

The Central Asian Economies in the Twenty-First Century: Paving a New Silk Road (2019)

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Central Asia has been receiving increased international attention over the past decade. The accelerating shift of the global political and economic ‘centres of gravity’ eastwards, driven by China’s Belt and Road Initiative, has made the region of utmost importance, *in primis*, for increasing connectivity along the ancient Silk Road and beyond. Despite being gradually pushed into the limelight of today’s geopolitical arena, the countries of the region still form a massive *terra incognita* in the middle of the Eurasian landmass, implying that most decision makers, policy advisors, and investors outside the post-Soviet space have limited understanding of its distinct economic realities. This stems from the fact that the region has been overlooked and its importance greatly underestimated, for centuries.

Richard Pomfret’s latest monograph stands out as a compelling and timely contribution filling a major long-standing lacuna in the study of the region’s economic progress. *The Central Asian Economies in the Twenty-First Century: Paving a New Silk Road* is a lucidly written, coherently structured and meticulously researched seminal work. The three parts of the book provide readers with a deep insight into the ongoing economic transformation of the five “stans”. In light of the opportunities offered by the re-establishment of trade routes and the interconnecting infrastructural network, the author advocates for the vital role of Central Asia in global development.

The first part draws upon the main findings of Pomfret’s two earlier books, *The Economies of Central Asia* and *The Central Asian Economies Since Independence*, published

in 1995 and 2006 respectively. It provides a succinct historical account of the sluggish transition of Central Asian states from centrally-planned to market-driven systems. Besides this, it uncovers the concern over the region's natural resource endowment (for instance, heavy dependence on primary product export and commodity price volatilities) and emphasises the untapped potential of renewable energy production.

The second part showcases the characteristics of development trajectories, addressing each country individually and the economic progress they have seen since their independence. The five country-specific analyses cogently illustrate the heterogeneity of national economies and place a strong emphasis on institutional changes, the softening political landscape and the core sectors of the economy. Pomfret has extensively researched the present and future bottlenecks of economic growth that might undermine the advent of a new Central Asian renaissance, insisting that more liberal policies, particularly those related to trade facilitation and economic diversification, are a *sine qua non* of improving the balance of payments position and ensuring macroeconomic stability.

The third part critically examines the regional and broader external context of economic growth and development. It elaborates on the essence of transboundary conflicts and points to the long-standing issues of water, borders and security that erode trust and cooperation between countries. The author highlights the pivotal role of Central Asia in global affairs; therefore, geopolitical tensions are an integral part of the examination. As postulated by Dostoevsky in his massive political-philosophical magnum opus, *A Writer's Diary*, 'build only two railroads: begin with the one to Siberia and then – to Central Asia – and at once you will see the consequences'. Indeed, after centuries of being brushed aside, Central Asia is currently stranded between Moscow, Beijing, and Washington.

Pomfret is overtly, yet cautiously optimistic about the costs and benefits of the Belt and Road Initiative that the entire region might encounter in the years to come. However, rather superficial attention is given to the unsustainable levels of remittance dependency, the overwhelming burden of indebtedness, the failure of foreign aid, the impact of rapid technological changes and the neo-colonialist attempts to hegemonise Central Asia.

Pomfret's outstanding handbook offers a rigorous and comprehensive analysis of a little-explored geopolitical area, while sharing plenty of insight. *The Central Asian Economies in the Twenty-First Century: Paving a New Silk Road* builds on existing research concerning the region's economy, helps readers with the rediscovery of its growth potential, and, most importantly, it persuasively proves that Central Asia does matter.

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