

The Plaid Avenger's World 7th edition
(August 2014) sample chapters:

Chapter 2: World Population
Dynamics

&

Chapter 22: Central Asia

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World Population Dynamics

2

BEFORE we get to the regions, we will focus on several topics that are better approached at the global scale; they involve traits that all regions possess equally, like people or religions, or that all regions participate in as a singular global unit, like the world economy or international organizations. Since people create, define, and operate all the cultural aspects of our planet, let's start with them.

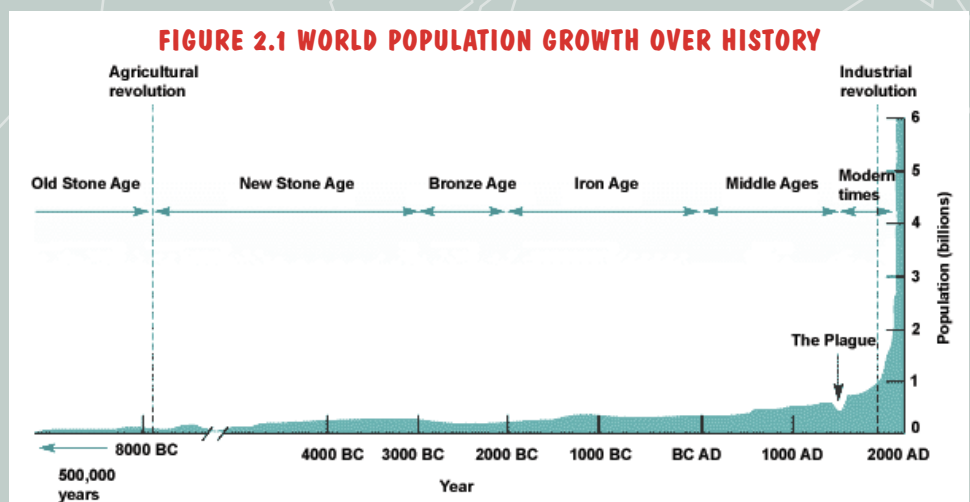


INTRO TO PEOPLE AKA WORLD SEX ED 101

People, people, people, all over the world. Old ones, young ones, rich ones, poor ones, black ones, white ones, Asian ones, and even plaid ones. Some places got lots of people, while others have just a few. Are there too many people? Perhaps not enough in some places? Some states have growing populations, while other states actually have shrinking populations. What's that all about? Although there are great differences around the world in numbers of people as well as growth rates of populations, it is best to approach the subject by looking at it systematically. That is, we can look at how human population dynamics operate as a whole, because the rules are essentially the same anywhere you go on the planet. Let's get to know how it works, and then you can apply your knowledge to understand what's happening in any state or region of interest. Game on!

For starters, you should know that we just crossed over the 7 billion mark in terms of how many peeps are currently alive on the planet. This has not always been the case. In fact, numbers this huge for human population are actually quite recent. Consider Figure 2.1.

As you can see, for most of humankind's existence, population totals have been relatively small. It took approximately one million years, from the beginning of time until about the year 1800, for the first billion humans to appear on the earth at the same time. From then, it's roughly



- 1927 that the second billion showed up
- 1960 saw the crossing over to 3 billion
- 1974 picked up number 4 billion
- 1987 flipped the pop-odometer to 5 billion
- 1999 the predawn of the 21st century we reached 6 billion
- And Happy Halloween! On that costumed holiday in 2011, 7 billion peeps were alive for the tricks and treats!

What you may be detecting here is a radically accelerated population increase in the last fifty years. The time it takes to add another billion people gets shorter every cycle, with the 8 billion mark already rapidly approaching. Why is this happening? Population growth is exponential, not mathematical. Adding ten more fertile females to the population pool doesn't equate to adding just ten more babies, but more like one hundred babies. Each woman has the potential to spawn many more offspring, who in turn can produce many more offspring themselves down the road. Get it?

As a result of this exponential growth in the human population, many folks believe that the planet is already overpopulated. Is that true? I can't give you an answer for that, because it is a relative question. Where are we talking about? Siberia? It's certainly not overpopulated. Calcutta, India? Yeah, maybe they have maxed out on the peeps. Maybe. Many assume that Africa as a whole is overpopulated, but given the size of the place and its current population totals, it is actually quite sparsely populated, particularly if you compare it to a place like Western Europe. And if Western Europe is overpopulated, why do many of its governments encourage their citizens to have more babies? Hmmmm . . . things get complicated fast. Plaid Avenger rule of thumb: a place seems to be considered truly overpopulated only when not enough resources exist to supply the people who live there. Thus, the 70 million people in Ethiopia may all agree that their country is overpopulated, but the 80 million people in Germany would probably not consider themselves so, even given that Ethiopia is roughly three times the size of its schnitzel-eating friend.

But enough for now on the theme of over- or underpopulation. Let's look at where people are in the first place.



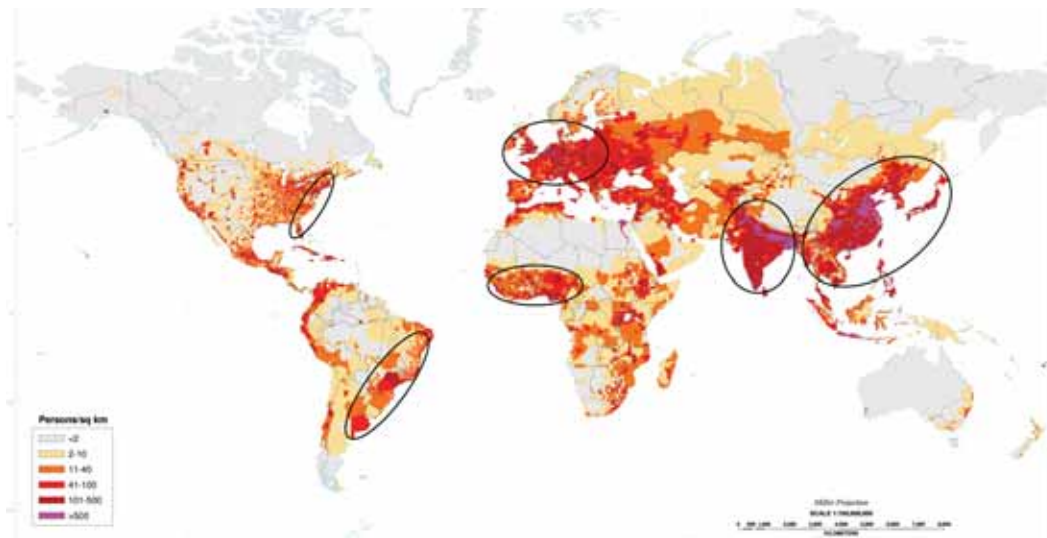
**CHART 1: TOP 20 POPULOUS STATES
COUNTRIES RANKED
BY POPULATION: 2014**

| Rank | Country | Population |
|------|---------------|---------------|
| 1 | China | 1,361,000,000 |
| 2 | India | 1,240,000,000 |
| 3 | United States | 317,000,000 |
| 4 | Indonesia | 250,000,000 |
| 5 | Brazil | 201,000,000 |
| 6 | Pakistan | 185,000,000 |
| 7 | Nigeria | 173,000,000 |
| 8 | Bangladesh | 152,000,000 |
| 9 | Russia | 143,000,000 |
| 10 | Japan | 127,000,000 |
| 11 | Mexico | 118,000,000 |
| 12 | Philippines | 99,000,000 |
| 13 | Vietnam | 90,000,000 |
| 14 | Ethiopia | 86,000,000 |
| 15 | Egypt | 86,000,000 |
| 16 | Germany | 80,000,000 |
| 17 | Iran | 77,000,000 |
| 18 | Turkey | 76,000,000 |
| 19 | DR Congo | 68,000,000 |
| 20 | Thailand | 66,000,000 |



REGIONAL DIFFERENCES IN POPULATION

Where are people, and where are they not? In some parts of the world, harsh climates and terrains are too formidable for large numbers of humans to hang out in. The cold Arctic areas in Canada and Russia, the great desert and steppe regions in North Africa and Central Asia, and the high Andes and Himalayan ranges serve to keep population numbers low. Humans tend to proliferate in well-watered areas and along coastlines. Generally speaking, human settlements favor the mid-latitudes; there are far more people in Eurasia and North America than in tropical areas. Draw on your own experiences to figure out this trend. Would you like to live in a tropical rainforest, a desert, or a mountain top? Why or why not?

FIGURE 2.2 POPULATION DENSITY, MAJOR CENTERS

People have adapted to living in just about every extreme environment on our planet—just not in great numbers. What is the deal with the great numbers? It has a lot to do with history, culture and current population dynamics, which we'll get to in just a second. First, a few points about the map in Figure 2.2. As you can see, I've circled just six big population clusters on the planet for our discussion, but of course there are others . . . that you should discuss amongst yourselves. I can't do it all!

For starters, over half the world's population are found in Eurasia, particularly a people-packed arc from Japan to Eastern China, through Southeast Asia to South Asia. The common perception is that China is far and away the most populated state with over a billion people. But watch out! India has a billion people as well, and, more importantly, is growing at a faster rate than China, which means that it will certainly become the top slot within a couple of decades. Don't forget India's neighborhood—Pakistan and Bangladesh are both members of the top ten most populous states in the world as well.

The monstrous Asian population centers are, in large part, a product of history. People in these areas have been getting busy—in more ways than one—for thousands of years since the innovation of agriculture and the birth of civilization as we know it. They have existed as stable civilizations for long periods of time. They also happen to be in physically conducive environments—well-watered, mid-latitude lowlands. This also helps to explain why the cradle of Western Civilization—Mesopotamia, which is just as old—did not form huge populations over time. Its physical environment is more arid and unable to support large numbers of people.

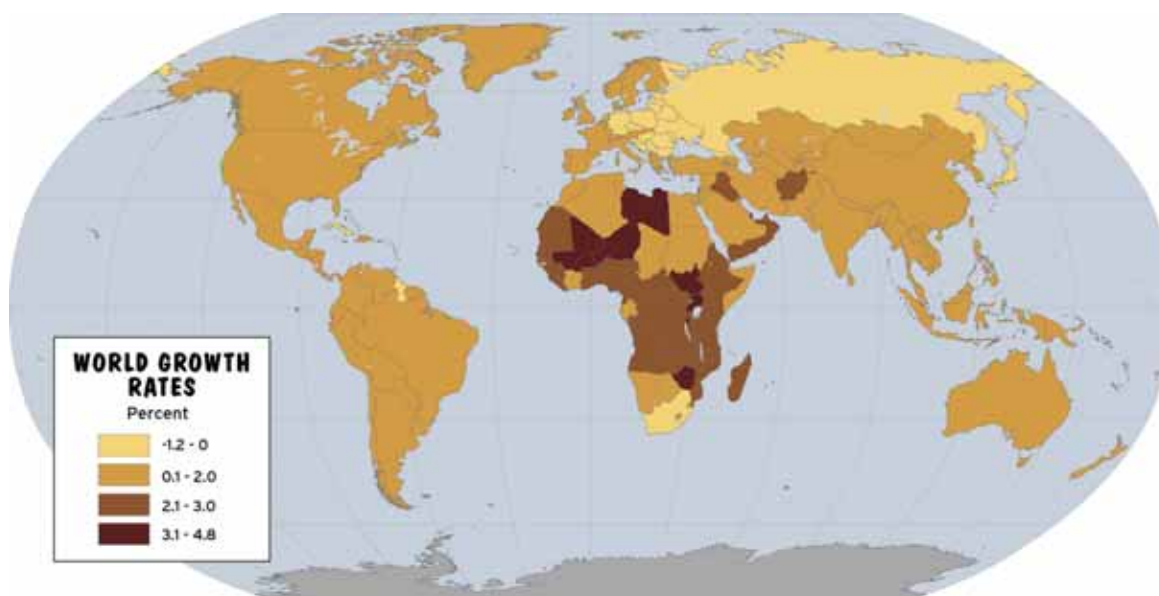
However, due to great leaps in technology during the Industrial Revolution, including lots of technologies that helped keep more humans alive longer, Europe's population boomed wicked fast in the last several hundred years. And now they are another significant center for people-packing on the planet. By contrast, the Americas have historically had low population numbers, pre-contact. When Europeans did arrive in the New World, they brought diseases that wiped out a vast number of people, thus leading to even lower numbers on our side of the planet. But the Western Hemisphere has now been going and growing for long enough to have significant population concentration in eastern USA, along with the mega-cities area of eastern South America centered in southern Brazil. History, technology, and the physical world have a lot to do with where most people are today.

Two more global population points of interest: Africa, largely believed to be overpopulated, is a ginormous place with half the population totals of South Asia or East Asia, but note the large concentration of peeps in West Africa, centered around Africa's most populous state of Nigeria. My favorite population fact deals with Russia and the US, the two Cold War adversaries. Look again at the map and realize this: these two regions account for less than 10 percent of the world's population, but have effectively shaped the political and economic fate of the other 90 percent during the last 50 years. Interesting, isn't it? Okay, maybe not, but it certainly was during the Cold War. Yes, those rascally Ruskiies used to be a world power, but now Russia is a state currently in population decline. Which brings us to our next point: where are populations growing, where are they shrinking, and why?

HOW POPULATION IS CHANGING

To complicate matters further, not just total population but also **population growth rates** are unevenly distributed around the world. Population growth rate refers to how fast or slow a group's population total is expanding . . . or shrinking, when referring to our Cossack friends. When you see a number like 3.5 for a population growth rate, it indicates that, by this time next year, the population total for that country will be 3.5% bigger than it is right now. A negative number is the inverse: population growth of -0.5 means that population total for next year will be 0.5% smaller than it is presently. Check out Figure 2.3 below for some insights . . .

FIGURE 2.3 WORLD POPULATION GROWTH RATES



Source: CIA World Factbook 2014

Look! Ethiopia and Yemen's population total is expanding very quickly, which means those countries have a high population growth rate. Both the US and China's total population gets bigger every year, but not by much percentage-wise; the countries have a moderate to slow growth rate. Russia and Japan's population totals are getting smaller every year—a negative growth rate. You may have also identified a major trend: the highest growth rates typically occur in states that we consider underdeveloped, a.k.a. the poor ones. Say again? You mean the poorest areas of the planet are where more people are being added faster than ever? That is correct. The developed, or richer, states all seem to have low growth rates. So the places that could afford to provide for more kids, have less kids? Yep, that's true as well. Why is this so? Good question. Answer: the Demographic Transition.



