
The Impact of Post-Communist Central Asia's Internal Dynamics on its External Relations

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ABSTRACT

Under the Soviet Union rule, Central Asia was a closed region with no access to the outside world. Both internal and external affairs in the region was directed by the central government in Moscow. When the Central Asian republics became dependence in 1991, the situation changed. Yet, in the new era Central Asia has faced many problems and challenges. This paper aims to explore how Central Asia's internal dynamics have influenced its external relations? The paper concludes that the region's external relations have been greatly affected by its internal dynamics.

1. Introduction

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, Central Asia, a closed and hard-to-reach region of Eurasia, once again achieved a significant position on Eurasia's map, with increased geopolitical and strategic weight. Yet, emergence of politico-economic and cultural dilemmas, particularly until the mid-1990s, and lack of actual capability to cope with these problems properly, has made the situation challengeable in Central Asia since independence in 1991.² Although since that time the region's economy has been developed to some extent, the republics still face daunting political, ethnic, economic, and environmental challenges to their stability and integrity. These factors not only have contributed to the countries insecurity and instability but also have had impact on the region's foreign relations.

This paper aims to explore the Central Asian internal dynamics, which have a significant impact on its external relations. The paper gives a background of the region's history and discusses the problems and challenges that faced its republics after independence. The main discussion of the paper is that, the region's internal dynamics, the social, political and economic challenges and problems, in post-Soviet Central Asia have affected their relations with the outside world. Indeed, the region's governments have been attempting to establish a network of relations with the outside world in order to receive international political and economic support.

2. Central Asia orientation to the outside world

With the demise of the Soviet Union and Russia's partial withdrawal from Central Asia the geopolitics of the region changed from a closed area to one opening up to other interested foreign players. Under the rule of the Soviet Union, the Central Asian republics never gained the status of independent actors in international relations. Foreign relations were directed by the central government in Moscow, and the central leadership determined foreign policy priorities and objectives. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, these independent countries got opportunity to set out a new framework of foreign relations with the outside world, the situation changed,

When the Central Asian republics became independent, one of the most important issues for the region's states was to explore their foreign relations. Accordingly, in the post-Soviet era the region's governments were concerned to render a positive image in the eyes of the international community, and to promote their self-identity in international relations, attain membership of regional and international organisations, particularly the United Nations (UN), expand relations with the

² Central Asia comprises of five republics, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. The region is bordered by Russia to the north, Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan to the south, China to the east and the Caspian Sea to the west.

outside world, and gain political and financial support to consolidate their independence and reconstruct their economic system.

To achieve these objectives the Central Asian governments needed to strengthen their independence, maintain sovereignty, and give high priority to national consolidation and security. Accordingly, the region's governments' priorities have appeared to be regime survival and economic construction, with foreign policy considerations relevant only if they support these goals. In this regard, Martha Brill Olcott (1996) in the early 1990s wrote:

Now the outside world could be let in, and each of the leaders saw the arrival of the international community as his salvation. Foreigners would help generate the capital that economic development required, through the purchase of energy and other valuable raw materials, through international funding (in part through joint ventures) Soviet-era plans for resource extraction as well as through the further expansion of these projects, and through the use of foreign aid, international credits, and joint ventures to reform agriculture and to modernise and expand the industrial base.

The region's states have devoted, and continue to devote considerable effort to forming and implementing their foreign relations. However, what cannot be ignored is that the Central Asian orientation to the outside world has been influenced by their internal dynamics. In other words, the challenges and problems that the region's states have been faced since dependence, and their history have greatly affected their foreign relations.

As for the outside world, for various reasons, Central Asia is also of increased importance to a considerable number of regional and extra-regional powers. Several specific circumstances have motivated these powers to play a role in Central Asia and to establish relations with the region's republics. First, Central Asia combines an important geopolitical location with valuable energy resources, giving rise to the particular issue of exporting oil and gas from the area. Second, it is characterised by political instability, undeveloped economy, radical Islamist movements and also proximity to Afghanistan.

