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The Geopolitics of Central Asia

**The Tennessee World Affairs Council in association with the
Belmont University Center for International Business, and the Nashville Area
Chamber of Commerce**

Professor John Miglietta

with Moderator

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Thomas Schwartz [00:00:25] I very much, after having lunch with John talking about these issues, decided this would be a useful program for the Tennessee World Affairs Council. And I was really delighted that John was willing to do a presentation for the Council on his work. So I'm going to turn it over to John. He has a PowerPoint presentation and is going to talk for about 10 to 15 minutes about that. And then we'll have some questions. I got some questions for him and then turn it over to questions from the audience. John.

John Miglietta [00:00:58] Okay. Well, thank you so much. It's my pleasure to be here. I want to thank Professor Schwartz and Mr. Ryan and the folks at the Tennessee World Affairs Council. Thank you very much. And just to sort of preface my conference, I have some slides about the geopolitics of Central Asia, which I hope will provoke some questions. But I've been getting more and more interested in Central Asia over the years. My field was actually Middle East studies, but I've been sort of migrating further east as I go along. And I was fortunate, I was able to apply and received the Fulbright to Tajikistan. And part of the reason I chose to go to Tajikistan was because it was the only one of the Central Asian countries where Persian is widely spoken and I had taken some Persian in

graduate school, so it was really an eye-opening experience and I really treasure my time there and I hope I can return, go back again in the very, very near future. But onto my presentation, which is the geopolitics of Central Asia, I hope you can all see my screen. Basically, Central Asia. There we go.

Central Asia was sort of known to many historians as the site of the great game of the 19th century. This was a competition between the Russian Empire and the British Empire for control in that part of the world. The Russians were expanding southward and putting pressure on British India. And again, you have to remember at this time British India also included Pakistan as well. And sort of they agreed that Afghanistan would be kind of a buffer state and essentially pretty much set the boundary lines in the late 19th century, demarcating sort of the southern portion of the Russian empire and independent of Afghanistan, which is now pretty much the borders that you see today, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan border on Afghanistan.

It was when I was in the country of Tajikistan, I taught at the University of Central Asian, which is right on the border with Afghanistan. But Central Asia was also becoming significant in sort of academic circles in the late 19th, early 20th century, because it's at this point that the U.S. tried to develop the idea of geopolitics came into vogue. And this is largely with the work of the British geographer J. Halford Mackinder who wrote a very influential paper in 1904 for the Royal Geographic Society called The Geographical Pivot of History. And he argued that you're looking at the world geographically, that basically whoever controlled Eastern Europe commanded the heartland, which he defined, as you could see from this map, as sort of a large part of the Eurasian landmass encompassing Central Asia.

So who rules eastern Europe commands the heartland, who rules the heartland commands the world island and who rules the world island commands the world. So again a lot - and he influenced a lot of other geographers and political leaders at the time who kind of came to view Eurasia, particularly Central Asia, as being really, really important geostrategically. Looking today at the geography of Central Asia you have - and we define Central Asia as the stan countries of formerly part of - that were formerly part of the Soviet Union. So Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan.

But also Afghanistan obviously plays a strong role in Central Asia as well as Pakistan as well. And again, if you look at the countries of Central Asia, by far, Kazakhstan is the largest country. It's the ninth largest country in the world. It's rich in oil and natural gas. And it's through Kazakhstan that Chinese goods flow to Russia and eventually to Western Europe. And we'll talk more about that when we talk about the belt, China's Belt and Road Initiative, because Kazakhstan is central in that. Kyrgyzstan is probably the most democratic, I guess you could probably say it's the least authoritarian of the Central Asian states. It has had a number of changes of government since the fall of the Soviet Union. Tajikistan is the smallest and poorest of the Central Asian countries. The language is Indo-European and Tajik is - the Tajik language is essentially Persian, while the other countries have Turkic based languages. Turkmenistan is the most closed of the Central Asian republics. It is rich in natural gas, although it's starting to open up a little bit more to the West, a little bit more to Europe. Uzbekistan is the largest country in terms of population in in that region, in that region.

So, again, you have a number of countries, they have a lot in common. They're all - the exception of Turkmenistan - they are all members of the Commonwealth of Independent States, which is an organization of essentially former areas that used to be part of the

Soviet Union. And it's really a vehicle by which Russia exerts a certain degree of control. I should mention that all of these countries, Russian is still widely spoken. And in fact, in some ways when I was living in Dushanbe for part of my time in Tajikistan, Russian seemed to be the preferred language of many people. Central Asia during the Soviet period after the Russian civil war, the area was kind of reabsorbed as part of the now Soviet Union, and they reasserted control largely through union republics and various autonomous regions. And the lines were drawn to suit political interests. And as a result, ethnic groups were usually not kept together.