HOW/WHY/WHERE POPULATION IS CHANGING: THE DEMOGRAPHIC TRANSITION

The Demographic Transition is a lovely little model that goes a long way in explaining lots of things about human population change around the world today. Be forewarned: it is just a theory, but man, it makes a whole lot of sense when applied to just about anywhere, anytime. It helps us understand why population is booming in the poorer parts of the world while it shrinks in richer areas, and even why women in Laos may have ten kids, when women reading this book here in America may not want to have kids at all.

The model is based on the experience of the currently, fully developed states, which underwent a population surge on a smaller scale beginning about 1700 in Europe, and then later stabilized. Other states—typically ex-colonies of Western European powers such as the United States or Australia, or states in close proximity to Western European powers, such as Russia—followed suit in the last several hundred years. Every other place on the globe can be seen as somewhere in the transitional process that these states have gone through.

Generally speaking, this "transition cycle" begins with high birth rates and high death rates, passes into a high birth rate/lower death rate period for a variety of reasons, and ends with low birth rates and low death rates.

The total population at the beginning and end of this cycle is stable or has a very low, perhaps even negative, growth rate. However, it is the massive increases in population during the middle phases that makes the model so compelling, and explains so much about what is happening in today's world. But I'm getting ahead of the story. Let's take it one step at a time.

For the rest of this discussion, **birth rate** refers to how many children are born every year per 1000 people. To give you some context, the birth rate in the US right now is about 14/1000 every year. **Death rate**, of course, refers to how many people kicked the bucket that year per 1000 people. The US death rate is currently around 8/1000. Now, on to the transition.

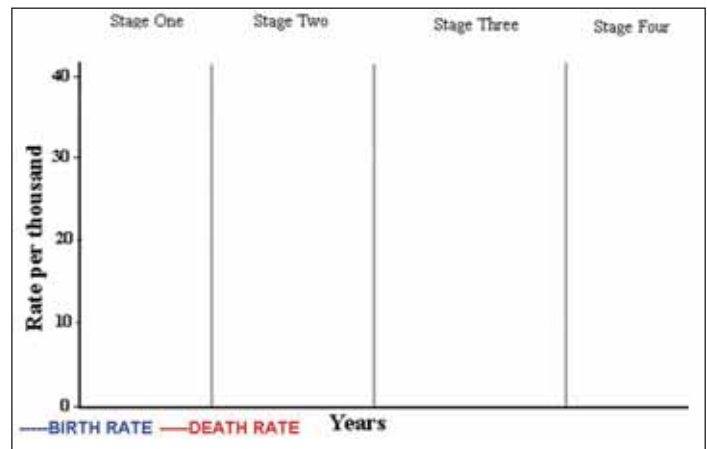
DEMOGRAPHIC TRANSITION STAGE ONE

This whole concept hinges on the idea that all societies want to go from premodern, hunter-gatherer, stick-collecting goobers to postmodern, latte-sipping, Vespa-driving goobers. It does seem to make sense. Given the option anywhere in the world, I think most folks would choose the latte; that is, most societies are striving to become industrialized, richer, and all-around better off. You don't have to buy my theory, because quite frankly, I'm not selling it. There are those that argue that we would all be a lot better off living in grass huts somewhere weaving baskets from giraffe hair, because that would be true sustainable development in harmony with Mother Earth. Good luck with that one. Give anyone a chance not to live on a dirt floor, and I'll bet they pack their bags, set the giraffes free, and head out to a better life for themselves and their kids. But I digress. Where were we? Ah! Stage One . . .

STAGE ONE of societal development finds us making baskets from giraffe hair. We typically associate this stage with premodern times; most folks are hunter-gatherers, living solely by collecting food naturally occurring out in, um . . . nature. This is pretty much the way things were for a great number of humans for a good long time in human history. Small groups of folks on the move, searching for food, waiting around for civilization to pop up. Of note for our model is that both the birth rates and the death rates are extremely high and erratic. Essentially you have a situation where lots of kids are born per 1000 people, and lots of people die per 1000 people, with some years being really good, and others being really bad. Why would that be?

Why the high death rates? Because this lifestyle is hard, and it sucks! It's easy to die from just about anything: lack of health care, food shortages, poor food containment so things go bad fast, lack of regular clean water, lack of sewage disposal or worse yet, your sewage disposal plan involves your drinking water source, animals that want to eat you, animals that just want to kill you, animals just having fun with

FIGURE 2.4 BASE MAP, DEMOGRAPHIC TRANSITION



Some Stage 1 hold-outs: Kalahari Bushmen in Namibia.



I liked your Granny too. She was delicious.

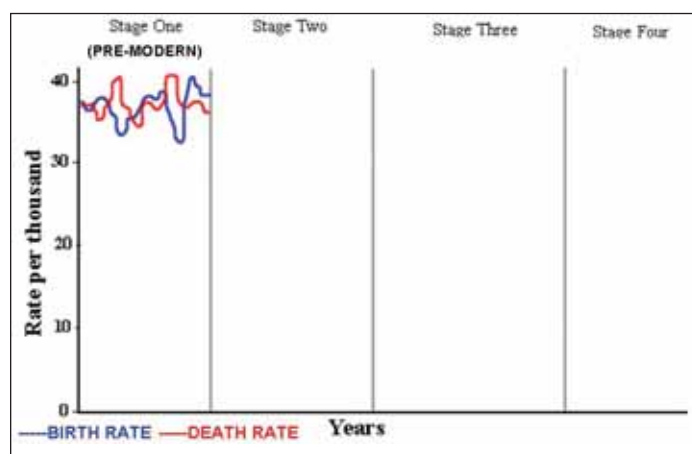
you, diseases of all sorts, simple infections you could contract from a hangnail . . . ew, this sounds like no fun at all. **Infant mortality**, the number of children that don't make it to their first birthday per 1000, is also high because of lack of immunizations and/or adequate diet. **Life expectancy**, or the average age to which the population is expected to live, is low. Old people get sick more easily, can't pull their own weight out picking berries and therefore don't eat as much, and in general, are slow enough to get caught by the animals that want to eat them. Poor Granny. I really liked her. Now she is cheetah food.

Why are the birth rates high? The same reasons that they are high in parts of today's underdeveloped world. For starters, it's a mindset; if you expect half your kids to die before they reach adulthood, then you should have twice as many. Makes sense. Also, children are often seen as a resource in these societies: maybe Junior starts picking berries at an early age to help out the fam. More kids = more labor = more food = good. Plus, no health care = no health education = no sex education = no contraceptive usage. Well, I guess people could always just abstain from having sex . . . yeah, right.

Why are the rates so erratic? For the simple fact that some years are good, while others years are bad. A drought or a plague would cause births to drop and deaths to rise. A very good, wet season with lots of food available would cause the spikes to move in the opposite direction.

Because both birth and death rates are extremely high, they offset each other, equating to a total population that is low and a population growth rate that is slow or stable. Looking back at Figure 2.1, you can see that for most of human history, population growth rate has been very slow, or stable, right on up to the Industrial Revolution. Before we leave this rather boring phase, just a quick note: there really are no more societies like this left anywhere on the planet. You have to dig deep into the Amazon rainforest, the remote savannas of tropical Africa, or into the highlands of Papua New Guinea to find folks still living this lifestyle. Even then, they will be very small numbers of people in isolated pockets. No state economy on the planet today would be classified in Stage One.

FIGURE 2.5 DEMOGRAPHIC TRANSITION STAGE ONE

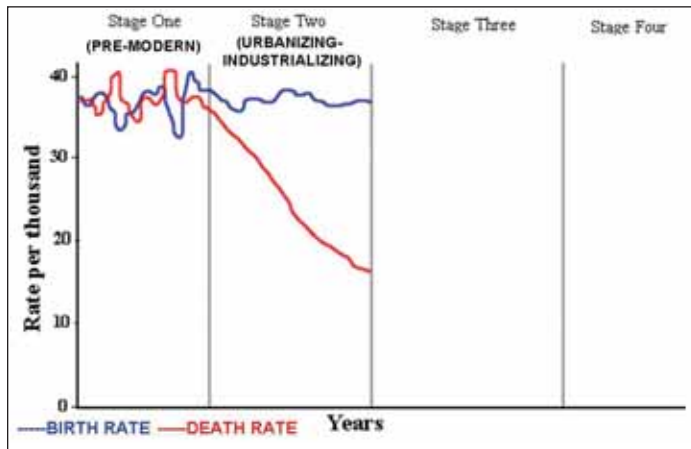


DEMOGRAPHIC TRANSITION STAGE TWO

STAGE TWO is the trickiest phase to consider, because we are going to pack a veritable smorgasbord of different human experiences under this single banner. They occur over long periods of time, but have this one big Stage Two result: the death rate declines while the birth rate remains high and stabilizes. Fewer people die; same amount of people being born. What happens to the total population numbers in such a situation?

Before we answer that, let's define the stage a little more. I said it is fairly all-inclusive of the human development spectrum, and I meant it. Stage Two includes the transition of humans from hunter-gatherers to agriculturalist to factory workers. Yes, this is a long stretch of time that also entails the formation of what we call technical innovation, civilization, and urbanization. Essentially, dudes figure out that staying put in one place and growing food is more productive than moving around and hunting all the time—an agricultural revolution. With increases in technology, so much extra food is

FIGURE 2.6 DEMOGRAPHIC TRANSITION STAGE TWO



the humans. Yikes! The Terminator! This is worse than the Granny-eating cheetah! But that is for a future textbook, so let's stick with Stage Two for now. . . .

What's all this got to do with people having kids? During this part of the societal transition, death rates absolutely plummet. Why? Remember how I told you that everything sucked in Stage One? In Stage Two, everything gets way better. Increases in food production and increases in food storage technology allow for a steady, stable food supply. There are no more "bad" food years or, at the very least, not as frequent as they were in Stage One.

Technological advances in water resources, sewage treatment, and health care, all based on growing scientific knowledge, serve to keep more people alive for longer periods of time. Child mortality drops and life expectancy rises. We have developed the shotgun to ensure that Granny is not eaten by the cheetah. More important, however, is the fact that more kids stay alive than ever before; young children become an increasingly bigger percentage of the total population. Education across the board, at all levels, also significantly increases quality of life and survivability.

During this vast sweep of progress, death rates drop and birth rates remain solidly high and even stabilize high. What is going on here? Basically, people are caught in a mental time warp and old habits die hard. If Mom had ten kids, and her mom had ten kids, and her mom had ten kids, it is highly likely that you would be of the mindset to have ten kids as well. It's just what people do. The society as a whole, and certainly not the individuals within it, does not understand that it is going through a transition. The mentality that producing large numbers of kids is good because half of them are going to die and the rest will help gather berries remains the same, even though conditions have changed. At the end of a Stage Two society, half the kids are now NOT going to die; maybe only one or two of them will die, maybe none at all. Granny had ten kids and only five survived. Mom had ten kids and seven survived. I had ten kids and . . . holy crap in the kiddie pool, all these little brats are still here!

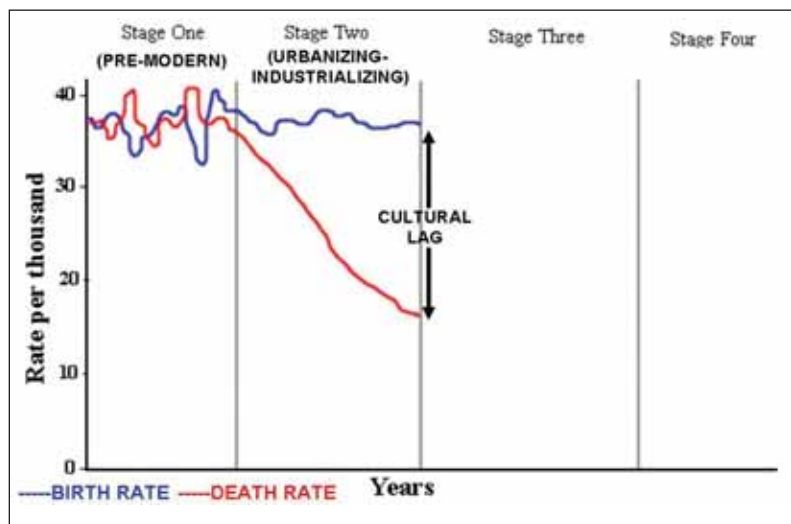
This mind warp is called **cultural lag**. Conditions have changed, but the culture is lagging behind. Folks with Stage One mentality are thinking "Wow, this is just a good year," without realizing that it is a good year after a good year after a good year, but they are still having kids like it's a boom-and-bust cycle. Result: **population explosion!** More kids beget more kids, and people just don't die like they did in Stage One. Mo' peeps having moo' peeps having mo' peeps.

produced that not everybody has to be farmers. Some become blacksmiths, butchers, priests, traders, artists, and inventors—that's specialization. This leads to the formation of villages, towns and eventually cities where larger and larger groups of dudes hang out and exchange products and services with each other—that's urbanization. Further technological advancements lead to the creation of machines to automate our work, which leads to the creation of machines that make stuff, and even make other machines—that's industrialization. Eventually taken to its logical extreme: robots that make robots that kill all



Stage 2 Shenanigans:
A Heaping Helping of
Historical Human
Activities

FIGURE 2.7 CULTURAL LAG



Stage Two main points: death rates decrease, while birth rates remain the same, total population explodes, and the structure of the total population becomes more youthful. This last point is the most important for the rest of this story, as we have more potential baby-makers entering the scene. Many states in the world may fall into the later fringe of Stage Two, mostly in Africa, Central America and parts of Southeast Asia. These states are still heavily reliant on agricultural production as a main economic activity. They also may have their death rates drop more from foreign external aid, importation of life-saving technologies, and humanitarian relief than from true upward evolution of the society. An important note: all of these things will help the death rate drop immediately, which means the period of cultural lag will likely be longer, significantly increasing total population overall. Angola and Guatemala are examples of states in Stage Two.