3. Central Asia's history: An overview

For more than three thousand years Central Asia has been a crossroads for major ethnic migrations. The region was predominantly peopled by nomadic and sedentary tribes, composed of a variety of ethnic groups. The Tajiks are closely related to the Persians, Kazaks are of Turkic-Mongol stock, also of Turkic stock are the Uzbeks, who also spread across the then virtually nonexistent border into northern Afghanistan; the Turkmens and Kyrgyz were also Turkic, and all could reasonably be described as 'backward', especially technologically, compared to their Russian conquerors (Jukes, 1973). In such circumstances it was not easy for them to develop a counterpart to European nationalism. The entire region was run as two governments, with roughly the present-day Kazakhstan being the 'steppe' governorate, and the rest – 'Turkestan' – under the influence of the main oasis states, namely Merv (Turkman), Khiva (mostly Turkmen and Uzbek), Bukhara (including Samarkand, a synthesis of Uzbeks and Tajiks), and Kokand (including Tashkent, mainly Uzbek). Among them, the Emirates of Bukhara and Khiva were the major political and cultural centres, both were established in the early sixteenth century (Ibid, 1973). Turkestan society was feudal, overwhelmingly illiterate, and backward in its agricultural practices. Warfare between the nomadic tribes over grazing land, and between the nomads and the settled areas was endemic. Slavery was institutional, the Turkmens in particular made a living by robbing trading caravans and raiding adjacent areas, especially northern Iran, to abduct travelers and inhabitants and sell them in the slave markets of Bukhara and elsewhere. From the religious point of view, as discussed below, apart from the Pamiris, who were mostly Ismaili Shiite, the great majority of Central Asians were Sunni Muslims of the *Hanafi* school of Islamic law (*madhhab*³), one of four such schools within Sunni Islam (Ibid, 1973).

Russia has had a long history of contact with the Central Asians and the cultural, social, economic and political characteristics of the region were greatly influenced by the colonisation process, which went through several phases. In the first stage, Ivan IV's⁴ capture of the Muslim Khanates of Kazan in 1552, and Astrakhan in 1556, brought the Muscovite state to the Caspian Sea and the banks of the Terek River in the Caucasus, and opened the gate of Asia to the Russians (Khodarkovsky, 2004). The second phase, between 1580 and 1644, was the occupation of Siberia from the Urals to the Pacific. Through this stage a series of military bases was established at strategic points, and administrative units were established (Akiner, Tideman, & Hay, 1998). This advance brought Russia to the Amu Darya River, and hence into direct confrontation with China. In the third stage, between 1680 and 1760, Russia projected its influence into the Caucasus and Kazak steppes.

³ The other three schools of Sunni Islam are the *Shafai*, the *Hanbali* and the *Maliki*.

⁴ Ivan IV (the 'Terrible', 1530–1584), Grand Duke of Muscovy, was the first Russian ruler to assume the title of Tsar.

Russian rule in Central Asia was based on specific strategic, economic, political, and cultural imperatives. Strategically, Central Asia became important during the nineteenth century. Indeed, in that period the conquest of the region took place in the context of wider international struggles (Khodarkovsky, 2004). Occupation of Central Asia brought Russia closer to India, a British colony, a land of enormous economic potential, and a corridor towards the world market. This southward advance alarmed the British government, so some British politicians began to speak of a Russian threat to India, while Russia in turn characterised Britain as a real threat to its interests in the area (Johnson, 2003). This situation led both powers toward conflict. In this connection, Central Asia played a strategic role for each to counter the other's perceived threat by creating a form of strategic diversion associated with cross-border subversion; this became known as the 'Great Game', as mentioned earlier.

Politically, the Russians in most cases ruled the region indirectly through local emirs; they did not 'disturb the existing society; and where they established settlements, these usually took the form of new suburbs alongside the existing cities but separate from them (Jukes, 1973).' This was because Tsarist regime's presence in the area was mainly motivated by economic and to some extent strategic considerations.