And actually this was done really by design so as to not have all of one ethnic group kind of concentrated in one area. And this has had major implications for when there is no Soviet Union, when the Soviet Union broke up, because now you have all of these independent states and many of them have territorial issues with each other. You may have followed the news recently. There has been flare ups on the Tajik-Turkish border because you have enclaves of Tajikistan that are completely within Kyrgyzstan. And access to these have been difficult and there have been border clashes and relations between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan are not very good at this point. In eastern Tajikistan you have a fairly decent sized Kyrgyzstan population near Murghab in those areas out to the east, towards China. Primarily you have a Kurdish population, Sunni Muslims, as opposed to Ismailis, which you find prevalent in other parts of eastern Tajikistan. Uzbekistan has a large Tajik population in the cities of Bukhara and Samarkand are in many ways Tajik cities but they were left in Uzbekistan. Tajikistan used to be part of Uzbekistan. It was sort of an autonomous region within Pakistan that in 1929 became its own Soviet socialist republic. But those cities were left, those areas were left off and left still as part of Uzbekistan.

Soviet rule in Central Asia. Again, they attempted to develop the region, developing industry and agriculture with sometimes rather tragic consequences. A major emphasis was on cotton cultivation, which is still prevalent in many parts of Central Asia. But this had rather dramatic environmental effects as the irrigation for these cotton fields led to the Aral Sea. I'm sorry, I misprinted. There should be drying up, not tying up. Sorry about that. But you can see parts of what would have been the Aral Sea are now desert. The Aral Sea still exists, but it's only a fraction of its former size. You can really go on the Internet and look at maps. The Aral Sea at this particular time versus the Aral Sea now. And you see a very, very big contrast. The end of the Soviet Union. It was really interesting. I'd become interested in Central Asia when I was in grad school. And a lot of the scholarship was yeah, the Iranian Revolution, it just happened. The Soviet Union eventually might fall down because of Islamic revolution in Asia, in Central Asia. But that didn't happen.

In fact, if anything, when the Soviet Union was breaking up, it was the Central Asian elite that were trying to hold it together and didn't necessarily want the Soviet Union to go away because they were dependent on huge subsidies coming from Moscow. Plus, the leadership were all Communist Party apparatchiks from, you know, and they didn't know what to do essentially. Now, most of them sort of reinvented themselves as nationalists after the break up. And some of them lived and some of them ruled for quite a long time. This is a photo of Nazarbayev, who was the longtime president of Kazakhstan. He just stepped down a few years ago. But he was instrumental in creating the Commonwealth of Independent State and has to sort of have some kind of a vehicle where you could have some coordination among the now former Soviet states. And Russia really has used that to promote its interests. And also Russia in addition to strategic and economic interest and cultural interest, they also view themselves as protecting the Russian populations that still remain in these in these countries and especially in Kazakhstan there's still a fairly

significant Russian population. Some of the other countries, maybe not as much, but it's still, but it's still there.

Again, I've already mentioned about the Commonwealth of Independent States. Not every former Soviet country is a member of that, but most of the Central Asian countries are, with the exception of Turkmenistan. China is also becoming very, very important in the region. The region is central for China's Belt and Road strategy of getting goods out of China to Western markets, to global markets. And also as a market in and of itself for Chinese goods and also access to raw materials. Oil and gas from Kazakhstan, gas from Turkmenistan, rare earth, metals from Tajikistan.

All of this is seen as very, very important for the Chinese economy. They are also very concerned about the security of western China, the Xinjiang region, which is very vast autonomous region of western China, where the Uyghurs live, who are Chinese citizens, but they are Muslim in religion. And there have been calls for independence and greater autonomy in Xinjiang. And the Chinese are very, very concerned about that and very, very concerned about Islamic appeals to the Uyghurs in Xinjiang. And China uses the SCO, much like Russia uses the CIS, to try to promote its influence in the in Central Asia. And here you have sort of a representation of the Belt and Road Initiative, how extensive that is not only going through Central Asia, but going to other parts of Asia as well, and all the different corridors that China is developing. Obviously, you know, China, Pakistan economic corridor, a Eurasian land bridge, which would impact the Central Asian countries specifically, but also other areas as well, going through Southeast Asia especially.

So, what is the U.S., what is the US relationship in the region? Well, part of what was defining the U.S. in the region was its close proximity to Afghanistan. As I mentioned, three of the Central Asian countries have direct borders with Afghanistan. Turkmenistan and Tajikistan have rather extensive borders, and these were seen as critical as supporting the American military effort or the NATO's military effort in Afghanistan. The U.S. has organized the C5+1 group, all the Central Asian countries, plus the United States, to coordinate all policies. The U.S. is very much involved in border security. All of the Central Asian republics are part of NATO's Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council, so they have interactions with NATO's and NATO countries. The U.S. has spent a great deal on border security and conducting border training, has trained over 2600 border guards in the various countries.