DEMOGRAPHIC TRANSITION STAGE THREE

As we move to **STAGE THREE**, we approach more familiar ground. Stage Two ends with the beginning of the industrialization of the society. Stage Three takes us the rest of the way through it, ending with what we refer to as the "mature industrial phase." Most states on the planet are currently located here, with varying degrees of development that can be quite radically different, depending upon whether they are early Stage Three or late Stage Three.

At this time, the Stage Three state continues down the modern industrial path. This is marked particularly by a shift in what the majority of folks do for a living. It is at this point that the scale gets tipped; more people are working in the processing, manufacturing and service sectors than are working as farmers. This development is significant because this typically means that agricultural technology has superseded the need for vast amounts of human labor in the fields. This



So long farming! We are manufacturing minions now! As we also shift to services. . .

equates to less farmers, which equates to more people leaving the countryside and heading to the big city to get a job—increasing urbanization.

Even today, agriculture is still the number one job on the planet. However, states in which agriculture is not the predominant occupation are further down the development road. That is, they are typically richer than states that still rely heavily on the agricultural sector to employ people. Food for thought—pun intended.

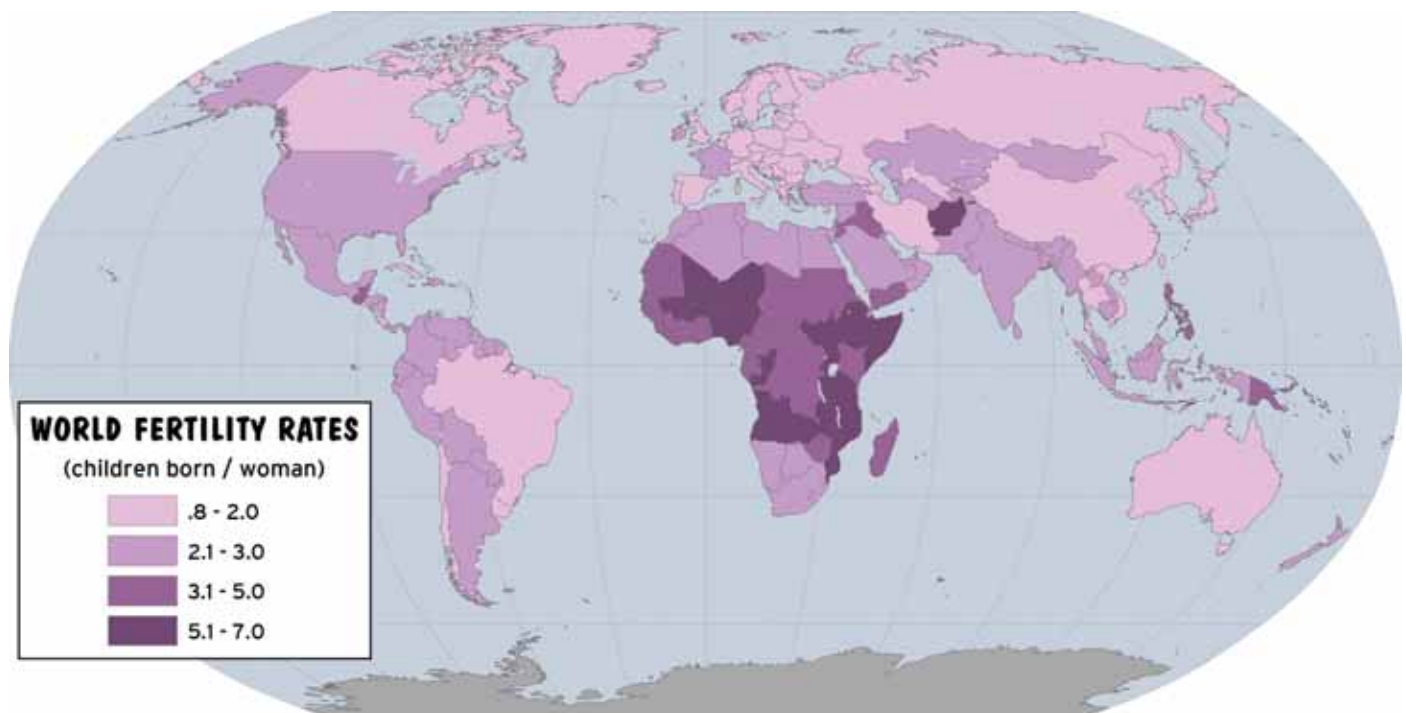
We're just getting warmed up with the impacts of this stage (agriculture-to-industry, and rural-to-urban shifts). What happens to the ideas about having lots of kids when this shift occurs? Plenty! Life in the big city is more costly. Having more kids to feed costs more money. Plus, you've got to clothe them and house them and buy school books for them and throw birthday parties for them and eventually buy them cars. Wow! This is starting to suck as bad as Stage One. But it gets worse! The value of kids has changed as well. Junior used to be an asset picking berries and plowing the fields. Now Junior is an added cost who only picks his nose and plows the family car into the side of the garage. The cultural lag is over thanks to you, Junior! No more kids for us!

In addition to these changes, several other things of note are on the rise. Health care technology and accessibility continues to increase, and especially with regards to increasing knowledge about birth control and contraceptive use in general. Increasing education across the board helps more and more people, but I want you to think more specifically of the education of women and its impact on the whole equation: more educated women = more women entering the workforce = more contraceptive use = more women delaying family formation = fewer kids.

Educating the women of any society decreases **fertility rate** instantaneously. Okay, maybe instantaneously is a bit strong, but it's a HUGE factor in affecting the fertility rate in today's world.

Fertility rate is simply how many kids on average one woman will have in her lifetime in a particular state. The fertility rate of the US is about 2.1. In Italy, the fertility rate is about 1.3. But in Mali, the fertility rate is about 7.5. The average woman in Mali will have seven kids and one half, say from the waist down. In the US, a woman will have two kids and a leg.

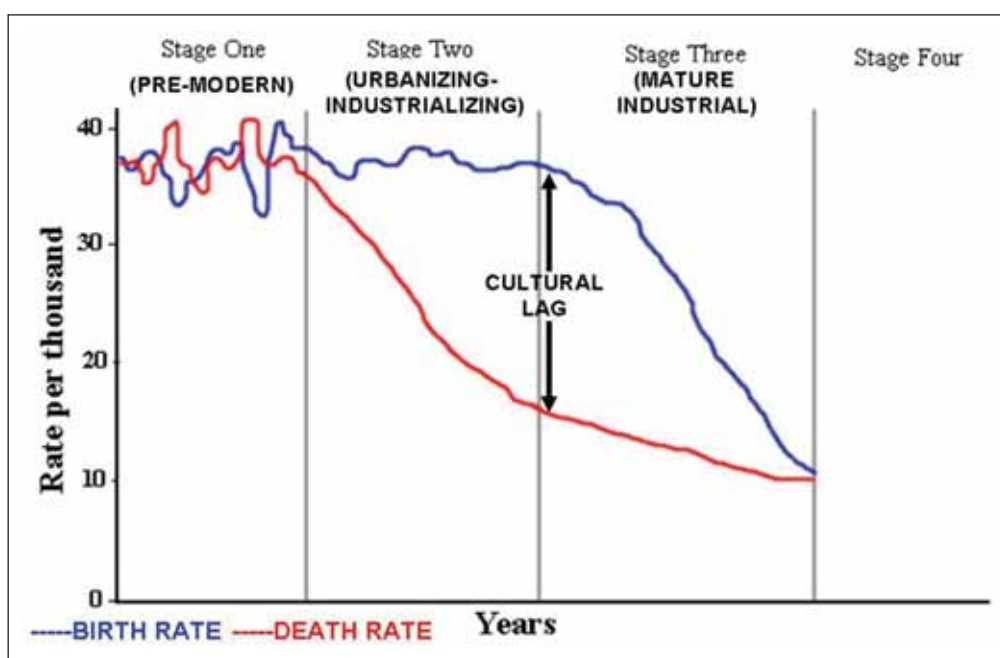
FIGURE 2.8 WORLD FERTILITY RATES



For our international readers, that is what we call a joke. Actually, the US figure is a quite important fertility rate; that number also happens to be something called the **replacement level**. A fertility rate of 2.1 is exactly what it takes to "replace" the current population. See, two people have to get together to create kids (at least still for now, thankfully) and if two people produce 2.1 kids, then when the parents die, there are still two humans they've created to take their place. Sweet! We'll return to this idea in a little bit.

Back to Stage Three. The result of increases in health care, technology, childcare and education serve to knock the death rates down even further. However, there is only so much that modern medicine can do, and eventually that line flattens out. Child mortality decreases and life expectancy increases a bit more, but we all have to die sooner or later, so we'll say goodbye to Granny once again.

FIGURE 2.9 DEMOGRAPHIC TRANSITION STAGE THREE



Of a more radical impact, increasing urbanization due to the employment shift, re-evaluation of the cost and benefits of having children, increased education of women (and all that entails) combine to overcome cultural lag causing the birth rate to plummet and meet the death rate. People may still be getting busy, but they are not having the babies like they did previously. After several generations, the fertility rates sink down closer to 2.1, the percentage of young people in the society about equals the middle aged cohort, and the older people as well. Good examples of early Stage Three states would be India and Brazil; late Stage Three, China and Chile.

DEMOGRAPHIC TRANSITION STAGE FOUR

Now we are through the transition, approaching life as we know it here in the fully developed, post-industrial, mostly Western world. **STAGE FOUR** is characterized by population stability, where death rates and birth rates are both low and parallel each other nicely. This post-industrial world is one in which yet another economic shift has occurred; now most folks work in the service sector, not quite as many in the manufacturing sectors, and virtually no one works in agriculture. If these terms are confusing to you, just hang on; we will be delving into economics in the next chapter.

In this stage, the population age structure has become older overall. Technology and education may still be increasing, but only in minute detail can they lower death rates anymore. The population of a Stage Four state is overwhelmingly urban and educated; they use some form of birth control and spend way too much on coffee.

The US, France, and Japan are all great examples of Stage Four states. As a result of expected higher standard of living and higher costs of living, many people will plan to have one or two children at most. Some people will decide not to have any children at all.

This leads us to a possible expansion of the Demographic Transition to a Stage Five, in which birth rates actually dip below death rates. The effect? Net population loss—the state’s population shrinks every year, and unless supplemented by immigration, the state would eventually disappear.

Immigration is when people not born in the state move into it. **Emigration** is just the opposite perspective: when people leave your state, they are emigrating out of it.

These concepts are increasingly critical in today’s world, because many Stage Four and Five states rely on immigrants to fill jobs, pay taxes and boost slumping population growth rates. The US is a prime example whose population is increasing partly due to immigration. This is actually more pronounced in Europe where states may be fading away because the locals just aren’t having many kids. If any at all.

Of course, the disappearing state thing has never happened before, but there are several states that are currently in this Stage Five category. Russia, Sweden, Italy, and Japan are all losing people. Italy and Japan are both in dire straits, but for different reasons; both have declining fertility rates, but in Italy it’s because no one wants to have kids at all, while Japan refuses to allow any immigration into its pristine palace. We shall see how that works out in the long run. Serves them right for creating Pokemon.

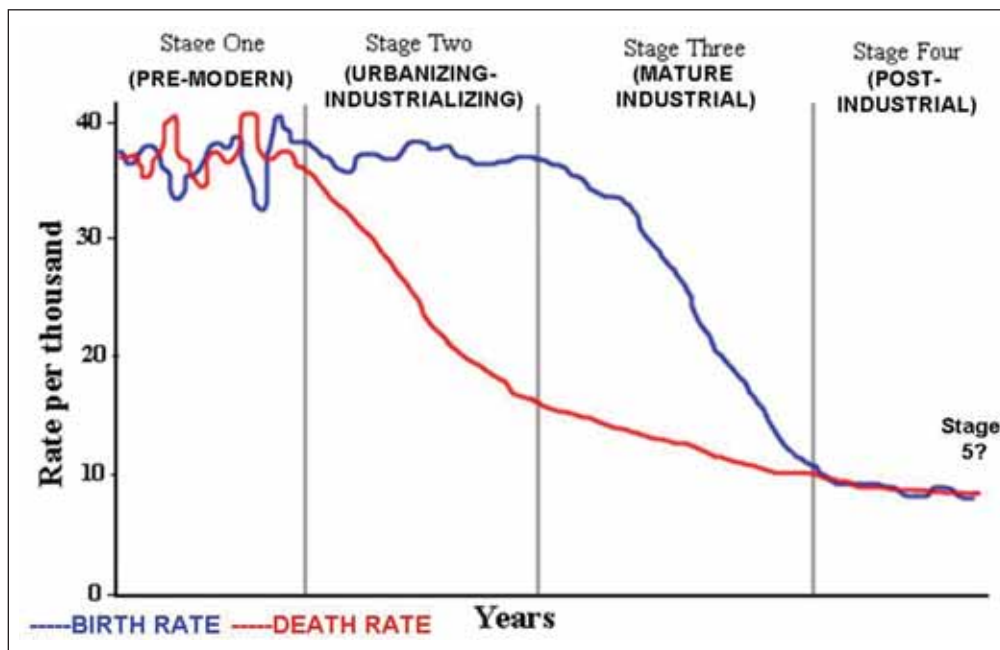


Have another cup . . . and get back to Stage 4 work!



The Service Sector Circle of Life. You will likely live here.

