

ECON 6130E: Political Economy of Central Eurasia

HKUST · Summer Term 2026

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Meetings	15 June – 8 July 2026, Mon & Wed, 7:00–10:20 PM (with breaks), Room 1009, LSK Building
Office hours	the hour before each class in LSK 5084, or by email
Quota	60
On Canvas	reading list and session materials, the final-project proposal guide, the question bank

Course Description

This course examines the political economy of contemporary Central Eurasia: the five post-Soviet republics — Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan — together with Afghanistan. It is interdisciplinary, drawing on economics, political science, sociology, history, and anthropology, and aims to give a firm grasp of the major issues in these countries' political, economic, and social development, with a focus on post-Soviet Central Asia.

We study the region through the lens of the modern political economy of development, returning to a few recurring questions: how states build capacity and fiscal foundations, how institutions shape long-run growth, how resource wealth and rentier dynamics work out, how communities govern shared water and adapt to a changing climate, what aid and remittances actually do, and how connectivity, trade corridors, and sovereign debt remake the economy. Each session sets a theoretical debate alongside Central Asia-specific research and a recent policy document from an international organization, so that theory is always tested against development practice.

The arc runs from what Central Eurasia is and how its states learned to govern (Sessions 1–2), to the formal and informal institutions that do the real governing (3–4), to ethnic politics and conflict (5), the resource, water, and climate base of the economy (6), and the external flows of aid and remittances (7), before closing with China's Belt and Road, the final team pitches, and the in-class exam (8). Economics runs through the whole term, filled out by political science, history, and culture. It all comes together in a team development-project proposal modeled on real IO project documents.

Who Should Take This Course

No prerequisites. The course suits anyone with a serious interest in international development and political economy. It will be especially useful to Economics and Political Science students who want regional expertise and applied research skills, to Public Policy and MPA students heading for international organizations, development banks, or foreign ministries, to area-studies students connecting regional knowledge to economics and the broader social-science frameworks, to anyone moving from regional expertise toward international-organization or development work, and to PhD-track students building a comparative political-economy foundation.

Learning Objectives

By the end of the course, students will be able to:

1. analyze the political economy of Central Eurasia with the tools of modern economics — state

- capacity, institutions, and long-run growth;
2. explain economic divergence: why Soviet legacies, resource endowments, and institutional choices produced different trajectories;
 3. assess how natural resources, water and climate, aid and remittances, and trade and connectivity shape political and economic order;
 4. apply causal reasoning and identification strategies to political-economy questions;
 5. produce a development-project proposal grounded in economic analysis and the course literature, modeled on real institutional documents (ADB Country Partnership Strategies, World Bank Country Partnership Frameworks and Project Appraisal Documents, country diagnostics) and supported by primary-source data;
 6. engage with development practice directly — reading how the major institutions diagnose a country and design a costed, evaluable project, and testing those documents against the theory.

Required Textbook

Pomfret, Richard. *The Central Asian Economies in the Twenty-First Century: Paving a New Silk Road*. Princeton University Press, 2019. ISBN 978-0-691-18221-6. (PDF on Canvas.) Assigned chapters are listed per session in the reading list; page- and table-specific references are required in the final proposals.

Recommended reference books (optional)

- Millward, James. *The Silk Road: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford UP, 2013. (A fun, highly recommended read.)
- Khalid, Adeeb. *Central Asia: A New History from the Imperial Conquests to the Present*. Princeton UP, 2021.
- Khalid, Adeeb. *Islam after Communism: Religion and Politics in Central Asia*. UC Press, 2007.
- Isaacs, Rico & Erica Marat (eds.). *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Central Asia*. Routledge, 2021.
- Zarakol, Ayşe. *Before the West: The Rise and Fall of Eastern World Orders*. Cambridge UP, 2022.
- Sahadeo, Jeff & Russell Zanca (eds.). *Everyday Life in Central Asia: Past and Present*. Indiana UP, 2007.

