who gave the age its brilliance were such a diverse lot. A few came from wealthy landed families and could live off their estates, while others, such as Ibn Sina and al-Biruni, won appointments to lucrative high offices. But they were exceptions. Most of the thinkers were full-time scientists, scholars, and intellectuals, or at least aspired to be. With no universities or academies of science to support them, this was no easy undertaking. Even if they assembled a few paying students, the resulting income never provided enough to sustain them. And so, by default, they relied on the patronage of rulers.

Here was one of Central Asia's great strengths. To be sure, a would-be scientist could strike out for Baghdad in hopes of joining the House of Wisdom, an academy of sciences established by the Central Asia-born caliph al-Ma'mun. But there were many local rulers and courts throughout the region, just as there were also in Persia to the west. All gave a respectful nod to Baghdad but considered themselves functionally independent. Each of these rulers was a kind



This miniature painting, which shows Abolqasem Ferdowsi meeting other literary men of the court of Mahmud of Ghazna (971–1030), appeared in the poet's famed *Shahnameh*. With an empire that stretched from Iran to India, Mahmud was notoriously ruthless, yet even he felt compelled to patronize the arts and sciences.

of caliph in his own right, ruling in a thoroughly authoritarian manner and defending his territory with a large army of Turks. But they also promoted trade, collected taxes, built splendid capitals, and, significantly, spent fortunes on the arts and sciences. One such court was at Gurganj, where al-Biruni worked. Another was at the already-ancient walled city of Samarqand, where between 850 and 1000 the Samanid dynasty maintained a magnificent library,

Central Asia occurred under the Seljuk Turks beginning about 1037 and continuing for more than a century. From their eastern capitals at Merv in modern Turkmenistan and Nishapur near the present-day Iranian-Afghan border, they encouraged innovators in many fields. Among their achievements was the invention of a way to cover large spaces with double domes. One of their earliest efforts can still be seen rising from the desolation of their ruined capital at

intense salons where savants discussed the Great Questions, and a lively social world centered on music and poetry.

There was nothing kind and gentle about some of these rulers; nor were all of them sophisticated as patrons of the arts and sciences. From his capital in eastern Afghanistan, Mahmud of Ghazna (971–1030) ruled an empire stretching from India to the heart of modern Iran. Mahmud was ruthless and viewed culture more as an adornment than a necessity. Yet he successfully engaged al-Biruni, who proceeded to author the first comprehensive study of India and Hinduism in any language. Mahmud also patronized the great poet Abolqasem Ferdowsi, whose grand panorama of pre-Muslim Persia, the *Shahnameh* (ca. 1000), influenced troubadours as far away as France and remains a classic of world literature.

The last great explosion of cultural energy in



Once a thriving commercial capital, the city of Balkh, in northeastern Afghanistan, never regained its influence after Mongols destroyed it in 1220.

Merv. Following a circuitous route that led through Filippo Brunelleschi's dome at the Cathedral of Florence to St. Nicholas's Cathedral in St. Petersburg, this innovation eventually defined the cupola of the U.S. Capitol in Washington.

**W**hy did the great age of Central Asia fade? The most common explanation blames the waning of the intellectual whirlwind on the Mongol invasion, which Ghenghis Khan launched from the Mongolian heartland in 1218. It is true that the Mongol invaders sacked most of the magnificent cities of Central Asia, but three objections undermine this thesis. First, all but a few of the cities quickly revived, thanks to trade and commerce. Second, far from isolating the region, the Mongol conquest increased contacts between Greater Central Asia and both Europe and the rest of Asia. This happened because the conquering Mongols abolished borders and tariffs within their vast empire. When Marco Polo passed through Afghanistan en route to China in the 13th century, he did so with a single "patent," or visa. To

the extent that cross-cultural contact was an essential ingredient of intellectual vitality, it flourished under the Mongols.