FIGURE 2.10 DEMOGRAPHIC TRANSITION STAGE FOUR

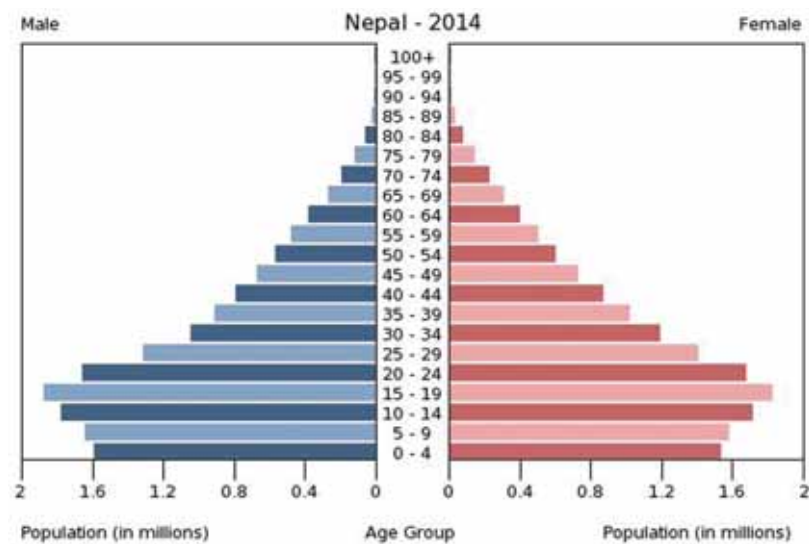




POPULATION PYRAMIDS

A final tool for our consideration of population dynamics on the planet is called a population pyramid. Population pyramids are constructed to show the breakdown of the population for gender and age groups. The x-axis across the bottom displays either a percentage of total population or actual population numbers, and the y-axis shows age cohorts, typically in 5-year increments. The two sides of the pyramid are divided up with males on one side, females on the other. Kind of like your junior high prom dance floor. In the Figure 2.11, you can see that in the rainbow of fruit flavors for Nepal in 2011, there are about 2 million males aged 0–4 years old, about 1.5 million females aged 10–14 years old, and about 0.5 million males aged 50–54.

FIGURE 2.11 A POPULATION PYRAMID



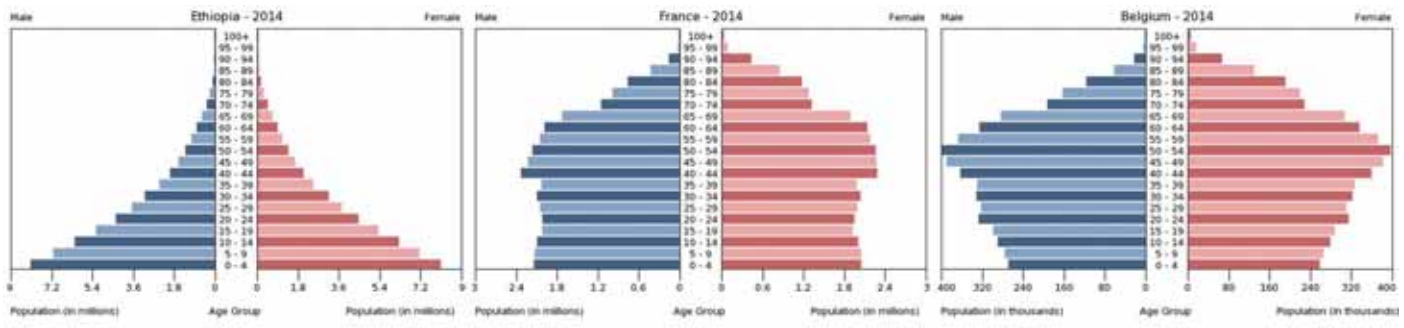
Source: U.S Census Bureau, International Data Base

Like I give a crap about how many Nepalese women are over 80 years old! What do these pyramids really tell us? They tell us all sorts of things about a state: current population, current economic conditions, and quite a bit about the standard of living as well. But that’s not all! These pyramids tell us a whole lot about what the future will hold and you don’t even need a crystal ball. Consider the three basic shapes that these pyramids can take: a **classic pyramid**, a **column** shape, or an **inverted pyramid**.

THE CLASSIC PYRAMID

The classic pyramid shape is, um . . . shaped like a perfect pyramid. The wide bars at the bottom taper up gradually to smaller and smaller bars as age increases, displaying that there are more people in the younger brackets and the size of the group diminishes steadily with age. Broad-based pyramids (Kenya in Figure 2.12 below) are characteristic of popula-

FIGURE 2.12 THREE TYPES OF PYRAMIDS: CLASSIC, COLUMN, AND INVERTED



Source: U.S Census Bureau, International Data Base

tions with high birth rates and lower life expectancies. Why? You already know the answer! Look back at the Stage Two and Stage Three descriptions of the Demographic Transition.

Industrialization and agricultural innovations, as well as increases in technologies across the board, result in advances in food supply and public health overall. This results in recently reduced infant and childhood mortality rates, and slightly increased life expectancy. However, they are definitely in the cultural lag mode, as fertility rates continue to be high. This in turn results in high population growth rates and in many cases, outright population explosion. Each year, the bottom bracket of 0–5 year olds gets wider than the previous year. Of particular significance: the numbers of kids under the age of 15 is larger than the number of folks in the 15–35 brackets.

Why is this significant? Because the under-15 are dependents in the society; that is, they absorb resources. Typically, the 15–35 year olds are the biggest providers in the society, both in economic means as money-makers for the state (gross domestic product, or GDP) and as family sustainers of young people and the elderly. That is, they provide most of the resources. Perhaps now you are starting to see why countries with this type of pyramid are often poorer or less-developed; the dependents often vastly outnumber the providers. More often than not, Stage Two and early Stage Three societies exhibit the pyramid shape demographic. The best examples of this type are any African country.

There is ever so much more we can say about a society with this type of pyramid. It is probably heavily reliant on agriculture or other primary industries for much of its economic earnings. Most people definitely grow some food, either as an occupation, for sustenance, or both. The society probably has lower literacy rates and little to no social safety nets like welfare, and also lacks adequate infrastructure, like good roads or sewer systems. Also, as pointed out earlier, many of the gains in health care, food availability, and life-sustaining technologies may be attributed to foreign aid and humanitarian aid programs. This adds a distinct 21st century dimension to the transition model; no one really knows what impact this will have in the long run for less-developed countries.

THE COLUMN SHAPE

All columns are not created equal, and there can be radical variations on this shape, but the main thing to identify this type of population pyramid is the more overall fuller figure. No, I'm not talking about a waist size here—that's a different book altogether. The real distinguishing mark here is that the size of the 15–50 year cohorts are *roughly* the same size as the under-15 cohorts, giving the overall shape more of a cylindrical look. The older age brackets also grow slightly, and upwards, as more people stay alive longer, adding to the elongated shape.

When this is the case, we realize that the fertility rate must be much lower than in the true pyramid shape, usually hovering between 2.0–3.0. This means that those child-bearing folks (typically between 15–50 years old) are having just two or three kids each, roughly replacing themselves or maybe even just a bit more. Remember that term **replacement level**? Well, the closer a society gets to that 2.1 fertility rate, which constitutes the replacement level, the more perfect the column shape will become. Some examples of this are the US, Lebanon, and Norway.

The operative words in these states is "stability." The total population growth rate is low, or perhaps even zero, with the state adding just a few percentage points of population every year. What else can be said about these countries? They are fully developed industrialized or post-industrialized societies. The highs: GDP per capita, standards of living, health care quality and access, available social programs, life expectancy, education levels, technology levels, urbanization, use of birth control, service sector jobs, and SUV ownership. The lows: fertility rate, infant mortality, illiteracy, farmers, miners, and people who die from infectious diseases.

INVERTED PYRAMID . . . YOU MEAN IT'S UPSIDE DOWN?

Indeed. This is an easy one to describe, because its essential ingredient is that the younger cohorts are smaller than the older ones; child-bearing peoples are creating less people than themselves; and total population is actually shrinking! Fertility rates are under 2.1 and thus the replacement level is not being reached; left unchecked, the population would

shrink into nonexistence. This has never really happened before, and is not likely to ever come to its full conclusion, either. To counter this effect, immigration is increased or some other government policy is put into place to encourage fertility rates to rise.

Why does this scenario happen? Perhaps due to several different reasons. The first and foremost explanation is due to the same processes at work which serve to end cultural lag in developing societies. Namely, the higher cost of living in highly urbanized areas, combined with kids becoming a drain on resources, changes attitudes towards family size. Smaller is better in industrialized societies. They only have one or two kids, and invest heavily in them, as opposed to having lots of kids. In some places here in the 21st century, this has gone to an extreme; many people totally opt out of the family thing altogether; they want no children in order to maintain their own high standard of living. End result: fewer or no kids, replacement level for the state is not reached. The best examples of this today are Japan, Italy, and Sweden.

Another reason for declining populations in the world may be due to economic circumstances. Some countries, while considered part of the developed world, have gone through radical changes and economic collapse due to the end of the Soviet Empire. Russia, Belarus, and Ukraine are all in this inverted pyramid category due to lack of resources, jobs, health care, and many other services that the government used to supply. This is particularly evident in some of the measures of well-being for Russia, whose current life expectancy more approximates a poor, underdeveloped African country than a former world superpower. Hard times can also cause fertility rates, and a state's population, to decline as life becomes too difficult and large families too expensive to maintain.

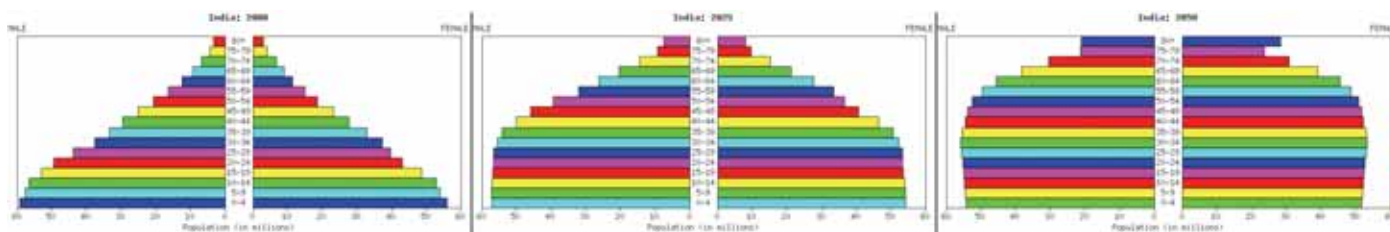


IT'S HARD TO STOP HAVING BABIES

Many of you will look at these definitions and numbers and come up with some puzzling questions. You may wonder how China is the most populous state on the planet, at 1.4 billion people, yet their fertility rate is only 1.73. Or perhaps you may discover that projecting ahead in India, they will continue to grow their population rapidly for some time to come, and indeed will surpass China as the most populous state very soon, but their fertility rate is only 2.73. That's not very much more than replacement level! How is this possible?

Simple. **Population Momentum** is the answer you seek. Consider India for the next 50 years:

FIGURE 2.13 INDIA: THE SNOWBALL GROWS



What these three images from 2000, 2025, and 2050 in India are showing you is the Demographic Transition model in action. In 2000, India was early- to mid-Stage Three, as you can just detect the perfect pyramid starting to round away the edges of the bottom age cohorts in an obvious sign that cultural lag is wearing off and fertility rates are starting to sink from what were highs of four to six kids average per fertile female. We see that, in 2025, this has taken full effect; India is certainly in the column shape as its late Stage Three or early Stage Four industrialization has knocked down fertility rates to a precise 2.1, the replacement level. It's a perfect column. How can population totals continue to expand after this?

Population momentum is like a snowball rolling down a steep hill. Even after fertility rate stabilization, the population pyramid will have to "fill out its figure," as you can see by projecting further ahead to 2050. Everyone may be only having 2.1 kids, but a much bigger number of them are doing it, as represented by those bottom age cohorts back in 2000, where the stabilization actually starts. By the time the snowball reaches the bottom of the hill, it is massive—as will India be by the time its population total flatlines.



A PRICKLY PROBLEM OF SKEWED SEXES . . .

I would be remiss in my duties to fully educate and illuminate on population issues without shining some light upon some more disturbing manipulations of the Demographic Transition which are spelling social and sexual disaster for some states! Of what do I speak? The un-natural selection of the sexes, no less!

Say what? Well, in the natural way of things, boy babies slightly outnumber girl babies at birth, usually on the order of 105 boys to 100 girls. Why is this so? Hmmm . . . maybe it's because boys are crazier, riskier, and the ones that usually go to war with each other and therefore die/kill off each other in greater numbers than girls do. Thus, you need a few more of them around so that after some of them die off, your society will still have enough men to match up with women for the procreation gig. It's like that for most animals, and our species ain't no exception.

But dig this: in some countries around the world there is a significant cultural bias that favors males over females, especially in Asia, but the trend is spreading. Male babies are prized over females because males carry the family name, are a symbol of virulence, get higher paying jobs, are stronger physically for work on the farm, and are seen as the potential extended family providers when the parents get old. In India, it is the traditional role of the bride's family to 'pay' the groom a **dowry** when the couple gets married, so having a daughter actually 'costs' the family all the way up to adulthood. A family stands to gain a lot of money in India if they have a bunch of sons, and no daughters.



"Yo, where are all da ladies at?"

Basically, in these societies men are seen as the continuation of the family lineage and the major breadwinners, but that belief alone is not the problem. It becomes a problem when parents start to skew the sexual ratio on purpose to get more males into the mix. With the advent of sonograms/ultrasound in the 1980's, coupled with easy access to safer abortion options, there has been a real "gendercide" underway, where female fetuses have been aborted in greater and greater numbers in an effort to get more male offspring . . . and it is starting to radically affect the demographics of the states, in increasingly negative ways. . . .

Particularly in China, India, South Korea, and Vietnam, males outnumber females at alarming rates. Right now in China, there are 35 million more boys than girls. In India, there are only 915 daughters born to every 1000 sons. These ratios are seriously skewed from the natural norm. And while Asian cultures seem to be the epicenter of this syndrome, even they are not alone anymore: the practice has spread to Europe, where skewed sex ratios now can be found in Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Serbia, Bosnia and Georgia.

So there are way too many penises in some countries. So what?

Ummm . . . can you say "life without a wife," and more critically, can you think about the potential problems that will cause? Not enough women for all the men means that an increasing number of males in these societies will not be able to find a wife and start families. That will affect fertility rates for sure (and wedding cake sales), but more importantly it leaves a gigantic pool of unmarried, unattached, uncontrolled, undersexed, and testosterone-fueled males in your country. Whoa! That ain't nothing but trouble!

Indeed! The affects are becoming obvious: there is unrest among young men unable to find partners. Reports are increasing from China and India of antisocial behavior and violence, threatening societal stability and security, as unattached males are more likely to be involved in harassment, gang activity, gambling, and even violent crime. But business opportunities have sprang up to serve the needs of these men as well: prostitution is on the rise, as is the trade in buying foreign wives. A quiet mass 'migration' may be in effect wherein Thai, Vietnamese, and Burmese women are being brought into China as mail-order brides. (Market price for Burmese bride is currently between \$600 and \$2,400.)