Assessment

This is an intensive research seminar: read before class, take part in discussion, and build a team development-project proposal over the term. You need not read every line — read each session's material with the assigned question in mind, and let it feed your team project. Every task is meant to teach, and doing one well is the best preparation for the next.

The grade has three parts:

- **Reading questions + peer review — 30%.** Six short submissions uploaded to Canvas before Sessions 2–7, graded out of 5 ($6 \times 5 = 30\%$); each carries a classmate's brief handwritten peer-review remark. **Full instructions are in the separate *Reading Questions Guide on Canvas*.**
- **Team development-project proposal — 40%.** Assessed in three stages: Eval 1 (Session 3),

Eval 2 (Session 6), Eval 3 (due Mon 13 July).

- **Final multiple-choice exam — 30%.** Held in Session 8: 40 questions, one hour, closed book.

What a typical session looks like

The rhythm repeats every week:

1. Before class, focus on reading the session's Tier 1 and Tier 2 materials with the assigned question in mind. Aim to derive your specific answer rather than achieving exhaustive coverage.
2. Write a one- to two-page answer to the assigned question(s), citing specific readings.
3. Print your answers and have a classmate write a two- or three-sentence peer-review remark by hand on the page.
4. Scan or photograph the annotated answer and upload it to Canvas before the session. Choose three questions from that submission's session(s) (Sub 1 = Sessions 1–2 with at least one from each; Sub 2–5 = Sessions 3, 4, 5, 6; Sub 6 = Sessions 7–8).
5. In class: a short lecture, plenty of discussion (cold-calling may happen), and a hands-on exercise using the readings.
6. Between sessions, keep moving your team proposal toward the next evaluation.

Grading philosophy

The course rewards original thinking over volume: a non-obvious argument, a creative identification strategy, a contrarian claim you can defend. Precision and analytical ambition count for more than length, and the best work shows how the readings fit together. Every reading, dataset, and policy document should point back to its original published source — not Wikipedia, blog summaries, or AI paraphrases — and every argument should carry a visible reference. AI can help you write more clearly; it cannot choose your sources or supply your ideas.

Team development-project proposal (40%)

The deliverable is a funding-ready research or policy project proposal, modeled on a real funding scheme — the HK CEPU Public Policy Research Funding Scheme, whose actual application form and guidance notes are on Canvas — and aimed at Central Asia. Teams have at most three members; the proposal develops across three evaluations, with every member uploading the team deliverable on Canvas at each stage (grading is team-based). Pick a real, specific problem that answers a big question — research or policy framing both work, and scale can be big or small — align it with the course's session topics and their literatures, and note the SDG(s) it engages. The background, the research or policy question, and above all the literature review carry the most weight; the budget section is optional and not graded. The eventual product is a policy report or an academic research paper. To model it on the real thing, the Canvas library holds the PRFS application form, guidance notes, and funded reports, CAREC Institute grant documents and funded outputs, and the strategy and project documents the development banks use for the five states. A full guide is on Canvas.

Grading runs in three stages:

- **Eval 1 — Project Concept** (Session 3, Mon 22 June, due 11:59 pm; 5%, completion-graded): a one-page concept — problem statement, theory of change, framework, target region, and one anticipated risk. Submit it seriously and the marks are yours; the feedback is the point.
- **Eval 2 — Project Draft** (Session 6, Wed 1 July, due 11:59 pm; 5%, completion-graded): a

full three-page proposal or ten slides, shown to the instructor in office hours.

- **Eval 3 — Final Proposal** (due Mon 13 July, 11:59 pm — after Session 8; 30%): the final ten- to fifteen-page proposal plus a ten-slide deck; upload both (no live presentation required). Graded part by part per the Final Project Guide; the literature review carries the heaviest weight (10 of 30).

Office hours are mandatory: each team comes at least twice — once on the topic before the Eval 1 and Eval 2 stages, and once for an intermediate progress report. They run the hour before each class in LSK 5084; you can also see me in class, before or after class, and email also works.