And the U.S. also exercises a great deal of soft power funding more than 75 projects in the region to promote cultural antiquities and historical sites. And I was very pleasantly surprised when I was in Tajikistan and saw that a lot of the cultural areas in Tajikistan had been refurbished and upgraded, largely with American assistance and support. This included mosques and other historical sites. I was very pleasantly surprised at that and I thought that was a very good thing. The U.S. also funds a number of numerous educational opportunities for citizens of the Central Asian republics to engage in professional development to learn English. The American spaces, which are sort of scattered across the region, are supported by the U.S. embassy and they're sort of gathering places, especially for young people to learn English, gain computer skills, take classes.

I myself, when I was living in Dushanbe I volunteered in American spaces and did a number of classes and they were just so happy to meet people who were sort of native speakers of English and talk about the United States and talk about all different kinds of things. So, I had a little bit of firsthand experience of that with American soft power. But

that's the gist of my presentation. I know I covered a lot in a fairly quick period of time, but I think - Tom, do you have anything you want me to elaborate on further?

Thomas Schwartz [00:16:32] No. I think we can move into sort of just questions right now and the questions that have already - I'd like to pose to you. Okay. I was - let me start off by simply saying, of course, that this is a very remote region to most Americans. This is not, especially now that Afghanistan is no longer an American area for regrettably or whatever. This is a part of the world that seems very distant. And I wanted to ask you a question that I've allowed you to give you some time to think about. But what are the American national interests here? What does it really matter that the United States is involved in? And from your own experience there, which clearly had a powerful impact on you, what did you come away with in terms of thinking about the national interest of the United States in Central Asia?

John Miglietta [00:17:33] Well, again, unlike, say, Russia and China, which are sort of in the neighborhood and maybe you could - and Russia obviously has a long-time interests and cultural interests and whatnot. And China, of course, the Belt and Road Initiative is kind of the centerpiece of Chinese development. U.S. interests are not as clear. And I think a lot of it was being driven sort of by Afghanistan, which is not really on the table anymore.

But I think American interest still is in promoting sort of good government and promoting also, you know, an understanding of the United States and also to some extent, American economic interests as well. I mean, U.S. imports to Tajikistan have increased by quite a lot the last several years. And I think, you know, that's again, in the grand scheme of things, it's not a huge amount, but it's something and it's there. And I think, you know, the U.S. wants to promote itself as kind of a counterweight to Russia and China. And maybe some people in the region do kind of see the U.S. as kind of a counterweight, maybe because it is sort of a bit more removed than, say, Russia or China. I know you know, a lot of people while they maybe appreciate some of the opportunities, economic opportunities for the country of China's Belt and Road Initiative. They're a little wary that China may be exerting a little bit too much influence. You know, China controls a lot of the public debt of Kyrgyzstan, of Tajikistan. Most of the new construction I saw walking around Dushanbe was clearly being financed by China.

So there was a little bit of concern. Maybe there needs to be a little bit more balance, at least from, you know, average people, you know, on the street, so to speak. And maybe this is why they look to the United States. I think they just appreciate the idea of being able to learn English because English is becoming the lingua franca of the world, essentially, sort of displace French as the sort of the language that people would like to speak after their own. And there's more economic opportunities, study opportunities abroad if they know English. So this is why the American spaces are extremely popular with really all people, particularly young people, but all people as well. And so I think there are a lot of opportunities there for the U.S. to exert influence and influence in a good way, get people to think about things like democracy and ideals and limited government and help spread those ideas to a certain degree, but also their knowledge of English and the opportunities they may have with that knowledge.

Thomas Schwartz [00:20:32] Let me let me ask you. Pat sent a note maybe to turn off the screen sharing if you could, John.

John Miglietta [00:20:39] Oh, sorry.

Thomas Schwartz [00:20:41] But let me ask you, as you alluded to, the idea of American ideals, particularly democracy, limited government, economic freedom, these sorts of things. Did you find in your own experience that there was an interest or a belief that the countries should try to become more democratic? Or do you - and here I'm also taking into account the Biden Administration's emphasis on this notion that there's a sort of a competition between autocracy and democracy. Is Central Asia an area that could be an area of competition between political systems or in effect, are we really dealing with a part of the world that is likely to be pretty autocratic for a long period of time?