So consider the repercussions of this skewed battle of the sexes in these societies, and how it affects not just the demographics, but also the cultures, economies, government policies, social stability, and even immigration policies in these places. All of these states have already outlawed abortions based solely on preferential sex of the fetus, but things like Indian tradition, China's 'One Child Policy,' and current economic situations in the Caucasus trump the law and social convention . . . but with grave repercussions imminent. Penis propensity problems will proliferate!



"I don't care if we are out! I want a woman, now!"



SOME FINAL THOUGHTS ON PEOPLE . . .

They disgust me! No, I'm joking. I love all the plaid peoples of the planet. What can we say about the future of our plaid population? It shouldn't be too hard to figure out some general trends. Most countries will continue down the development path, and thus we should be able to track what's happening in societies and within population dynamics through the lens of our Demographic Transition model. Everybody in the world wants a good job, a good standard of living, access to health care, and a better life for their kids. It's just the human way.

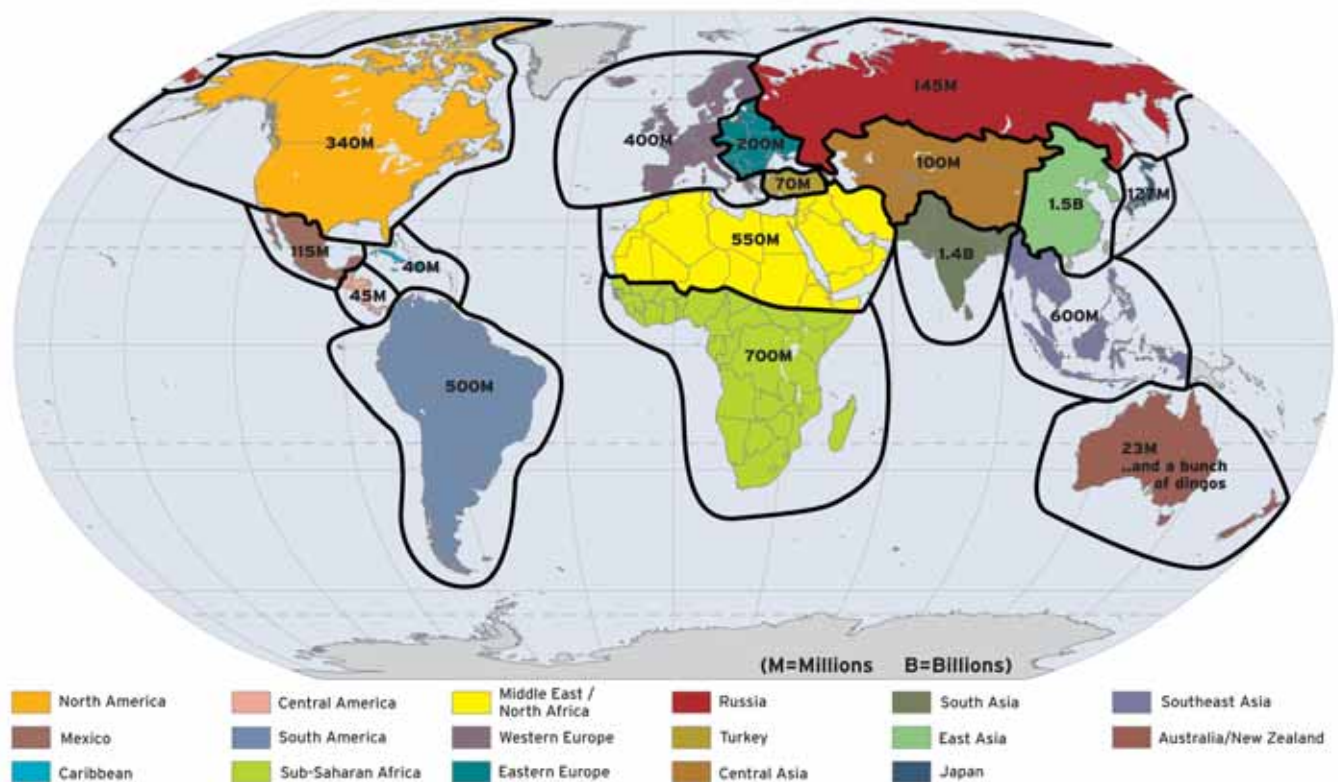
Having said that, there is nothing to lead me to believe that poorer states won't continue to try and modernize and industrialize like the rich ones have. Is this possible? That's a whole other ballgame we won't get into yet. But what will this mean for the peoples of the planet? The world population total will continue to go up for some time to come, but we can be more specific than that:

- The least-developed countries are the places where population will truly grow the fastest, and the most. Regions like sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East, Central America, and parts of Asia will continue to pile on the humans, even though they are the regions perhaps most ill-equipped to handle more.
- Regions further down the development path, like China, India, Mexico, and South America, will continue to grow, albeit at a slower pace as fertility rates stabilize.
- Fully developed regions, like Western Europe, US/Canada, and Australia are stabilized populations with no growth, but with the potential to grow bigger mostly through allowing immigration from other regions.
- Regions that are currently shrinking in populations, like Russia, Eastern Europe, some parts of Western Europe, and Japan, will almost certainly not disappear—but most certainly will encourage folks to have more kids and allow more immigration as well.

→ However, we should never underestimate the power of culture to undo all our tidy demographic transition assessments! Some states in the Middle East and South America are maintaining their high birth rates even despite increased development and climbing costs of living. This is due primarily to powerful religious influences (Islam and Catholicism) which prize large family size. Also, there are folks bucking the trend in places like China, where the state-sponsored One-Child Policy predominated for decades, because the wealthy and growing middle class can now simply afford to have more kids, and want to do so despite government tax penalties. Quite the opposite of anything the model would have predicted. These wacky humans can be so impulsive when it comes to procreation!

This is the current state of the plaid world. This is the future state of the plaid world. How many kids do you want? How many can the plaid world support? All of the factors explained in this chapter combine to create the world population of today. Check out the regional totals in Figure 2.14 to see how these things are reflected in today's world, and know these figures well.

FIGURE 2.14 WORLD REGIONAL MAP WITH POPULATION TOTALS



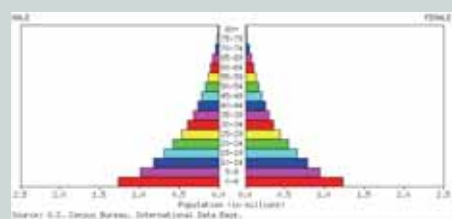
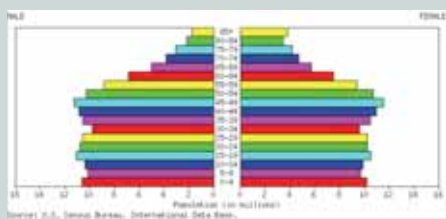
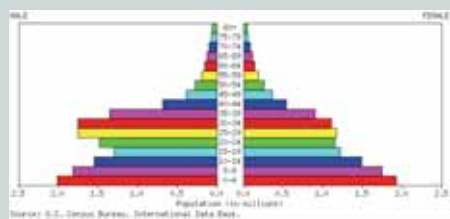
Now let's see what you've learned about population dynamics, population pyramids, and fertility rates. Help the Plaid Avenger find his way home with his family. Match the Plaid Avenger fertility rate to the appropriate population pyramid and then to the country to which they belong. Be sure to notice the partial children!



Fertility Rate

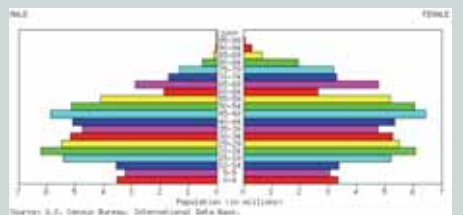
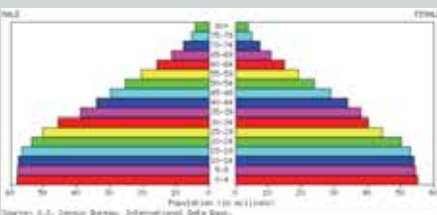
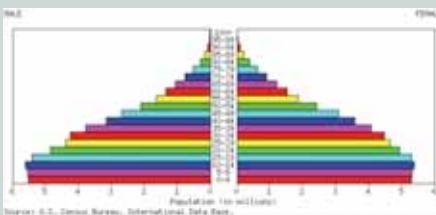


Country of Origin



Population Pyramid

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, International Data Base





CHAPTER OUTLINE

1. The Game Pieces
2. The Game Board
 - 2.1 Landlocked
3. Culture Central
 - 3.1 Prancing Around the Continent
 - 3.2 Mongol Mania
4. Parker Brothers Inspired
 - 4.1 The Modern Era Classic Original Board Game
 - 4.2 The 21st Century Edition
 - 4.2.1.1 The Vacuum Created by Moving the Soviets Out
 - 4.2.2.2 Because of Increasing Finds of Petroleum and Natural Gas
 - 4.2.3.3 Terrorism and Drugs
5. The Game Continues to Evolve with New Players
 - 5.1 You Gotta Know the SCO
 - 5.2 Soviet Re-Boot?
6. Game On

Central Asia

22

LET'S move to the center of the Eurasian continent. Central Asia is kind of a vacuum in the heart of Asia that, as opposed to going through it, people go out of their way to avoid it. But times are changing fast, my friends, and Central Asia may have found a new home as the delicious meaty center of a Russia-China sandwich or perhaps are going to join a USSR 2.0 as Moscow tries to absorb them back into a "Eurasian Union" . . . , but I am getting ahead of the story. Throughout history, this area has been a battleground between steppe nomads and the settled peoples in urban areas all around its fringe. It still can be viewed as perhaps the last active true fight for preserving local culture vs globalizaton forces . . . a fight that has been going on for ages here. The Huns invading Europe, the Mongols invading Eurasia . . . then the British, then Soviet, then the Taliban, then al-Qaeda, then NATO/American invasions into the region all demonstrate how Central Asia has long been a chess board across which the pawns of many armies and empires have made power plays into other regions and states. And the game goes on. . .

But what is it about Central Asia that makes it a region? Is it a region? A lot of people may say that it's not a separate region, but it is to the Plaid Avenger and here is how I'm going to define it.



Kickin' Kazakh Dancers!



THE GAME PIECES

Central Asia consists of a core of countries that everyone might agree upon: the "-stan" countries starting with Kazakhstan (the big one), and then Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Afghanistan (I know you've heard of that one), Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan. Everybody would say, "Yeah, we think that's Central Asia, or at least we know where you're talking about—all those places we can't pronounce."

This may be the trickiest region to define because we have to take parts of another country in order to do it. We are going to take the western parts of China, including Xinjiang, one of the biggest, most significant westernmost provinces of said country; we must also take two other Chinese provinces, Tibet and Inner Mongolia, as well as the independent sovereign state of Mongolia. The Plaid Avenger calls all of these places Central Asia. It's a little tricky because you will say, "Wait, you just took parts of China and China is its own country. It's a sovereign state." We're going to talk a lot about China in the next chapter, but what you'll find is that China has a very distinct east/west divide. Virtually all the people

and businesses are in the east. All economic activity is on the eastern side closer to the coast; most inhabitants are as close to the coast as possible, as is most of the transportation, communication, and government.

China, as it has been known throughout the centuries, is the eastern side of the country, but not the west. Western China is quite different in terms of its population; it is sparsely populated and contains ethnic groups that are not historically Chinese.

All the reasons eastern China has *little* to do with western China are the same reasons that western China has a *lot* to do with Central Asia. The dissimilar groups in parts of Mongolia and the "-stan" countries are thrown into this region called Central Asia. Why is it a region? What's homogeneous about the disparate group of countries, states, and Chinese sub-states? Let's get to work.



THE GAME BOARD

The most obvious similarities between all of the countries in this region are the physical attributes. Unlike other regions that contain a variety of climates and terrains, like South America or North America, Central Asia is relatively standard throughout. Like the Middle East, it is mostly desert and steppe, making it homogeneously dry across the board. There is really nothing else, no other climate to speak of. You definitely won't find any big forests. There are patches of growth, but this region is mostly either short grass grassland or desert, which has had a definite impact on how people have settled and survived for the last several thousand years.

Before we get too deep into dryness, let's look at the terrain: one of the highest and toughest terrains on Earth. We already referenced the Himalayas when discussing the division of South Asia from the rest of Asia, and they play a big part here as well. It's not just the range itself—it's the whole Tibetan Plateau, which sits over 12,000 feet above sea level. It has extremely high mountains. The **Hindu Kush Mountains** run through Afghanistan; the **Tien Shan** run through Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. These mountains seem wimpy in comparison to the Himalayas, but what they lack in physical harshness, they make up for in another kind of tactical danger; just ask the US military in Afghanistan. This is not a fun part of the world. It is very difficult to get around, through, or across the plateau.

In addition to the Tien Shan, the Hindu Kush, and the Himalayas, we have the Altai Mountains in Mongolia. Although there are a few basins where things level out a bit, it boasts some of the toughest terrain on the planet.

The terrain and dryness go hand in hand. For the same reason that there are monsoons in South Asia, Central Asia is nearly all dry. All the water that would float up north drops from the sky as the air is pushed higher by the Himalayas. This causes the monsoons, and makes for only dry air to make its way up the mountains and into Central Asia.



Grand Canyon? Nah, these things are a dime a dozen in this region.



Central Asia: formidable, inhospitable, and largely un-livable.

The dryness doesn't support much vegetation. A lot of Central Asia is what we would distinguish as grasslands. We think, "Oh, grasslands are good for things like wheat and barley." No, those are long grasses. Central Asia can't even sustain most of that stuff. There is only enough water in this ecosystem to support shorter grasses. Since the land cannot support any type of large-scale food crops, in turn, it cannot support huge populations. Much of the food that the locals eat has to be imported. This is a fairly stark environment.