Third, even if the Mongols had set out to suppress free thought in 1221 (they did not), there would have been no need for them to do so. A full century earlier, much of the cultural energy that had crackled across the length and breadth of Central Asia for hundreds of years had dissipated. True, at Merv in the 12th century there were still a dozen libraries, one of them with 12,000 volumes, and there were more than 50 doctors in Bukhara. But as early as 1100, the focus of intellectual life had shifted from bold sallies into vast and unknown territories to the preparation of compendiums of earlier studies and careful treatises on safer, more limited subjects. A sure sign that the formerly bright flame had diminished is the fact that most of the surviving manuscripts from this period are either copies of earlier writings or commentaries on them, not original works.

If the "Whodunit?" question does not point to the Mongols, what caused the decline? Most of Central Asia's great ancient cities today present a picture of gaunt ruins baking silently in the desert sun, the bleak-



ness relieved only by occasional tufts of sage. Viewing them, one is tempted to blame the cultural downturn on climate change or some other ecological shift. But most studies of the region's ecological history conclude that the climate during the boom years was nearly identical to what it is today, and that the main change was the decay of the irrigation systems that were once the region's glory.

Looking beyond the Mongols and ecology, at least four factors contributed to the region's decline. First, and perhaps foremost, nothing endures forever. The golden age of classical Athens lasted barely a century before the city slipped into a lesser silver age. Few of the Renaissance cities remained at a peak of cultural creativity for more than a century and a half. It is natural and inevitable that decline should set in after a high point.

In the case of Central Asia, even more than with the Arabs to the West, the mighty stimulus for original thinking had been the challenge of mastering and assimilating vast and unfamiliar bodies of thought, from ancient Greece, the Middle East, and India. By 1100 this had been accomplished, and no comparably huge body of new learning presented itself thereafter. The European Renaissance should have provided such a stimulus, of course, but by that time the great trade routes that had connected civilizations had seen better days and Central Asia's isolation and decline was becoming entrenched.

Second, religions, like the cultures of which they are a part, go through cycles, beginning in dynamism, self-confidence, and experimentation and then hardening into orthodoxy. In Central Asia, this had already occurred with both Zoroastrianism and Buddhism. In the case of Islam, the greatest flowering of creative thought started early, between 800 and 1100. The hardening into orthodoxy also began early, but did not reach its apex until around 1100. Even then, there remained a few isolated outposts that stayed intellectually vital for another century or so. But in Persian and Turkic Central Asia, as in the Arab heartland and in Persia proper, the demands of a steadily rigidifying Muslim orthodoxy gradually narrowed the sphere in which free thought and humanism could be exercised.

Beyond these "morphological" realities that contributed to the withering of free intellectual life in Greater Central Asia, a third and much more specific factor was at work: the Sunni-Shia split within the Muslim faith. This

fundamental division dates to the first generation after Muhammad's death in AD 632. By the time of the rise of the first Caliphate in Damascus, the Sunnis were firmly in charge throughout the Muslim world except in Egypt, where the Fatimids, a Shiite dynasty, flourished from 968 to 1171. But even before the fall of the Fatimids the Shiite faithful were being hounded eastward, shifting the core zone of confessional conflict to Persia and Central Asia. As this occurred, the reigning Sunni rulers across the region tightened their grip on all who might be suspected of schismatic leanings. Many of the great innovators, such as Ibn Sina, had come from Shiite families. Now anyone like him was suspect.

Needless to say, the change hit the freethinkers particularly hard, but it affected no less the mainline Sunnis. Two figures from the town of Tus on the western fringe of Central Asia in what is now eastern Iran epitomized this new direction. The first, Nizam al-Mulk (1018–92), was a highly gifted administrator and also one of the best political scientists of the era. Al-Mulk's teachers had introduced him to works by the best minds of the Central Asian renaissance. But by the time he was appointed vizier of the Seljuk Empire, the battle against Shiite dissidence was at full tilt. Fearing deviance on every side, al-Mulk proposed to establish a network of schools, or madrasas, that would instill orthodox Sunni Islam and turn young men into well-informed loyalists of the faith. Graduates would reject not only the Shiite schism but any other forms of thought that might be suspected of deviance from orthodoxy.