John Miglietta [00:21:38] I think in the near future, you're probably not going to see a whole lot of political change, as I mentioned in my introductory comments. Probably Kyrgyzstan is - I wouldn't even say it's the most democratic, it's probably the least authoritarian of all those countries. I mean, they are out of the Soviet system. The people who run those countries until relatively recently and in some cases still are products of the Soviet system.

So I don't think they're going to change anytime soon. Their politics is very much at the center, and this is a problem sometimes with minorities within the country, whether they're an ethnic minority or a religious minority. That can be problematic. I mean, development varies widely. I mean, you know, you go, the capital cities are beautiful, well laid out, you know, and whatnot. They look attractive. But then, you know, you go into rural villages and there are still issues, you know, major basic infrastructure issues. You know, corruption is a problem really endemic throughout the region, which is another thing maybe holding back development in some ways.

So I don't see any massive political changes coming in the very near future. But again, if more people can kind of get these ideas and think about it and get exposed to other parts of the world. I mean, the U.S. embassy has a number of different, State Department, a number of different programs, you know, bringing students to the United States for maybe even just short periods of time or a semester or a year or even less, sometimes in summer programs. I mean, that'll help in the long term, in the long run. I think it'll help to really instill these ideas. I don't think it's going to happen tomorrow. But, you know, maybe down the road, it'll sort of germinate.

Thomas Schwartz [00:23:43] Well, one of the interesting offshoots, of course, of the Russian campaign in Ukraine, and particularly in recent weeks, was, as Russia has been suffering setbacks, is the sense that this weakens the degree to which Russia is a dominant power in this region. And you alluded to, of course, the clashes that are taking place between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan particularly. Do you foresee a more violent and chaotic region if Russia's power declines?

John Miglietta [00:24:20] That's an interesting question. I think Russia is still, does hold a lot of cards in the region when it comes to military like they have. The Russian military has never really left Tajikistan. They were there during the independence period. They were there during the civil war. They are very strong supporters of the current government of Tajikistan. There are Russian border guards along the Afghan border. So, I don't think they're going to not be a player anytime soon. I mean, they're sort of reverses in Ukraine notwithstanding. But because a lot of the country, not just Tajikistan, but many of the other countries do kind of look to Russia and are still somewhat dependent on Russia to varying degrees. Tajikistan is really dependent on Russia because so many Tajiks work in Russia and it is the country that is really run on a remittance economy. So, they're extremely dependent on what goes on in Russia. Maybe Kazakhstan, a little bit less so. And the

other countries to varying degrees. But I don't think Russia is going to lose its influence anytime soon.

Thomas Schwartz [00:25:36] There's actually been reports lately that a large number of Russian young men particularly went into Central Asia to avoid the draft. I'm curious, what type of people - do you think the that type of migration will have any type of influence?

John Miglietta [00:25:56] It might. It depends how long those folks stay for. If they stay for - my guess is they're intending to stay for a short period of time until the conflict subsides. But you never know when the conflict is going to subside. There has been a history of Western migration into Central Asia. I mean, part of this was during consolidating control and encouraging Russian and Ukrainian peasants into Central Asia. And of course, Stalin sort of viewed Central Asia as like a dumping ground for ethnicities that he felt were somehow politically suspect both before and during and after World War II. So, you do have a certain amount of immigration into - sort of a history of immigration into Central Asia. So, it could have an effect if these folks end up staying for a longer time and intermarrying and whatnot.

Thomas Schwartz [00:26:52] Has the fall of Afghanistan to the Taliban had an impact at all on these states in terms of either refugees or fears of Taliban extremism migrating into Central Asia?

John Miglietta [00:27:09] Well, that was certainly a concern. And Tajikistan had a fair number of immigrants from Afghanistan. I had the pleasure of working at the American Space Extension which primarily - wasn't exclusively for Afghans, but primarily serves the Afghan population. And part of it was also because part of the ethnic dynamic of Afghanistan are Tajiks. So, they speak the same language and similar customs and whatnot. So, Tajikistan was sort of a natural place of immigration for them. I didn't see a huge exodus while I was there because I think most of the exodus had already happened, the border orders were closed. But I know for, at least initially, Tajikistan was the only one of the Central Asian countries that still was not was not accepting the Taliban like a lot of the other Central Asian countries started to negotiate with the Taliban. But Tajikistan was somewhat resistant, and I think they've softened that a little bit because there was that fear perhaps of this massive migration, whatnot, into Tajikistan.

But there's also fears of - also you have organizations like the Islamic State of Khorasan Province, which is geared towards Central Asians. And they've claimed that they're doing a lot of sort of recruitment or attempting to recruit people from Central Asia, particularly from Tajikistan and other places. So that is kind of in the minds of the leadership of these countries. It's also on the minds of Russia, China as well, because there are links between those groups and maybe Uyghur Islamic groups as well, and also to some degree the United States as well. I should say there's also some Chinese troops in Tajikistan as well. So, Tajikistan is kind of unique.