Economically, although Central Asia apparently offered little attraction for Russian colonisation, for much of it was arid, and there were relatively few oases and river valleys to offer a basis for settlement, the region had some compensating features. It was a good source of raw materials for Russian industry particularly cotton. Furthermore, it was crossed by trade routes connecting Russia, Iran, India and China, and even on its semiarid lands a pastoral economy was possible (Becker, 1924). The region's economic value was greatly enhanced by the Trans-Caspian Railway. Its construction began in 1880 at Krasnovodsk, on the Caspian Sea; and following the Persian and Afghan borders, it reached Merv in 1886, Samarkand in 1888, and Tashkent in 1905. Thus, one can argue that for Russia, set on a course of capitalist development, control of this region, with its unrivalled market and suspected rich raw materials, was in some respects important. Count N.P. Ignat'ev, a leading adviser to Tsar Alexander II, proclaimed in 1857:

Asia is the only area left to our trade and developing industry, which are too weak to compete successfully elsewhere with Britain, France, Belgium, America and other countries. The exploration of Central Asia, the strengthening of our relations with it and our influence there, and the weakening of British influence, correspond so closely with Russia's vital interests that it should not be difficult to meet the expense of an expedition. One can expect that many rich merchants and manufacturers will be ready to assist such an undertaking (Soucek, 2012).

As for culture, Russia's influence during the Tsarist period was rather limited, and the region's traditional social, cultural, and political fabric remained almost unchanged (Hunter, 1996). The native population was to be exposed to Russian cultural and linguistic patterns, and such exposure through physical contact, and education in the native language, was believed sufficient to raise the inhabitants' awareness of the superiority of Russian culture, and hence the desire for assimilation (Haghayeghi, 1995). During the 1890s and 1900s particularly under Prime Minister Peter Stolypin (1906-1911) many Russians migrated to Central Asia. But in fact Tsarist attempts to generate cultural changes in the region were minimal; very few Central Asians were educated, and illiteracy was still over 90 percent at the start of the Soviet period in 1917 (Allworth, 1994).

The Russian revolution of October 1917 occurred within an ideological framework that opened the way for new local elites and political bodies to emerge. The Central Asians had received the revolution with mixed sentiments. Nationalist Muslims tried to use this opportunity to gain independence, but moderate Muslim groups preferred to have the support of the new Soviet regime (Miller, 2000). To position the Muslims within the new alignment, the Bolshevik leadership sought to 'pacify and to Sovietise Central Asia' (Atabaki, 2002). One of the policies in this regard was to enforce immigration from other parts of the Soviet Union to the area. During the Stalin government many people were deported to the region: Kulaks (mainly Russians and Ukrainians, late 1920s-early 1930s), Koreans (1937-1938), Poles and Balts (1939-1941), Volga Germans (1941-1942), Chechens, Ingush and Crimean Tartars (1944). Furthermore, under Khrushchev's 'Virgin Lands' campaign, which was planned to turn much of the north Kazakstan steppe into farmland in the mid-1950s, more people were sent to the region.⁵ The Soviet government tried to Sovietise people in Central Asia and elsewhere in the Soviet Union to produce the 'new Soviet man' who, whatever his ethnicity, accepted and shared the values of the regime.

⁵ Khrushchev, being of a peasant background, attempted to remedy some of the shortcomings of Stalin's collectivisation of agriculture. The Virgin Lands policy involved using previously unfarmed areas of land, particularly in Kazakhstan, for growing crops.

The republics' economic structure was determined by centralised Soviet planning.⁶ In fact, the region's economy was tied to Moscow because the USSR was a single economic space, in which all Soviet republics were to a greater or lesser extent dependent on each other. Parts and raw materials for Central Asia's industries were imported from elsewhere in the USSR. The Soviet era also brought forced collectivisation and migration that deeply changed Central Asian ways of life. Soviet resettlement programs and political expulsions brought large numbers of non-indigenes to the region, while collective farming and agricultural quotas initially came close to destroying the local economies and land. However, Soviet rule of Central Asia also brought some considerable progress, including the development of agriculture and to some degree industry, and significant achievements in culture, science, education, and public health, as discussed below, and in addition, provided some access to wider markets for Central Asian products (Kasenov, 2017). Askar Akayev, the former Kyrgyzstan president, had said in this respect: 'Those citizens of the Central Asian countries who possess good common sense and are free from nationalistic prejudices are well aware of Russia's positive role in developing the region. The Soviet epoch was really a sort of Renaissance for Central Asia in terms of public health services, culture, education and science' (Akayev, 2003).