Reading questions + peer review (30%)

This component drives the readings: open-ended questions across the eight sessions, with six short submissions graded out of 5 (before Sessions 2–7). Full instructions are in the separate *Reading Questions Guide* on Canvas.

Final exam: multiple choice (30%)

Forty multiple-choice questions, one hour, 2–3 marks each, in Session 8 (Wed 8 July; Canvas submission due 11:59 pm). Closed book; a study guide goes up on Canvas beforehand. The exam draws on the session slides and tests the main idea and key finding of each reading — what it argues and what it shows — rather than trivia; a few items are a little more theoretical.

Sample item: “Luong and Weinthal argue that whether Kazakhstan’s oil wealth becomes a resource curse depends mainly on: (A) the share of oil in total exports; (B) the ownership structure of the oil sector — state or private, domestic or foreign; (C) the size of proven reserves relative to GDP; (D) the degree of exchange-rate overvaluation.” (All four are real mechanisms in the literature; only B is their specific claim.)

Reading Tiers

The reading list (on Canvas) uses three tiers:

- **Tier 1 — core:** required of every student.
- **Tier 2 — advanced:** for MA students and anyone wanting more depth.
- **Tier 3 — research frontier:** for PhD-track students and further research.

How much to read varies by tier: read Pomfret in full, read Tier 1 quickly for the whole argument, and read Tier 2 abstracts for the main idea, while skimming the international-organization and policy documents. Let the question bank guide you — read to find your answer rather than aiming for full coverage.

Each session pairs a theoretical anchor with a Central Asia application, and matches it to a real international-organization document (a country strategy, diagnostic, or project) so you can test theory against practice. The course holds a library of over 200 such reports on Canvas, and each session has a short “data hook” linking a real figure to that week’s question. Each session also opens with a short podcast or video to frame the week’s debate. Most readings are downloadable and posted by the instructor, but be ready to find sources yourself.

Course Schedule

Full readings, policy documents, and questions are on Canvas.

- S1** Mon 15 Jun — What Is Central Eurasia?
- S2** Wed 17 Jun — Historical Legacies and State Formation. *Reading submission 1 due (Sessions 1–2).*
- S3** Mon 22 Jun — Formal Institutions. *Submission 2 due (Session 3); Eval 1 (Project Concept) due.*
- S4** Wed 24 Jun — Informal Institutions. *Submission 3 due (Session 4).*
- S5** Mon 29 Jun — Ethnic Politics and Conflict. *Submission 4 due (Session 5).*
- S6** Wed 1 Jul — Natural Resources, Water, and Climate. *Submission 5 due (Session 6); Eval 2 (Project Draft) due.*
- S7** Mon 6 Jul — Aid, Remittances, and the Development Project. *Submission 6 due (Sessions 7–8); project clinic.*
- S8** Wed 8 Jul — BRI, Final Exam, and Field-Work Q&A. *Final exam in class (Canvas due 11:59 pm).*
- Eval 3** Mon 13 Jul — Final Proposal due 11:59 pm (after the last class).

Course Policies

Academic integrity

All work must be original and properly cited: Chicago author-date for academic writing, ADB or World Bank style footnotes for the policy proposal. AI tools may be used for research, drafting, editing, and brainstorming, but the analytical argument, the choice of sources, and the policy reasoning must be yours. Each submission includes the honor pledge:

“I affirm that the analytical content of this submission is my own work. AI tools were used for [be specific — e.g., outlining, editing, or research assistance]. No AI-generated text appears in this document as my original analysis.”

Verbatim AI-generated analysis is not acceptable; AI-assisted editing of your own text is fine.

Late submissions

Late submissions are not accepted. Reading questions are due by 9 pm on the session day; the project evaluations and the final exam are due by 11:59 pm on their dates — the deadlines are what make the seminar work. In a genuine, documented emergency, contact the instructor before the deadline.

Accessibility

Students requiring accommodations should contact the instructor in the first week. Please flag any access issue immediately.