The second transformative figure, Abu Hamid Muhammad ibn Muhammad al-Ghazali (1058–1111), a philosopher and theologian, launched a frontal attack on the dangers posed by the unrestrained exercise of reason. The title of his most famous work tells it all: *The Incoherence of the Philosophers* (i.e., scientists). Like the Grand Inquisitor in Feodor Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, al-Ghazali intimately knew his enemy, in this case Aristotelian empiricism, which had attracted the best minds of the region. Attacking Aristotle, he attacked all contemporary rationalists, and to devastating effect.

Together, al-Mulk and al-Ghazali lowered the curtain on independent thought that had been raised in Central Asia for three centuries. Yet Central Asians responded with their typical creativity. With outer forms of the faith hardened and rigidified, they evinced a fresh interest in indi-

vidual spirituality. Their highly personal system for achieving a mystical experience of God required neither books, hierarchies, nor mosques, and was called Sufism. Central Asians had ready at hand many forms of such mystical and private worship, thanks to their contacts with Hindu India and their rich local traditions of Buddhism, Syrian Christianity, and even Judaism, which had thrived in the region's trade centers. How mystical currents within these

**SOMEWHERE IN THE DNA of the peoples of Central Asia is the capacity to become a link and bridge between civilizations.**

faiths contributed to Sufism is much debated, but one thing is clear: Even though the first Sufis had been Arabs, Central Asia became Sufism's heartland. Several of the first and greatest Sufi movements arose there and spread thence throughout the Muslim world. Today Sufi poems by Rumi, Attar, and others have gained a New Age following, but in their own era they represented a turning inward and away from the civic realm.

Central Asia by no means disappeared from the world's view after 1100. In the 14th century, Timur, known in the West as Tamerlane, conquered the world from Delhi to the eastern shore of the Mediterranean and then assembled learned scientists and writers in his rebuilt capital of Samarqand. A century later, Babur sprang from the Fergana Valley and went on to found the Mughal dynasty in India. A gifted writer, Babur followed the old Central Asian practice of gathering creative talent to his court.

Yet Central Asia never regained the intellectual luster it had possessed in the centuries between 800 and 1100. High local tariffs killed the golden goose that had given birth to prosperity and inter-cultural contact. Religious orthodoxy stifled the region's most original thinkers. As the decline set in, Central Asia gradually

ceased to be central to the high culture of all Eurasia and sank into the status of a remote and dusty boondocks.

From this descent into obscurity it was an easy step to Dan Rather's coverage of Afghanistan and the region in the immediate wake of 9/11. Donning a bush jacket and filming at dawn and dusk, he presented the region as inaccessible, backward, exotic, marginal, and

threatening—in short, the end of the world. Ibn Sina, al-Biruni, and scores of other world-class geniuses from the region might just as well never have lived.

Even though the Central Asia of Rather's depiction was and is an evocative image, it carries some bothersome implications.

On the one hand, it conjures up a place where the best the United States and the world community can hope for is to limit the damage arising from it. This means destroying whatever threatens us and then getting out. The problem is that the thinking behind such an approach can then become self-fulfilling: A place we judged to be hopeless becomes truly so, and even more threatening than before. The fact that Central Asia and Afghanistan are situated between four—and possibly soon five—nuclear powers does not help matters.

Fortunately, this prevailing image of backwardness is not the whole story. Since the region emerged from Soviet and Taliban rule, the ancient continental trade routes have begun to revive. Indians and Koreans flying to Europe stop off there. Half a dozen countries and as many international financial institutions are busily building a network of highways that will eventually link Europe, China, India, and the Middle East. The fact that this is occurring without central direction means that its extent has largely gone unnoticed. But the road building has now reached the level of an unstoppable force. The opening of routes between Europe and China and across Afghanistan toward the Arabian Sea, India, and Southeast Asia and linking the Middle East, China, and India will, in the coming decade, transform the entire Eurasian landmass. Little that is emerging is absolutely new. Indeed,

anyone interested in knowing what the new transport configuration will look like might start by examining the trade routes of the golden era.

