

Samarkand, on the Silk Road¹ **The former Soviet republic returns to its origins at the hand of China**

Fernando Ayala*

In Uzbekistan, in the heart of central Asia, is the mythical Samarkand, whose name is associated with a beautiful love story and is one of the oldest inhabited cities in the world.

From Alexander the Great to Josef Stalin

The origins of Samarkand date back to the 5th century BC. Its splendor stems from the ancient Silk Road and the Turkish-Mongolian conqueror, Tamerlane, national hero whose tomb is venerated in Samarkand and who consolidated an empire even larger than the Roman. In the beautiful square of Registan - which today we would call a university campus - with its three imposing madrasahs or Koranic schools where one studied from religion to astronomy, I had the opportunity to observe the fine work of architects and artists of the 14th, 15th and 16th centuries. In the city, I walked across its markets full of scents and colors, visited the building that contained the sextant to measure the positions of the stars created by the astronomer and King Ulugh Beg in the 16th century, and sat in the place where the caravans from China arrived with their precious silk, whose secret of manufacture was kept for all the centuries in which the merchants were responsible for bringing it to the West.

Through Samarkand and the Uzbek lands crossed, among many others, Alexander the Great, Genghis Khan and Marco Polo. Alexander settled in this city where he married his first wife, Roxana, who accompanied him to India.

The legend credited him with the Uzbek national dish called plov, born from Alexander's instruction given to his cook to prepare something "nutritious and tasty" for his soldiers and to be served in the mornings, before each battle. Today it is eaten all over Uzbekistan and it became a tradition that the groom, on the day he celebrates his wedding, eats it at dawn only accompanied by men. A macho tradition, by the way, since it is cooked, of course, by women.

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Fernando Ayala*

Former Ambassador of Chile, is a graduate economist at the University of Zagreb in Croatia and holds a master's degree in Political Science from the Catholic University of Chile. He is currently consultant for FAO in Rome headquarter, on South-South cooperation, academic and parliamentary issues.

The history of the 20th century was harsh with this country of 447,900 km² and about 30 million inhabitants. The Russian Revolution and the subsequent creation of the Soviet Union incorporated the territories of Central Asia that were mainly Muslim and that today make up five countries, as socialist republics, despite their ethnic and cultural differences¹. In the vast majority of them, the population declares itself Sunni Muslim, but there are also Orthodox Christians and other minority religions.

Islam settled and thrived from the 8th century until its incorporation into the Soviet Union in 1924, which quickly closed mosques and churches officially proclaiming atheism, which generated the protest of some Uzbek sectors². This became even more evident when German troops invaded the USSR and part of the Muslim population showed enthusiasm for the occupiers.

While many fought against the Nazis in the Red Army, Stalin was later charged with deporting entire populations to Central Asia in retaliation for their collaboration. This is how today an Uzbek majority coexists with Russians, Koreans, Tajiks, Kazakhs, Karakalpaks and Tatars.

The Soviet era

When talking to older Uzbeks whom I had the opportunity to meet in squares and cafes, I consulted many times what they remembered of the Soviet era – for good and for bad. Invariably the positive responses were education, work, social security, housing, the cost of living. Likewise, they remembered negatively the action of the police, the KGB and the lack of spaces of freedom to criticize.

Twenty-eight years after the disappearance of the USSR, today young people refer to it as something alien, far from their lives. A girl from the Tatar minority, whose grandparents were deported to Uzbekistan, told me that the closure of the mosques had been very hard for them because it was part of their cultural identity. However, she added, it had been positive for later generations who grew up in the Muslim culture of their homes, but without religion classes at schools, without veils or mosques. Today, the official religion is Muslim, mosques are open, but few women are seen with veils. There is a soft Islam, something the girl appreciated. Another positive aspect would be the widespread use of the Russian language that allows communication between ethnic groups and countries across the region.

Tashkent, the Uzbek capital, has the imprint of Soviet architecture: wide avenues with massive concrete blocks that revive at night, thanks to modern and colorful lighting systems copied from modern Muscovite buildings. The Government committed in 2017 to a strategy of economic reforms - following the tradition of the five-year plans - that must culminate in 2021 with the economic, social and political opening. It seeks to deepen the market economy with greater competition together with maintaining macroeconomic stability, strengthening social protection and the development of environmental sustainability.

In 2017, the Per Capita Income (PCI) of Uzbekistan reached US \$ 6,253, the Central Asian countries show a great disparity of income. In that same year they had

a PCI of: Kazakhstan US\$24.055, Kyrgyzstan US \$ 3,620, Tajikistan US \$ 2,896 and Turkmenistan US \$ 16,389), public debt stood at 23.5% of GDP, education expenditure was 19.2% of GDP, literacy rate reached 99.98% and life expectancy was 71.3 years.