All in all, the Central Asian region has had a long history, whose legacy is still felt and continues to influence its politico-economic life and particularly its relations with the outside world. Russian and Soviet rule in Central Asia widely affected the region's culture, economics and politics, and created a relationship of strong dependency between the local nations and the Russian/Soviet state. The region's politico-economic and social structure was shaped in a centrist manner that presented serious problems and challenges after independence, as discussed below. Thus Kazakhstan's president, Nursultan Nazarbayev, in an interview with *The Washington Times* in December 1999, observed: 'With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the severing of economic ties from the Soviet Union, we inherited an inefficient socialist economy' (The Washington Times, 1999).

4. Central Asia: New development

The breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991 made salient the geopolitical, economic and cultural importance of Central Asia. As a result the geopolitics of the region changed, and it was led to the new international, geopolitical and geoeconomic arena. The republics became free to 'pursue their own individual policy lines towards religion, politics, the economy and anything else for that matter' (Olcott, 1994). Of course, the region's governments did not have complete liberty, because even after about three decades still it is hard to claim that they are not dependent on Russia, especially economically and militarily. Geopolitically, Central Asia is an important region due to its strategic position. Economically, some of the republics, particularly Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, sit on vast natural resources, notably oil and gas, as well as gold and uranium are also present. These two important characteristics have impelled regional and international powers to seek roles in Central Asia, and exploit their economic and political problems to gain influence. Consequently, these republics have become new fields in post-Cold War international politics and economics (Mikheev, 2019).

Since independent the Central Asian governments have been seeking to develop regional cooperation. Their leaders viewed creation of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) on 21 December 1991 as a step toward cooperation.

However, in practice the Central Asian republics have benefited little from CIS, and for them it has been 'an empty shell' (Krapohl, & Dienes, 2019). Efforts for regional cooperation have not been limited to the creation of CIS; they have tried to coordinate economic activities so as to minimise inflation, curb the alarming fall in industrial production, and promote regional security. A. Koshanov and B. Khusainov have analysed the economic aspects of regional cooperation in Central Asia and the stumbling blocks on the road to regional integration. In their analysis they proceed from an assumption that a shared strategy of economic cooperation and closeness of economic models were two indispensable conditions of successful unification. Their conclusion is of strategic importance: deepening of integrative processes is an objective necessity (Zogg, 2019).

The establishment of any regional organisation might serve the republics' interests, but, as Martha Brill Olcott (1994) has pointed out, any notion that offers to bring these states together has to be balanced with some discussion of potential areas of conflict between them. Furthermore, some leaders have shown little interest in regional cooperation. Turkmenistan proclaimed a neutral policy, and has displayed no enthusiasm for regional collaboration (Rakhimov, 2010). This lack of a strong movement towards regional cooperation is also associated with the different nature of politics in each country. Kyrgyzstan, for example, has been characterised as a multi-party, liberal, free-market, open and democratic country, and is

⁶ Of course, their economies improved compared to the Tsarist period. However, oil, gas and hydroelectric resources in Central Asia were less than those elsewhere in the USSR. The average standard of living in the region was lower than in Russia, but much higher than in neighbouring countries (Sadri, 1997).

regarded as the most progressive of the republics in carrying out market reforms.⁷ Kyrgyzstan former President, Akayev, had tried to present his country to the West as an enlightened state that welcomes cooperation with foreign states (Fuller, 1994). In contrast, the regime in Uzbekistan has been the most aggressive toward religion, opposition groups and political parties in the region particularly during Islam Karimov presidency. And former Turkmenistan's president, Murat Niyazov, who had taken the title of *Turkmenbashi* (father of all Turkmens) in emulation of Kemal Ataturk (Turkey), was a dictator whose 'corrupt, venal, and misguided policies were driving his country to isolation and international ridicule and its population to ruinous poverty' (Central Asia Report, 2002).