Thomas Schwartz [00:29:27] Has al Qaeda or other sort of more radical terrorist groups had any, developed any presence in the Central Asian countries?

John Miglietta [00:29:36] You know, it's - yeah. I mean, there are people mostly in exile who were from Central Asia who were fighting with the Islamic State or fighting with al Qaeda. Tajikistan is really kind of interesting because they were the only - it's tragic actually - because they were the only one of the Central Asian countries that experienced the civil war in the aftermath of the Soviet Union. There was a conflict and they basically

saw the traditional sort of communist leadership that was now sort of reinventing themselves as nationalists versus sort of a collection of sort of people who believed in democracy and some ethnic groups and also an Islamic group as well. They were collectively called the United Tajik opposition, and they fought a civil war. And finally, a peace deal was agreed to in 1997, brokered in part by Russia, the United States and the U.N., in which there was supposed to be power sharing. And a certain amount of some of the militia militaries were supposed to be absorbed in the Tajik military, and they're supposed to be positions in government. But over the years, the central government has kind of squeezed them out and inserted a great deal of control.

So, there may be some appeals to people who may feel, they may not necessarily be strong Islamists, but they may feel, well, there's no other alternative but to support these people because they have the resources to help us so that, you know, in some respects, the policies of some of these governments may be pushing people to go that route, even though they might not have normally gone that route, but because they feel they may have no other alternative.

Thomas Schwartz [00:31:30] Well, yes. I mean, the authoritarianism of these states and their strict control undoubtedly has an impact on political behavior there. I am curious. There was a recent report that Kyrgyzstan actually canceled some military maneuvers from the CSTO that were going to take place. And there was this sort of notion that perhaps Russian influence was being weakened. There was also the U.N. vote the other day on secession and the condemning the Russian annexation of provinces, which a number of the Central Asian countries voted against Russia.

John Miglietta [00:32:12] I mean, there are some Central Asian countries that are trying not to be because they're trying to maintain a relationship with China. They're trying to maintain a relationship with the United States. So they may be kind of backing off from, you know, support of, total support from Russia. But there's a few that are still very supportive of Russia as well. So, again, opinion is kind of mixed depending on what Central Asian country you're looking at.

Thomas Schwartz [00:32:45] If you were in the, if you were able to give advice to the President or to the Secretary of State on priorities for the United States in Central Asia, what would you think, where would you prioritize American involvement there? What would you think would be the most cost-effective things the United States could do in Central Asia?

John Miglietta [00:33:06] I think probably the most cost-effective things would be focusing more on soft power issues. I think you'll get a good reception from the population. Helping the agricultural, helping certain sectors like agriculture is really, really important because a lot of a lot of the country's agriculture is still a big thing. And that's really helpful, especially a country like Tajikistan, which is 93% mountains. So, they have to really maximize what arable land they have. That is important. And that will probably pay a lot more dividends than just focusing on security issues.

I mean, security is an issue. I mean, these countries have long borders and yeah, that's part of it. And the U.S. has been very active in terms of border security, but that certainly shouldn't be the whole thing. And getting them to try to work together through the C5 I think would also be good, especially. Hopefully that will build some bridges between countries like Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan that have kind of been at odds with each other. And it's not really going to serve any purpose if they get into a more protracted conflict, it's

just going to sort of impact negatively the people who live in those regions. So, I think focusing more on the soft power would probably be the way to go for the United States. And also, it wouldn't necessarily panic Russia or China to think that the U.S. was trying to circumvent their positions.

Thomas Schwartz [00:34:36] Let me ask you, as a final question here before we open it up to the questions in the Q&A, what was your sense of the impact of American popular culture in this region of the world? Did you find yourself having to explain aspects of America that people haven't learned or absorbed through popular culture outlets?

John Miglietta [00:34:57] Not as much as I would have thought. Like, for example, when I was in Dushanbe, I was there in February and there was a real interest in doing programming on Black History Month, for example. There was a lot of interest in that, looking at the contributions of African-Americans to politics, to music, to sort of American culture in general. So, there was a real sort of curiosity about the United States. And I didn't encounter any, like, anti-Americanism at all. In fact, people were more than happy to talk to me when they found out I was from the United States. I mean, again, if they spoke English, they maybe wanted to practice their English or just curious because Central Asia for most Americans is kind of off the beaten track.