Throughout the centuries, one of the main perceptions we hold of Central Asians is that they are horse people. Why don't they raise cattle or something else? The environment will not allow it. It cannot be done because the vegetation is not there for farmers to raise large amounts of cattle in one place, year after year. But short grasses can sustain animals that move around a lot, like horses, which is why the region's inhabitants are known for having them.

LANDLOCKED

What is the most unique feature of this region? It's landlocked, which is another condition that makes it a homogeneous whole. In fact, some of these places are doubly landlocked. What is "landlocked" and why is it significant? What does this mean for the place as a whole? **Landlocked** means you have no tie to the oceans. Not even a river system that goes to a place that can indirectly get you to an ocean. What's the big deal about that? In the good old days, when people used to travel across the continent on trade routes, Central Asia's location in the middle of things was a bonus. Those days were good, but they are long gone, my friends.

In today's world, virtually all the world's traffic and economic activity happens via the oceans. If you do not have access to the oceans, then you are not part of the world economy. Therefore, Central Asia is not part of the world economy today. It is what The Plaid Avenger calls a **marooned region**. It is not attached to what's going on around the rest of the planet, and the region is economically isolated and therefore slightly stagnant.

As I mentioned before, some of these places are **doubly landlocked**, which means they are landlocked by other landlocked countries. Their economies are largely internal, with the possible exception of something like drilling for oil or making pipelines through the region to connect up producers and consumers from other regions. Some places like Kyrgyzstan are so far from anything that they cannot possibly foster any meaningful movement of goods or services across the Asian continent. It's just not going to happen. Being landlocked is a physical condition that has an enormous influence on what's going on internally and externally for Central Asia.



Central Asian rush hour here at the airport.

Landlocked Countries in Asia



States locked out of ocean access, thus global access, thus economic access.

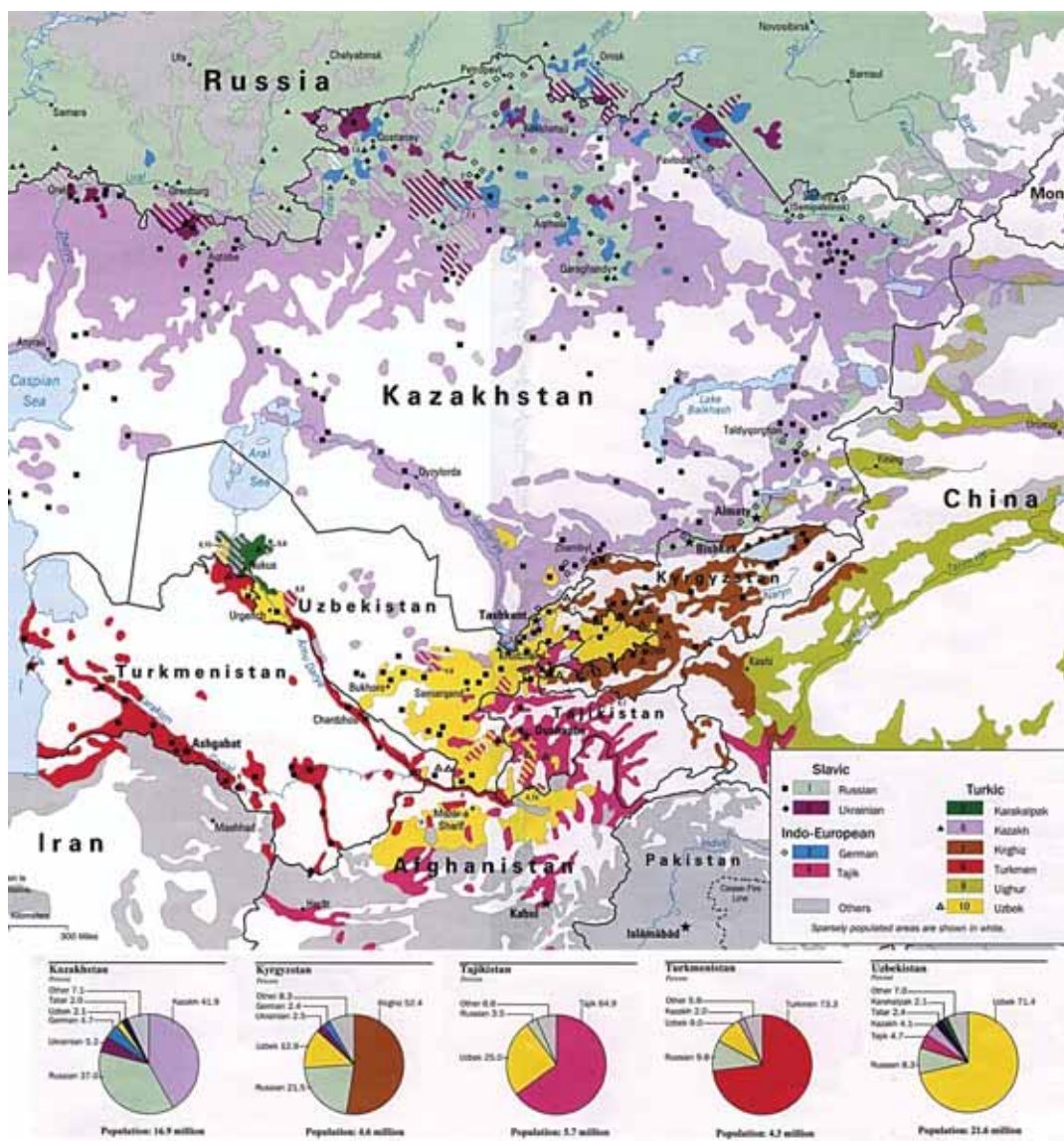


CULTURE CENTRAL

Let's look at some cultural traits that permeate Central Asia, the main one being religion. All of the "-stan" countries and the western province of China are overwhelmingly Islamic, while Tibet and Mongolia are devoutly Buddhist. Xinjiang is that western province of China that is mostly Islamic, and they are also ethnically Uyghur (pronounced Weeger, like Weezer), not Han Chinese. Speaking of ethnicity, check out the map for the smattering of Uzbeks in Uzbekistan, the Kazaks in Kazakhstan, and so on. Each 'stan is defined by its major ethnicity, and collectively all these peeps across the whole region number less than 120 million, in an area exceeding 4.5 million square miles. That's a lot of elbow room per person! For perspective: Japan alone has 127 million people in 145,000 sq miles.



A Yurt: Central Asian party hut!



Who is in the white areas? Answer: Nobody.

PRANCING AROUND THE CONTINENT

We talked about the physical features of the region being dry and landlocked. What has this landlocked, dry, arid, short grass steppe meant culturally to this region over the centuries? It means that they are not a big agricultural region. They are mostly **nomadic**; that is, they pick up their Yurts (those big white tents that you see) and move seasonally to find better grasslands for their horses. There are still traditional peeps native to this region are not sedentary and are noncentralized, consisting mostly of small tribes of folks on the move. These guys have been forever focused on the horse, not just as a main means of locomotion, but also as a way of life. I'm thinking specifically of the Mongols. Mongol domination at one point in history is one of the other unifying cultural factors of this entire region and the value of the horse in Central Asia can't be understated, especially for this group.

The Mongols were the most kick-ass group of horse warriors that the world has ever seen. What was so cool about them? What did they do that was so unique?



Uzbeki Zorrol



Don't mess with the Mongols!

MONGOL MANIA

The Mongols were a tribe of totally awesome nomadic horsemen who rallied under **Genghis Khan** and started a campaign to conquer the whole planet right around 1200 CE. Genghis is the one dude who got fairly close to actually achieving the global domination deal. Lots of other people have tried, such as, I don't know, Hitler, Mussolini, and Wal-Mart. But this was a guy who actually came close to conquering the whole world at the time.

A couple of unique things about the Mongol Empire: They created a single empire that tied together the peoples of Europe and the peoples of the rest of Asia under a single political and economic umbrella. To my knowledge, this has not been done since. We could look at the

modern world and say, "Oh yeah, people have interactions now," but not on this scale. This is a singular empire that placed white Europeans and Chinese people in the same state. What's so important about that? Mad cultural interchange occurred and the region was fully integrated into the global system, a situation that hasn't been duplicated since.

Under Mongol rule, it was said that a virgin with a pot of gold on her head could travel from one side of the empire to another unharmed and



Genghis got game: the largest land empire of its time . . . perhaps ever.

untouched. That may or may not actually be true, but it gets at the idea of Mongol citizens' safety. They had a good legal system that was strictly enforced. That type of safety encouraged freedom of movement of people and their stuffs. You had this mass movement of goods, services, materials, and technologies across the Eurasian continent like never before, and perhaps not since. The Mongol Empire was very unique in world history; it encompassed all of what is now China, parts of South-east Asia, and parts of India, as well as big chunks of the Middle East that stretched all the way into parts of Europe. They sacked Baghdad in 1258, which marked the end of Middle Eastern expansion—remember that from a few chapters ago?

How did they unify all of these lands under one common empire? They were ruthless conquerors. Their environment molded and hardened them into exceptional alpha male warrior dudes who could ride horses for days. These guys were totally brutal. One of Genghis Khan's sayings was, "Submit or die." He didn't negotiate with anybody, period. Typical Mongol foreign policy would be to go into a town and tell the inhabitants, "Here's the deal: you guys get down on your hands and knees and start begging for mercy right now. We'll circle around you, slowly making our way toward your homes, and decide if we'll kill you. But if anybody takes up arms against us, we will kill every freakin' one of you down to the last man, woman and child. Blood will flow in the streets and we'll burn the town to the ground. Given their reputation for actually committing such acts, most surrendered immediately."

That was how they were successful in storming across the continent. Perhaps even more important to their success were their fighting tactics. They could cover HUGE amounts of territory in a day. They would ride horses continuously and would have stations set up so that whole cavalry units could get new horses and essentially ride nonstop for 72 to 96 hours. That is an amazing feat in today's world, much less a thousand years ago. The Mongols were so tough they trained their ponies so they didn't have to get out of the saddle to eat; they made cuts on the ponies' necks and drank their blood for nourishment. Drinking blood is not only a fun fact; it also accentuates this tough environment. What did their diet consist of? Mare's milk and blood. Protein rich! I think somebody should invent the Mongol diet because these guys were lean, mean fighting machines.

If you go to Mongolia today, you'll see a lot of people doing these same things. Not in terms of raping and pillaging, but what they eat and what they do for a living has not changed much. They still herd goats, drink funky milk, and generally are chillin' out on the central Asian plains.

The Mongols ended up ruling much of the Eurasian continent, but their empire was not a superpower for very long. Their glorious reign was pretty short after Genghis Khan died. After that, they stopped conquering, and eventually the Mongol Empire broke apart into separate kingdoms that affected world history in lots of different places: Kublai Khan ruled China; Tamerlane was in Central Asia; descendants of the Mongols end up as the Mughal Empire in India, and even the Cossacks of Russia are lineage of the Mongols. But for a while, under the main man Genghis, the Mongols ruled!



Genghis Khan—ok, not really because they didn't have cameras 800 years ago, but this guy is a pretty legit looking stunt double.



PARKER BROTHERS INSPIRED

There's one thing the Plaid Avenger wants you to know about in Central Asia because it is still kind of happening; it's called **The Great Game**. The Great Game, coined by some British dude (as so many things on our planet have been), describes the major world power players' attitudes toward Central Asia in the last few hundred years. That attitude has resulted in Central Asia becoming very much like the game of *Risk*. It's a platform or playing field for different countries to vie for influence. No one really wants it. No one wants to actually control it. They just want to make sure they have their

fingers in there to ensure that other people do not control it. This was a scenario that arose during European imperialism, and in the build up to WWI and beyond.

THE MODERN ERA CLASSIC ORIGINAL BOARD GAME

Basically, it's the Russians vs. the British vs. The Persians/Iranians vs. the French vs. the locals. All these colonial powers and others who are in the neighborhood, such as the Chinese and the Persians, all jockeyed around Central Asia to make sure that no one else got in. Everybody protected their own backyard. It's mostly the Russians who started up this game because they had been expanding their territory for hundreds of years. Among other things, they increased their influence by pushing into Central Asia during Soviet expansion, eventually fully adsorbing the 'stan countries and renaming them soviet republics . . . e.g., the Kazak SSR. Many would say they wanted to push down into Iran to gain access to the Indian Ocean, which is one reason that the Persians did not want the Russians there.

As the Russians were coming down from the North, the British, who controlled "British India" at the time, were pushing up from the South, effectively buffering against Russian influence in the region. The Chinese did not want anyone in there either, so they were vying for influence to make sure that no one encroached upon their territory. This became a big game where rulers were moving soldiers around on this very real chessboard. That is why it's funny in today's world to see the United States vying for influence in Afghanistan by pushing US ideals and working against radical Muslim influence, or perhaps against a renewed Russian presence in the region—same story, different century.

Afghanistan is a good country to discuss for just a second. The Russians and the British found this out a long time ago: you just don't mess around in Afghanistan. Everybody, all these world powers, have tried very hard in the past, and let me tell you what the historical scoreboard reads: Afghanistan: 1000, Outsiders: zero. No one from Europe or anywhere else has successfully occupied or influenced Afghanistan for very long, and it remains to be seen if the US/NATO is going to have much impact either. Folks throughout Central Asia, particularly Afghanistan, have a fierce independent spirit. They understand that they are pawns in the game and they will have none of it. When the British went into Afghanistan to thwart the Russians, the Afghans kicked the crap out of them. Then when the Soviet Russians came in 50 years later, they kicked the crap out of them as well. The Central Asians as a whole are not peoples to be trifled with.

In 1979 when the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in their bid to expand the communist sphere of influence even further, a new player joined the game: the US. The United States armed and trained a bunch of locals—let's call them the **mujahideen**—to really stick it to the Ruskies in order to stymie the Soviet advance. It worked great! That 1979 to 1989 Afghan campaign proved absolutely disastrous for the Soviets, and has been credited as part of the reason for their eventual collapse just two years later. Of course, those CIA trained mujahideen then ended up becoming the Taliban and members of al-Qaeda, which the US now finds itself fighting, but that's a different round of this unfolding drama. Isn't this region just a pack of fun? Kind of like playing nude lawn darts.