Similarly, the opening of Central Asia between 1991 and 2001 is beginning to transform the region intellectually. Tens of thousands of the region's students have gone to study at the best universities abroad. In an act of enlightenment worthy of their predecessors a millennium ago, the governments of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have paid for these young people to acquire the most modern knowledge and bring it back home. They return with a passion for reconnecting their region with the global world of ideas. Within the next decade, these young men and women will assume leadership roles in their societies and in the region as a whole. It is hard to imagine that they will consider the prevailing corruption to be normal, or accept Soviet-style controls over their ideas. Even in Afghanistan the National University, the recently established American University, and thousands of lower schools are opening new prospects to the rising generation.

These young people quite reasonably ask, "Who are we?" Answers pour in from every side. Many in the Middle East and even in the West, from the White House down, tell them they are Muslims, defined mainly by the faith in which they were raised. Alternatively, some experts smugly invoke the notions of tribal or clan heritage to explain what they consider the region's hopelessly retrograde politics. Meanwhile, local patriots hail their various national ethnic identities—Kyrgyz, Tajik, or Uzbek—each of which, they insist, is absolutely unique and like no other.

These proposed identities may have some basis in reality. But all run the risk of narrowing the horizons of the emerging generation and limiting their expectations of themselves. The attraction of some young people to fundamentalist religious organizations or narrowly nationalistic groups is also a cause for concern. But Central Asians have ready at hand a meaningful past that lifts up the individual, defines each person in terms of reason and wisdom, and places that person in the mainstream of global developments. This is the great tradition that for 300 years made their region the center of the world of intellect. Why shouldn't Central Asians and their friends abroad place this remarkable heritage, rather than some narrowly religious or national ideology, as the lodestone of their policies today?

This means focusing more of our support and theirs on reopening the great continental transport routes, instituting freer borders, lowering tariffs, and reducing meddling from the governments. Free trade must also extend to the world of ideas. This means creating the unfettered intellectual space that enabled Ibn Sina and al-Biruni to hypothesize on evolution rather than creationism and even to contemplate the existence of other worlds. Though they each lived under a different government, nobody intercepted their mail and nobody censured their heretical thoughts. In fact, rulers competed to become their patrons and to support their work.

Would this happen today in Central Asia? Several governments in the region are glad to talk of unfettered continental trade but bridle at the prospect of an unfettered exchange of ideas. Yet in every country in the region, there are distinguished champions of the kind of intellectual openness that will give rise to modern Ibn Sinas and al-Birunis. With the emergence of the new generation, increasing numbers of these people are in government. The idea of a fresh flowering of Central Asia may seem a distant prospect, but it is not impossible, especially if Central Asians become more familiar with their rich heritage and draw from it relevant lessons for the present.

If this is the challenge to inhabitants of the region today, the challenge to their international partners is to treat the regional states as sovereign countries, not as culturally inert objects to be shoved around on a chessboard. It is not enough to view them simply as a "zone of [our] special interest," as Vladimir Putin's government does; as a source of raw materials, as the Chinese do; or as a fueling stop en route to Kabul, as the United States does. The better alternative is to acknowledge that somewhere in the DNA of these peoples is the capacity to manage great empires and even greater trading zones, to interact as equals with the other centers of world culture, and to use their unique geographical position to become a link and bridge between civilizations. Such an awareness will raise expectations on all sides, and encourage the region's international partners to view it as more than the object of a geopolitical game.

This, too, won't be easy, but acquiring a deeper knowledge of Central Asia's past is an essential place to begin. ■