I mean, it's not like there were no Americans there. But most Americans I came into contact with where people either worked for the embassy or for work for various programs like education programs and things like that. I didn't see too many American business people or anything, I guess. I came across a group of hunters at one point. That was about it. I think they were hunting. And you have to get special permission to, like, hunt the Marco Polo sheep or something. And they were in Khorog, they weren't in Dushanbe, because Khorog is like 12 hours from Dushanbe by road. So that's maybe not quite the most remote part of the country, but almost, you know. So that was kind of interesting. But, yeah, you don't see, it's not like, you know, American tourists or anything like that, although supposedly they were doing a - I'm not sure if this came off - they do a music festival in Khorog and they were talking about having someone from Nashville come and perform. I don't know if that came off or not.

Thomas Schwartz [00:37:01] Oh, that's fascinating.

John Miglietta [00:37:02] Gone by the time I was there. But yeah.

Thomas Schwartz [00:37:06] Okay. Pat, could you see if there's some questions?

Patrick Ryan [00:37:10] Thanks. First, let me thank you guys again. And we've been talking with Professor John Miglietta from Tennessee State University, who was a Fulbright in Tajikistan, and Professor Tom Schwartz, distinguished historian at Vanderbilt. It makes me want to run out and sign up for classes at Vanderbilt and TSU to sit and listen to you guys more. This is a fascinating conversation.

John, you touched on the impact of American soft power in the region. And we have a question from Hayden Duke. You answered it in some respects about not really riling Russia and China for Americans to get involved in that and Hayden asks about whether further aid would increase pressure or violence even from the other two great powers. Let me combine that with a question that we have from Karen St. John, who asked about tensions between Russia and China. You know, these countries are, for the most part in

the Commonwealth of Independent states, the successor to the Soviet Union, and China has the Belt and Road going through all of them, except for Kyrgyzstan or Uzbekistan.

John Miglietta [00:38:24] Uzbekistan, too. Yeah, I think it's pretty much touches all the Central Asian countries.

Patrick Ryan [00:38:29] So China has economic interests in the region in a significant way and Russia has political and security interests. So, talk a little bit more about the concern for American influence in the region, which I suspect is waning after the Afghanistan withdrawal. But, you know, we saw Putin and Xi back in February declaring this relationship without bounds. But is there a potential for tension over Central Asia?

John Miglietta [00:39:03] Well, I mean, in a way, as China develops further contacts with Central Asia - as I mentioned, they hold a good bit of the public debt of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan especially. They're doing a lot of investment in infrastructure, which, again, some parts of the region really need quite badly because you have remote parts of the region where I mean, you literally have one road and it gets blocked or whatever. So, you need a lot of infrastructure development. So that's obviously going to help China, and I guess Russia could see it as possibly a threat down the road.

On the other hand, if it supports countries that are friendly to Russia, then that can be mutually beneficial. Most of these countries are together in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Both Russia and China are members, as well as all the Central Asian countries. Again, I think except for Turkmenistan, I think they're observers. Turkmenistan doesn't join a lot of organizations that kind of - they're probably the most closed of some of the Central Asian republics. So again, there's a potential for cooperation there and joint diplomacy, joint negotiation there.

So, I mean, yeah, there could be conflicts down the road. I think right now they're both pretty content to leave things probably as they are. I mean, Russia has its hands full in Ukraine and China is sort of distancing itself from Russia in terms of Ukraine. But they're not really trying to upset Russia too much because they're trying to pursue the Belt and Road Initiative, which is really geared to sending goods into Russia and eventually to the other parts of the world.

Thomas Schwartz [00:40:59] What it does suggest, though, John, doesn't it is that China may eventually, through economic means, somewhat surpass Russia's influence in this region. China's economy may dictate that.

John Miglietta [00:41:13] Yeah. Right now, though, so many people in the region, particularly in Tajikistan, maybe to a lesser extent in Kyrgyzstan, work in Russia. So, they are very dependent on those remittances coming back from Russia. This is why when the sanctions started in the aftermath of Russia's invasion in Ukraine, you saw a jump in prices in Tajikistan quite, quite dramatically for many people. And, you know, look, the Russian ruble took a beating and that meant, you know, people's money was worth less in terms of when they were doing the remittances. And so many people had the experience of working in Russia, even though they may not work in Russia now, they had worked in Russia in the recent past or knew people or had friends and family working in Russia.

Thomas Schwartz [00:42:05] But this suggests that there might be the impact of the sanctions, the Western sanctions on Russia may have an impact in the sense of reducing Russia's economic clout in Central Asia.

John Miglietta [00:42:15] Yeah, yeah, that could happen. But I think right now most of those countries are still really dependent on Russia. So, I don't see any change any time soon. But maybe long term, you're right. Maybe China might end up displacing Russia, although people are concerned about China, too. I mean, they're not saying, well, you know, that's a difficult proposition. And that's why for many people, the United States looks very appealing.