Among the strengths of the country, like the others that make up Central Asia, is its geographical location that will be boosted with the Silk Road and shall compensate for the lack of access to the sea. The five countries of Central Asia border on Russia, China, Iran and Afghanistan in an area of geopolitical interest both for their natural resources as for the strategic position in which they find themselves.

A Chinese Marco Polo

The beginnings of the Silk Road date back to the 2nd century BC. C. when Emperor Wudi, of the Han Dynasty, sent Zhang Qian - his Marco Polo - to explore the regions of Central Asia. It took him 13 years to return to China and he left testimony of it in his writings after touring what is now Uzbekistan, Afghanistan and Turkestan - a coherent account of what he had seen - and bringing to the empire, among other things, a new breed of horses, and unknown unknown unknown plants such as grapes and alfalfa.

Chinese President Xi Jinping announced on September 7, 2013 at the University of Nazarbayev, in Kazakhstan, the initiative of the “Economic Strip of the Silk Road and the Maritime Route of the 21st Century” or New Silk Road (NSR). On that occasion he pointed out:

More than two millennia ago, the diligent and courageous people of Eurasia explored and opened up trade and cultural exchanges linking the main civilizations of Asia, Europe and Africa, collectively called the Silk Road for later generations.

This was the beginning of the connection that ended up linking China with the Mediterranean and that today also aims to reach Africa and Latin America. The NSR already covers 126 countries, including a dozen from Europe, with a market close to two thirds of humanity. It is undoubtedly the most ambitious development project of the 21st century and will benefit everyone, especially China that assumes the political and financial risk by creating a fund of 40,000 million dollars with the Asian Investment and Infrastructure Bank with a capital of 100 billion dollars.

The development of infrastructure projects at a planetary level with the construction of highways, high-speed lines for trains, ports, canals and other investments, will have multiplier effects that will favor economic growth and especially the development of the western part of China, where cities and industries are expected to flourish.

The expansion of China’s global power raises the natural concern of the United States, Russia and other powers. In a world where the Cold War for some has not ended, every move on the global geopolitical board represents a potential threat of interest. The Trump Administration does not want to allow, for example, the Chinese expansion to what it has historically considered its “backyard”, i.e. Latin America.

Using rude language in diplomatic terms, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo³ recently traveled to South America to warn, without shame, about the dangers posed by the Chinese presence in the region. As if the Latin Americans did not remember the brutal usufruct of

the transnationals in the past, the coups d'état and military invasions of the United States.

Tourism, the new silk

The NSR represents an opportunity for the countries of Central Asia to make a leap to development. Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev seems to be fully aware of the strategic value of his country. In 2017 he made state visits to Russia and China where he signed numerous agreements for 16,000 and 20,000 million dollars respectively. In May 2018 he met in Washington with President Trump and spoke of “a new era of strategic cooperation” by signing agreements with 20 US companies for 5 billion dollars. General Motors produces 250,000 cars a year in its factories in Uzbekistan employing more than eight thousand workers.

The powers know about the strategic value and resources that Central Asia represents, so the interest in strengthening relations with these countries and increasing the presence of their companies is no coincidence. The Chinese initiative offers resources, job creation and reciprocal benefits. China has known what it wants for a long time and is now implementing it. These are the advantages of a centralized system which looks at the very long term and is deploying its global presence based on its vision of the principles of realism in international politics adapted in its own way and that includes four elements: political leadership and economic, military and cultural power, in which the first is the independent variable that can condition the others⁴.

As for the global cultural deployment, China started it in 2004 with the opening of the first Confucius Institutes for the teaching and dissemination of their language and culture. Today it has 548 institutes spread around the world, of which 126 are in Asia (Hanban, the headquarters of the institutes, indicates that there are 54 centers in Africa, 173 in Europe, 21 in Oceania, 160 in the Americas and 126 in Asia).

Uzbekistan can take advantage of the opportunities that the NSR will bring to enhance its comparative advantages since, in addition to its geographical location and natural resources, it has a young, educated population eager to progress. In addition, the country has great potential in terms of tourism with the historical wealth offered by cities such as Samarkand, Bukhara and Khiva especially, which will benefit from regional economic growth and are virtually unknown to Western tourists.

Tourism can be the new silk that will bring riches and progress to Central Asia. Merchants will no longer arrive in caravans and tents as in the past, but rather as modern travelers on high-speed trains to settle in comfortable hotels that will facilitate tourism, integration and interculturality. It is an opportunity that opens the country for numerous companies around the world that seek stability and economic growth to invest, stimulate integration, generate jobs and contribute to peace and development.

References

- 1 Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan together amount to 4 million km² and almost 70 million inhabitants.
- 2 After the triumph of the Russian Revolution, Lenin appointed Stalin People's Commissar for

Nationalities, a position which he held until 1923.

3 Between April 11 and 15, Pompeo visited Chile, Peru, Colombia and Paraguay to warn of the dangers of the Chinese and Russian presence in the region.

4 Yar Xuetong, Leadership and the rise of great powers. Princeton University Press, 2019.