THE 21ST CENTURY EDITION

Lots of the parties who were vying for influence in the last couple hundred years are some of the same players in today's world, with a few new entries—like the United States, the Taliban, al-Qaeda and a country that didn't even exist back then, now called Pakistan. As in the past, no one really wants to own Central Asia, but everybody is trying to expel other influences and powers from it. The Game is back on. Back in the day, most of the powers originally got involved to curb the power and growth of pre-Soviet Russia. The British, in particular, didn't really want to get into the northern parts of India,



Main Central Asian currency unit: force.

but felt compelled to in order to stop the Russian advance. The game to stop Russia is over (maybe), but there are three new reasons that the game started back up.

1. THE VACUUM CREATED BY MOVING THE SOVIETS OUT

Under the Soviet umbrella, Russia gained control of all of Central Asia, except Afghanistan, by the 1940s. All of those “-stan” countries became Soviet republics—you know, the R in the USSR. Afghanistan was never brought into the fray; that’s why the Russians invaded them in 1979, much to their own chagrin for the next decade. Since the fall of the Soviet Empire in 1989, all of those former Soviet SSR’s declared independence and became sovereign states again. Who is in charge now? For most of the “-stan” countries, this has resulted in authoritarian dictators/one-party states that are extremely open to outside influences, especially when there is money involved. How refreshing. Oops, I mean, how exactly the same as always.

2. BECAUSE OF INCREASING FINDS OF PETROLEUM AND NATURAL GAS

These natural resources are without which the world can not live evidenced by the fact that people were still willing to pay 130 dollars a barrel for oil back in June, 2008. Oil and natural gas, and the pipelines that carry it, are popping up all over the region. Every day, it seems, they increase their findings of potential natural reserves. Kazakhstan is the leader of this. It is the Central Asian powerhouse when it comes to energy exports.

Where is this stuff going? Everywhere. This game is back on because everybody wants that stuff. No one wants to control the places, but they want the influence inside the region in order to get a piece of the oil action. As described by the US’s Energy Information Administration: “Central Asia has large reserves of natural gas but its development as a major natural gas exporter is constrained because of a lack of pipeline infrastructure.” Everyone wants a piece of the infrastructure-building action.

Who are they supplying? Kazakhstan’s and Uzbekistan’s stuff has mostly moved west into Russia and then on into Europe. Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan supply the Ukraine and other Eastern and Western European countries, as well as Iran. Some of it floats south to Iran or through it. Increasingly, even Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Kazakhstan are building pipelines into China. Why would China want that stuff? Their population is exploding and they can not ever possibly have enough oil and natural gas. These historically landlocked economies of Central Asia are in a prime position now. The one thing that they could move out of their countries in order to make money is being discovered in large amounts.



Pipelines a'plenty! Source: Energy Information Administration



3. TERRORISM AND DRUGS

Why would anybody from the outside world be interested in vying for influence of drugs and terrorism? Ask the US government! Thwarting terrorism is the prime reason that the United States is there. The current US-led war in Afghanistan is to try and stop the Taliban, al-Qaeda, and any other radical extremist groups that may be there training, setting up shop, or otherwise trying to control the area. I do want to be quick to point out that this is a US-led effort; the Afghan campaign is actually a NATO mission, of which the US is the biggest player. Why is that important? Because it shows that all other NATO members, namely all of Team West, are involved because they all believe that the anti-terrorism fight is a worthy cause that they will continue to pursue.

Do not lose sight of the irony that the US and NATO are currently fighting against forces that they helped train to fight the Soviets back in the 1970s. Ah, the game continues.

Of course, drugs are a bad thing; Central Asia is historically one of the largest producers of opium, so lots of developed countries around the world in their **War on Drugs** have had their fingers in Central Asia long before the current conflict in Afghanistan. Unfortunately, in a war-wrecked country, drug production is one of the few (if not only) economic opportunities for these folks to embrace. The war has been further complicated by the Taliban and al-Qaeda, who are now using the drug trade money to help re-arm and re-equip themselves to do further battle against Team West. Could this mess get worse? It sure can! While virtually all of this product used to be shipped abroad to the rich, bored citizens of Europe and America, it has recently been increasingly used at home. Drug consumption and addiction has soared in Central Asia, Russia, and East Asia.

Terrorism, drugs, and petroleum products are the main reasons that Central Asia has become an area of much interest for people around the globe who otherwise would not care about this economically marooned region. There isn't much else about this place to interest the outsiders. What's made this even more important in today's world is the **War on Terror**. The War on Terror is the reason why the US is in Afghanistan, supposedly the reason they are in Iraq, and the reason why there are US military bases that have cropped up all throughout Central Asia—because of the fear that terrorism and extremism will be on the increase, particularly in this region. The United States is vying for influence here not to control the place, but to control the extreme elements within the place. The United States is worried about terrorists in this Central Asian society, but they're not the only ones.

The Russians are also worried because they have lost a lot of territory and influence in the world since the implosion of the USSR, so they are determined to maintain their role in the region. Their long history of influence here, desire to maintain their status as a world power, and close ties with Central Asian economies give them more reason to stick around. They have their terrorist problems as well, mostly with Muslim extremists over in Chechnya, but also here in Central Asia. So Russia has a vested interest in maintaining influence here. . . even if it's not a physical presence anymore.

And then there's China. Here's a theme that's perfect for identifying western China as part of Central Asia and not as China proper. It's a little known fact that when the United States declared war on terrorism after 9/11, there were two countries that IMMEDIATELY jumped on board and said, "Yeah, we'll help! We agree that terrorism should be fought on all fronts!" Those two countries are probably not ones you would think of as the first in line to side up with the US: Russia and China. Russia said, "We've been fighting Muslim extremists for years. We call them Chechens and we are going to continue to beat the beet juice out of them in our war on terrorism." And China said, "We have Muslim extremist terrorists as well. The Uyghurs out in the western states have been blowing stuff up and making attempts at independence. We're going to fight the War on Terror by continuing to kick the Kung Pao chicken out of the Uyghur separatists in our country."



Terrorist hunters have their work cut out for them in this neck of the woods.

So terrorism is a rallying cry for a lot of countries to continue to be involved in Central Asia, and is a theme that probably isn't going away any time soon. We've got Russia, China, and the United States in there vying for influence for oil, trying to control terrorism, and lots of other things. Who else may be involved in The New Great Game? For starters, the Pakistanis, who are US allies and the ones fighting the truly active War on Terror on their own border. Pakistan's largest border is shared with Afghanistan; that border is a real hotspot for active conflict. People are shooting at each other there all the time. That is where everyone thinks Osama bin Laden is currently hiding. Hey hold on there! 2011 Update: That WAS where Osama was hiding, just like the US always said, and Pakistan always denied! And now, of course, he is dead.

Iran, which also fronts this region, is increasing its power on the planet by building nuclear facilities and playing up its role as a leader of Muslim culture. It is also a major mover of natural gas and oil out of Central Asia to the rest of the world. They want to join the power players and are vying for influence as well. They have the advantage of being Islamic like all their Central Asian brothers. 2012 Update: Kazakhstan just inked a deal with Iran to build a major pipeline from Central Asia to their "Muslims brothers in Iran," as spoken by Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev. Game on! Because of this, Iran may end up being a major political player in this region in the very near future—or perhaps the US will invade them first, but I kind of doubt it right now.



What's the Deal with Drug Production?

If you wanted to see the biggest production center for heroin on the planet, you'd probably take a trip—no pun intended—to Afghanistan. Afghanistan is the largest producer of opium in the world, weighing in at almost 5,000 metric tons/year. That's 87 percent of the opium supply of the entire world. Quite impressive.

The funny thing is that under Taliban rule, opium production was much, much lower. Once the US intervened and knocked the Taliban out, with an almost audible "smack" heard round the world, opium production nearly doubled each year after 2001. 2009 was a world record breaker for most opium produced in the country. Nice job, guys! Here's a hint for you: most of that isn't going to the pharmaceutical companies that turn opium into legitimately consumed pain killers. This is hardcore stuff getting released into the streets, mostly in Europe and Southeast Asia, in larger and larger quantities because that's where the money can be made. It's untaxed, uncut, and a hell of a cash crop for this economically landlocked region. Production is only increasing, despite US occupation.



What a pretty poppy garden these boys are tending—of opium poppies, that is!



THE GAME CONTINUES TO EVOLVE WITH NEW PLAYERS

To summarize: Central Asia is an isolated region both physically and economically—a culturally and economically marooned region—which has been suddenly thrust back into prominence in the new version of The Great Game. Why? It's mostly for resources, such as oil and natural gas, but also for the fight against terrorism and the drug trade. We also see some of the old school elements of The Great Game here, such as Russia not wanting to completely lose all of its influence in the region. The US military presence is actually seen as a direct threat to this historic Russian influence. Vladimir "The Man" Putin is not too happy about it. And he is on the move again to remedy this. . . .

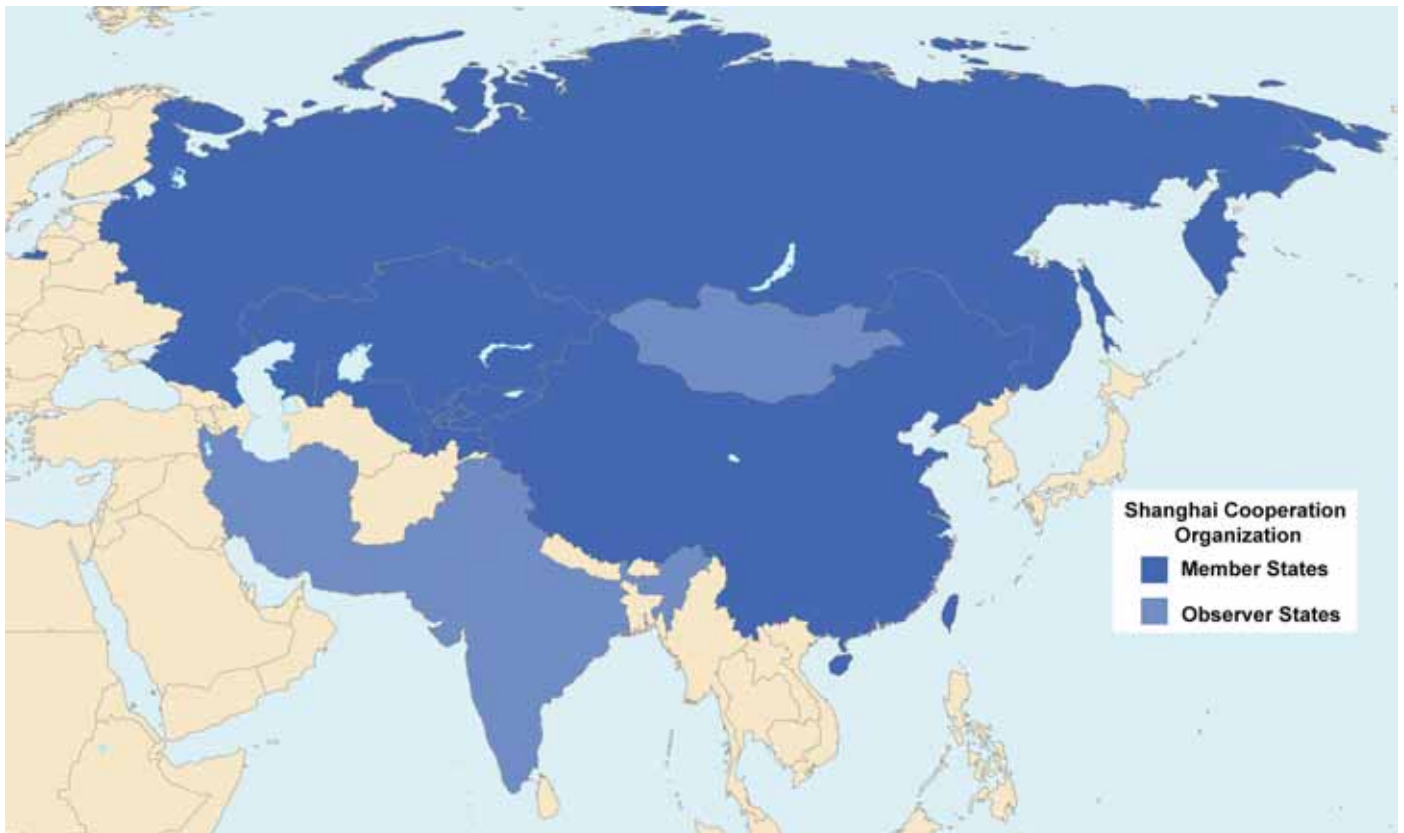
Luckily for him, Putin's country is currently winning the fight. Some countries have requested the US troops to leave as soon as possible, and Uzbekistan recently just blatantly kicked them out. Many of the "-stan" countries are already reestablishing their old ties with Russia for security purposes, but they're also increasingly looking to Russia for leadership in the oil and natural gas industries. Putin is happy again! The vehicle for this renewed Russian leadership is a supranationalist organization named the SCO. You heard it here first: this group has huge potential to become a major global force in the coming decades. And yet another force is rising as well: a Russian-forged "Eurasian Union" seeks to pull the entire region back into the arms of Mother Russia . . . a possible USSR 2.0? Too early to call, but never too early to learn more about it. . . . Best to know a bit more about these entities right now.

YOU GOTTA KNOW THE SCO

Watch out! This coalition could be hot! The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) is an intergovernmental organization founded on June 14, 2001, by leaders of the People's Republic of China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.



Comrade Russia iz still vatching Central Asia.



THE hot block to watch: and its so much more than trade oriented!

The SCO facilitates cooperation and organization on issues like natural resource extraction, counterterrorism, extremism, and separatism. They are now holding joint military exercises and also thinking about a free trade pact. Though the declaration on the establishment of the SCO contained a statement that it "is not an alliance directed against other states and regions and it adheres to the principle of openness," most observers believe that one of the original purposes of the SCO was to serve as a counterbalance to the US, and particularly to avoid conflicts that would allow the US to intervene in areas near both Russia and China.

How are they pulling this off? In lots of curious ways that have tremendous potential for the future of these states and also the world. First, there have been very secretive discussions about these countries creating a common cartel based on their exports of natural gas—basically, an Asian version of OPEC. Just as OPEC countries control the lion's share of exported oil and, therefore, control the supply and price, the combined SCO countries control a significant amount of global reserves of natural gas. It is not a stretch of the imagination to see them pooling their resources together under a single umbrella of control, which would make them all even richer.