Patrick Ryan [00:42:46] And that was the point I was going to make, Tom, that that Russia - some people see that as increasingly a vassal of China. So it would be difficult, I think, for Russia to push back on any Chinese encroachment, although there could be some resentment.

Let me ask you, John, about the vote in the United Nations General Assembly to label Russia's annexation of the provinces in eastern Ukraine as illegal. Russia had the support of, I think, North Korea, Belarus, Syria, Nicaragua, and that was about it. The Central Asian states all abstained. What's the signal there?

John Miglietta [00:43:28] Well, I think the signal is they didn't vote against it, but they didn't - you know, again, I think it was showing yeah, we don't like, they're not that enthralled with what they did, but and maybe they don't want it to get repeated in certain areas, like, you know, northern Kazakhstan has a large Russian population. So, I can understand the Kazakhs being very - and they border Russia directly. So, I could see them being very skittish about that. But I think it's also, you know, they didn't want to get condemned by the rest of the world and you know, they wanted to sort of keep their lines of communication open with China and the United States. So, I think, you know, again, it was showing, I guess, some modicum of displeasure with Russia, but not a total break with Russia.

Patrick Ryan [00:44:24] Sure. Talking about Kazakhstan, Karen St. John asks about Russian-Kazakh relations and we know we had the bloody crackdown in January in Kazakhstan and the introduction of Russian troops to help support the government in what was a very strong response to demonstrations, I think it was over fuel prices.

John Miglietta [00:44:45] Fuel prices among other things, yeah.

Patrick Ryan [00:44:47] So where does - what is the relationship between Moscow and the Kazakhstan?

John Miglietta [00:44:54] Well, I think it's much like most of the other Central Asian countries. I mean, they're formerly part of the Soviet Union. In Kazakhstan, you actually have a large Russian population. And it's I think the Kazakhs are only a little bit more than 50% of Kazakhstan and especially like northern Kazakhstan is still very Russian. So, I think, you know, the relationship is still going to be there for the foreseeable future. And again, a lot of the political leadership in Kazakhstan probably still came out of the Soviet system. They were probably somewhat young at the time of the breakup of the Soviet Union, but they're still sort of products of that system. So, I think, I don't I don't see it changing dramatically in the near future unless you have major, major earthquakes taking place in Kazakh politics.

And as you see, they were you know, they sent troops in and they've done this in other countries as well, used their military to come in, in some cases. As I mentioned, in

Tajikistan the Russian military never really left. I mean, they've always kind of been there, even an independence through civil war and whatnot. So, I still think they're not going to be shy about using their military to help like potential allies in the region.

Patrick Ryan [00:46:23] We have a question from Overton Colton. The population there, Sunni Muslim?

John Miglietta [00:46:29] Most of the region are Sunni Muslim. Where, actually where I was in Tajikistan they were - the dominant religion was Ismaili Muslims. So, in that eastern part of Tajikistan called the GBAO, the Gorno Badakhshan Autonomous Region, Autonomous Oblast, the bulk of the population are Ismaili Shiites who kind of view the Aga Khan as their spiritual leader. And the Aga Khan Development Network has been very big in the region, in the entire region of Central Asia, in supporting local populations and things like businesses and power plants. And the university I was at, the University of Central Asia, is supported by the Aga Khan Development Network. They have a branch campus in Kyrgyzstan, in Tajikistan, and there's one being developed in Kazakhstan. And again, their mission was to support sort of the mountainous regions of Central Asia.

So, for the most part, Sunni Muslim. Again, it varies. Most of the governments do not play up Islam as part of the identity. I mean, people are Muslims. They go to, they go to mosque. I mean, I happened to be in Dushanbe during Ramadan and there was a lot of people going to mosque, particularly on Fridays, a lot of people keeping the fast in the sunup to sundown, not eating or drinking, which is - I don't think I could do that. But you know, I was really impressed by that, that even though the government was not sort of focusing a lot on religion, that a lot of people in their own private life were still.

Patrick Ryan [00:48:43] Can I interject here and just ask John, did you see much in the way of Turkish influence in Central Asia?

John Miglietta [00:48:49] A lot of products from Turkey, a lot from Turkey. Most of these countries are Turkic speaking countries. Kazakh, Uzbek, Kyrgyz, Turkmen. They're all variations of part of the Turkic family of languages. Not Tajikistan. They're Persian speaking. But yet you saw a lot of Turkish influence in the marketplaces. A lot of goods were from Turkey. I bought some things myself. That was sort of the largest economy where they were getting like clothing, especially.

Patrick Ryan [00:49:34] John, we're getting down to the end here. I want to get some more questions in, so keep the answers short. Andrew Patrick tells us when he was in Abu Dhabi, he saw a lot of Kazakh engineers working there. After the Arab Spring, the UAE was less interested in Arab engineers. He asked about the state of higher education in the region. And is it - is there a surplus of engineers and professionals that they can export them?

John Miglietta [00:50:01] Well, again, it is probably the old Soviet system. I mean, they have a lot of universities. The universities tend to be centered more or less in the major cities, not as much on the outlying areas. That's, I mean, where I was in Khorog was somewhat unique because we actually had two universities. There was a state university that had been around for a while, and then there was the University of Central Asia, which was relatively new, which was a private university. But that's kind of an exception. In most rural areas, the education opportunities were limited. You really had to be in like a major urban area to attend universities. And then of course, in the summer there were several universities. There's a business in international affairs university. There's the medical

university. There's engineering, science universities and things like that. But that old Soviet system.

Patrick Ryan [00:50:57] Okay. We have a couple of interesting observations and questions here. One from Ambassador Charles Bowers, who tells us that the Osh Restaurant on Thompson Lane specializes in Uzbek food. He's been there and gives it his personal thumbs up. So, give that a try.

We also have a note from Karen St. John who mentions the World Affairs Council in Philadelphia, for those not familiar with the Network of World Affairs Council, they do a lot of travel and they have a trip planned next April to Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, Silk Road trip that she signed up for. So, she suggests that you check out the World Affairs Council of Philadelphia if you're interested in Central Asia. And we're towards the end here. John, I'm going to ask you and Tom, I'll ask Tom first, just to share any observations on our topic for today on Central Asia and its importance to the United States. It's a fascinating topic. And we hope to have you come back and talk a little bit more about what's happening in that region. Because as we look at China and Russia and the U.S. interests around the world, this is really a pivotal region at the moment and it doesn't get the attention that it deserves. Tom, anything you'd like to add?

Thomas Schwartz [00:52:15] Yeah, no, I think John has done a great job in talking about the various dimensions to this region. It's not one that Americans really know a great deal about, but American influence, particularly ideological and to a certain extent popular culture, even the manner in which our history has unfolded, as John said, the interest they have and African-Americans and their role in this country. American influence still can play a very positive role, I think, in this region. How we go about it and some of the soft power techniques are going to require some, I think, considered thought. But I think that despite the debacle of Afghanistan, we still have a role to play in this area.

John Miglietta [00:52:58] Yeah. And I think, you know, again, countries are just sort of naturally curious, I think, about the United States. And people have seen, you know, they're exposed to the United States through popular culture, American popular culture. I had students doing research papers. One young man did a paper on rap music and they have Tajik rap music, you know, which is interesting. Another did a paper, I think, on anime, which is not American as more Japanese, but still a part of the kind of global genre there. So, I think there's a natural curiosity and especially like the young people are just naturally curious about music and things and there's really a desire to learn languages. I was really, really impressed with my students at University of Central Asia. Most of them spoke minimum, four languages, minimum. They spoke Shughni, which is the local language, they spoke Tajik, they spoke Russian, and they spoke English and some even a fifth language. Several of them were learning German, I think.

So, it's amazing. And that's, again, one of the reasons why they try to take advantage of every opportunity to travel and it's difficult because you forget it's a remote part of the world, but it's hard to get, it's hard to get to places. It's difficult to get to places. It's expensive. But fortunately, because the U.S. is doing a number of different programs, education programs, and at least a few students are able to benefit from them. Several of my students have been to the United States on the Flex program, which deals with high school students when they come to the United States for a year. And so they got to experience different parts of the United States.

Patrick Ryan [00:54:55] A fascinating part of the world, and thank you for introducing us to that that region. We've been talking with Professor John Miglietta from Tennessee State University and Professor Tom Schwartz from Vanderbilt University on Central Asia. We thank them for being with us today and sharing their insights and perspectives. And let me conclude by again reminding you that we have a great many videos on [YouTube.com/TNWAC](https://www.youtube.com/TNWAC). You can check out our series on Ukraine and the Russian invasion we started back in February with Ambassador John Kornblum, and he anchored the series along with some other special guests. We had some great insights on what's happening there and it's a continuing series, but you can find it on [YouTube.com/TNWAC](https://www.youtube.com/TNWAC) along with all of our other video presentations.

And again, lastly, please consider becoming a member or supporting the Tennessee World Affairs Council. That's how we are able to bring programs like this to you. So go to [TNWAC.org](https://www.TNWAC.org). You can either join, become a member, help sustain your organization, or to make a gift. And that's it for us today. We appreciate you coming and staying with us. And again, thanks, Professor Schwartz, Professor Miglietta. And that's it for today. Everyone have a great day.

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