Second, the SCO states are strengthening their defense pacts with each other to ensure that no interference or invasion will be allowed from outsiders. In essence, they are trying to slowly form an Asian version of NATO. The movement in this direction is why most US military bases have now been kicked out of SCO states, and also why America's request to become an observer state has been declined every single year. It's also why the SCO has started doing the joint military exercises. By the way, don't start digging your backyard bunker in preparations for WWII anytime soon; militarily, these guys are still pretty clueless—okay, they outright stink. The main point is that they're just beginning to do these exercises, thus setting the trend for the future.

Let's get you even smarter. What current observer state in the map above do you think is desperate to become a full member of the SCO? If you said Iran, then give yourself a cookie and a barrel of oil. If Iran joined this Asian NATO club, then the prospects of US/UN actions to prevent Iran from going nuclear would instantaneously become a world crisis. Dig what I'm saying here? It's a really big deal.

But hang on! Don't let me paint a picture that makes the SCO look like an enemy of the US or Team West in general! They are not! The SCO met in April 2009 specifically to try and find "an Asian solution" to the War of Terror debacle going down in both Afghanistan and Pakistan. The US/NATO/Team West is losing this battle, and the SCO club knows it, and are NOT happy about it! See, China, Russia, and India are all states that have active Islamic extremist/terrorist problems too, and they DO NOT want to see the Afghan/Pakistani area continue to melt down, mostly because the impacts to them will be much, much, much greater than any real impact to the US. Think about it: the SCO (plus observers) surround this troubled area, and trouble has a way of spreading like a cancer. On multiple fronts like terrorism and drugs, the SCO shares strategic interest with the US and Team West. Hopefully, they can think up a better solution than the West has been trying, 'cuz it can't get worse!



Let's go go go with the the SCO . . . and get back our military mo-jo!

Organizing pipeline construction, conducting military exercises, trying to come up with Asian solutions to Asian problems, and refusing to grant the US observer status. Ouch! This thing is on fire, and no one in our country has probably even heard of it, but I think you should. But I bet due to the recent resurgence of Russia (particularly as they re-took Crimea), maybe more of you have heard reference to another aspiring entity in this area: The Eurasian Union. . . .

PUTIN'S PROJECT: SOVIET UNION RE-BOOT?

Watch out kids! This sucker is ready to launch! Or possibly explode while on the launch pad! Too close to call here in 2014, but this idea is being talked about everywhere as the proposed game plan for a new Russian-led re-do of the Soviet Union! But there ain't no more 'soviet' stuff, so let's now call it a kinder, gentler, more politically correct and inviting "Eurasian Union." Something led by Russia that is kinder and gentler and inviting? lol NOT! So what is this really all about, and why is it terrifying to so many?

While originally an idea posed by Kazak President Nursultan Nazarbayev, the Eurasian Union, is without a doubt the wet dream of Russian President Vladimir Putin, who now openly seeks to reassert a resurgent Russia's influence and out-right power into areas it lost during the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Putin for his part has actually referred to the demise of the USSR as "the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century," . . . and it is a catastrophe he now seems intent on fixing. Through economic coercion, intimidation, and possibly force if necessary, Russia looks to be regaining its old sphere of influence here in Central Asia and Eastern Europe. Is this an attempt to rebuild the Soviet Union proper? Is this a new Cold War? Eh. I'm not sure it is all that, at least not yet, but here is the deal as of 2014:

The formations of it are entirely logical and benign, at least on paper: In November 2011, the presidents of Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan signed an agreement to create the Eurasian Economic Union: a customs union (like a free trade zone) with partial economic integration between the states, with the intent of becoming something very close to the



I see the Russian Re-Boots coming!



European Union (you know, the EU) in the future with full-on economic, political, and military cooperation. Supposed to be fully functional by 2015. Just like the EU, it is supposed to safeguard regional economical interests and facilitate trade and business within member countries. Since Russia is obviously the powerhouse player in all of this, Putin could not be happier. But he isn't satisfied just as yet. . . .

Putin's grand gamble here is that his union (and yes, it is referred to as his personal grand strategy at this point) will become a successful alternative to the European Union, and that states of Central Asia, Eastern Europe, and even the Caucasus Region will want to sign up for it. I suppose it is being marketed as a great way to boost economic growth, without having to bother with all that pesky democracy and human rights stuff. And it is definitely being pushed as an alternative to joining Team West. And it definitely is Russia trying to regain "influence" in areas it previously held as its own. The Ukraine was to be a jewel in the crown of all of this, thus Putin's interest in keeping that country in the Russian orbit, and the Eurasian Union specifically. That whole taking over Crimean Peninsula stuff? Yeah, that was the kick-off of the game, not the finish of it. And what game would that be? Ah! Back to the Great Game of course! This is a now fervently fired-up Russian response to the last two decades of the EU and NATO creeping closer and closer to its borders. The Bear wants its backyard back! Game on!

Will it work? Who knows yet, but everyone in the 'hood is worried, as Russian pressure to get on board this Eurasian party train is growing. The EU, the US, and even China are watching these developments warily. States that have lots of ethnic Russian people in them (like Kazakhstan) are starting to fear a Russian take-over of parts of their territory, much like what happened to Ukraine with Crimea. Belarus may be concerned about being re-absorbed altogether. But the other Central Asian states are now also stuck in this battle for control, as Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are highly dependent on Russian foreign aid and economic trade . . . they will likely join. The other -stans seem to be hedging their bets, as they

like their sovereignty more than they like Russia. Armenia has announced it will join soon, and the fate of Ukraine as a whole is (as of this writing) still unsettled . . . a full Russian takeover of that state will see it bolster the Eurasian Union's ranks into a fully legit power block. But will Putin want to go that far to see his 21st century Ruskie dream realized? We will soon find out. . . .



GAME ON

Terrorism is a problem which, despite US influence, is not going away; it's actually increasing. To be completely frank, Afghanistan is the only real hotspot and haven for most of the terrorism in the region right now, mostly related to the US/NATO war and the lack of any strong and stable government functionality. When you look at the rest of the "-stan" countries in this region, they are all strong-arm authoritarian types, mostly influenced by the biggest strong-arm of them all: Vladimir Putin in Russia, and also the fairly assertive commie crew over in China. As such, those states are extremely successful at repressing and/or eliminating terrorist elements. Unfortunately, they are also good at repressing any democratic and human rights elements. I don't want to paint this region in an entirely negative light, because they do have some positive things coinciding with some of the wealth accumulation due to their increasing natural gas and oil exports. One of the things I like people to remember is when we say, "Crap, this sucks! Gas is going to be five dollars a gallon this summer. This is terrible. Oil is 130 dollars a barrel, this is terrible!" Well, it may suck for you, but it actually means great things for Central Asia and any other oil and gas producing region. That means their revenues are expanding, and they have a little more wealth, hopefully to spread around to their citizens.

Things may be looking up for the "-stans." Economic integration in Central Asia has risen to an all time high for the last 500 years. States are figuring out that they must work together in order to effectively build the infrastructure to get their petroleum products exported out to the rest of the world. With that type of cooperation comes increased trade and communications. That is why the Plaid Avenger really wants you to know all about that SCO, because it is becoming the most effective organizational superstructure to accelerate this process. Look for the SCO to not only become an OPEC-style cartel of natural gas in Asia, but also a NATO-style defense structure with which many Asian nations might be keen to get involved. Trade and economic integration will follow. I need say no more about the Eurasian Union at this point, but it also may become a force to be reckoned with, for better or worse.

This is a place of fairly extreme economic disparity and massive challenges in terms of infrastructure creation; however, at the same time, due to its Soviet influence, this is a fairly literate region. People are fairly well-educated and the illiteracy rates are some of the lowest in the world (except Afghanistan, of course). In terms of standards of living, access to health care and literacy rates, they are not doing too badly (except Afghanistan, of course). With Russia and China as powerful bookends, a new Asian OPEC and an Asian NATO, things are looking up, although the authoritarian structure in the governments of most of these places may still keep the people down for some time to come. But that's a story for another time and another place.

The region continues to evolve quickly, as Vladimir Putin's return to the Presidency of Russia has created a promise of an "Eurasian Union" filled with trade and cooperation to compete with the EU, and with a likely 10 more years of Vladimir coming, watch for further Russian and Chinese investment/integration in Central Asia to become a reality. In addition, the Afghanistan campaign now appears to be winding down way faster than anyone would have anticipated: the US has exit plans for 2015; so look for the Afghan problem to be thrown into the laps of the SCO countries, who will be forced to pick up the hot potato and do something with it. What that something will be is anybody's guess right now, but for sure policy changes are coming to the Afghan situation, and the region as a whole.

Let's get to the next superpower on the planet . . .

CENTRAL ASIA RUNDOWN & RESOURCES

View additional Plaid Avenger resources for this region at http://plaid.at/c_asia



BIG PLUSES

- Huge reserves of oil and natural gas, with more being discovered every year
- Region now being courted heavily by Russia and China and Iran, with even a distant Uncle Sam trying to exert some influence (albeit mostly unsuccessfully)
- The SCO is a possible unifying entity of the region that is just getting warmed up here in the 21st century
- Region is surrounded by great powers (Russia, China, India) who all have a sound and stable Central Asia in their best interests; that was not so 100 years ago



BIG PROBLEMS

- Landlocked and largely isolated from world economy (although this is changing)
- Tough terrain and climate make inter-regional connections challenging or impossible
- Ummm . . . Afghanistan? Enough said
- Drug production and distribution (primarily of heroine) is widespread, and drug addiction is actually increasing within the region as well
- Overwhelmingly reliant on oil and natural gas exports; not economically diversified
- Supposedly a great area for terrorists, separatists, and other rabble rousers . . . although this seems to me to be skewed reality as government/SCO crackdowns in the region have crushed much dissent, both of terrorists but also of political activists (except Afghanistan)
- Almost all governments of region are one-party states/dictatorships, with political power consolidated in the hands of few

DEAD DUDES OF NOTE:



Genghis Khan: The founder and Khan (ruler) of the Mongol Empire, which became the largest contiguous empire in history after his death. After uniting the horse-warrior, nomadic tribes of northeast Asia in 1200 AD, went on a world tour of butt-whipping, invading and destroying political entities in China, India, Iran, Iraq, Egypt, Russia, and Eastern Europe. And totally ravaged Oshman's Sporting Goods in *Bill & Ted's Excellent Adventure*.

LIVE LEADERS YOU SHOULD KNOW:



Nursultan Nazarbayev: President of Kazakhstan since the Fall of the USSR and the nation's independence in 1991. Pretty much in charge for life of this one-party state bordering on dictatorship . . . but he is actually very popular and well-liked, so it's a tough call. Kazakhstan is fast becoming a regional powerhouse and serious economy, and is invited to SCO, G-20, Nuclear Summits, NATO meetings and other important international gatherings. Watch this guy; he is important.



Hamid Karzai: President of Afghanistan since 2004, and pretty much the US-sponsored head cheese since the fall of the Taliban in 2001. Has been accused of wild corruption, cronyism, and vote-rigging, and he certainly isn't making anyone's list of top 100 leaders in the world. However, the US is trying to stick with him a little bit longer in the hopes that he can hold the country together and get the government's act together. Don't hold your breath on this one.



PLAID CINEMA SELECTION:

Charlie Wilson's War (2007) AWESOME! A dramatic biographical film, documents the efforts of Texas senator Charlie Wilson, who passed away in 2010, in his efforts to help Afghanistan fight Soviet occupation. While certain elements of the plot are fictional, the film does a great job of laying the basic details of the actual event on the table for this generation to understand.

Beshkempir (1998) A Kyrgyz film, shot and produced entirely in Kyrgyzstan, is a prime example of the new wave of films produced after the country gained independence from the Soviet Union. Film follows an adopted child growing up in rural Kyrgyzstan. Demonstrates several Kyrgyz traditions, including funeral and engagement ceremonies.

Seven Years in Tibet (1997) Based on real events of Austrian mountaineer Heinrich Harrer on his experiences in Tibet between 1944 and 1951 during the Second World War, the interim period, and the Chinese People's Liberation Army's invasion of Tibet in 1950. Features the Dalai Lama is is pretty historically accurate on the timeline and events, despite the presence of a young Brad Pitt.

True Noon (2009) An absurdist film made by filmmakers in Tajikistan about a change in the border between Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. The film centers around two villages that are very close that get separated by the new divide with barbed wire fence, all while a marriage is about to occur between two people, one from each town.

Kandahar (2001) Depressing film is based on a story (partly true, partly fictionalized) of a successful Afghan-Canadian who returns to Taliban-led Afghanistan after receiving a suicidal letter from her sister.

Osama (2003) Even more depressing story of a girl in Taliban-led Afghanistan who disguises herself as a boy in order to support her family. It was the first film to be shot entirely in Afghanistan since 1996, when the Taliban régime banned the creation of all film.

The Kite Runner (2007) Slightly even more depressing tale of abandonment set against a backdrop of tumultuous events, from the fall of the monarchy in Afghanistan through the Soviet invasion, the mass exodus of Afghan refugees to Pakistan and the United States, and the Taliban regime.

Mountain Patrol (2004) Shot on location in extreme awe-inspiring landscapes, depicts the struggle between vigilante rangers and bands of poachers in the remote Tibetan region of Kekexili (Hoh Xil). It was inspired by the documentary *Balance* by Peng Hui.

Story of Weeping Camel (2003) The most exciting film you will ever see about camel weaning! A family of nomadic shepherds in the Gobi desert of Mongolia try to save the life of a rare white Bactrian camel calf after it was rejected by its mother. Great scenery and unique insight into the culture, and if you don't like reading subtitles, don't worry; I'm not sure they speak more than five minutes during the course of the entire 87 minute film. A quiet camel calamity.

Mongol (2007) The first installment of what I heard is to be a three-part series on Genghis Khan. This film is slow, quiet, long and chronicles the rise of the man in his early years before he got to the world conquering stuff. That sounds boring, right? But man, the scenery is totally epic, the battles are bloody, and the pacing and feel so real as that you would swear you are actually there watching the man live. Actually shot in Kazakhstan.