Therefore, one can assume that one reason why the Central Asian countries have concentrated more on the outside world is lack of intra-regional integration. They have been in competition in gaining assistance from regional and international powers.⁸ In fact, political friction among them, and their preference for dealing with outsiders, perceived as more capable and less dangerous, are responsible for the failure to put rhetoric into practice.

5. The role of Islam in Central Asia: past and present

Islam came to Central Asia in the early part of the 8th century CE as part of the Muslim expansion and conquest of the region. In fact, Islam entered this region not long after its birth in the seventh century in the Arabia. By the tenth century Central Asia emerged as one of the great centers of Islamic culture and learning, especially the great Silk Road cities of Samarqand and Bukhara (Naqash, 2015).

Yet, during the Soviet Islam and Muslim in Central Asia experienced a very tough situation. One of the key tenets of the Soviet system was that religion was incompatible with communism, and the communists methodically set about repressing all forms of religious expression (Rashid, 2002). In Central Asia, as a part of the general aggressive Communist policy towards religion, and with the help of indigenous 'modernising' elements, who regarded Islam as an obstacle to development, Moscow embarked on a thoroughgoing attack on Islam (Jukes, 1973).⁹ Of course, before the Bolsheviks, the Tsarist regime evidently had also the same view about the deadening influence of Islam as their Soviet successors (Wheeler, 1997). Both the Tsarist and Soviet regimes criticised Islam due to Muslims' anti-colonial actions against Russian conquest, colonisation, economic exploitation, and political discrimination. M.I. Venyukov, geographer, statistician, ethnologist and publicist, (1832-1901), wrote that Russia 'should provide Central Asian peoples access to industrial progress, proselytise 'Christianity', while replacing the elements of Mohammedan fanaticism by humanizing elements...and consequently freeing man from the narrow bondage of Islam' (Hauer, 1989). Compared with the Tsars, who did not destroy or desecrate Islamic institutions such as mosques, the Soviet anti-Islamic movement was much wider and deeper (Bennigsen & Chantal, 1967).¹⁰

Yet, Islam has played an important and all-encompassing role in Central Asia's history, culture, and society, bringing fundamental changes to all aspects of life, and creating an Islamic civilization that gave the people of the region a new identity (Frye, 2002). However, some scholars have debated the extent of Islam's impact on the region. A. Ehteshami, for example, has argued that 'historically, Islam has not played an identical role in each of these societies' (Ehteshami, 1994). Other analysts note that even the long periods of Russian imperial rule and atheistic Soviet-era indoctrination failed to eliminate Islam's influence in Central Asia (Gross, 1992). Aleksei Malashenko (1999), head of Islamic Studies at the Institute of Oriental Studies, Russian Academy of Sciences, for example, has pointed out that Islam has always been a main factor of the religious and cultural identity of Central Asia, even if this self-identification existed only unofficially under the Soviet government.¹¹

⁷ This was so until about the mid 1990s; this country then also moved away from democratic reform. For discussion (Anderson, 1999).

⁸ This sort of disintegration to some degree resulted from Soviet economic strategy and also the nature of the region's market and products. What these republics produced was mostly sent to other Soviet republics, not to each other. The cotton-producing countries, for example, were not markets for each other's cotton. Kazakhstan's oil, in its southwest, was exported crude to Russia; its refineries were in its north-east, working on crude oil imported from West Siberia. Tajikistan has an aluminum smelter, but it imported aluminum ore mostly from Siberia. The main market for Uzbekistan's fruit and vegetables was Russia.

⁹ Russian Orthodox Christianity was attacked as viciously as Islam.

¹⁰ However, the intensity of persecution varied over time. In the early years, 1917-1920, Moscow pursued official tolerance of Islam, but turned to repression in the period of industrialisation and collectivisation and became especially ferocious in the late 1920s and 1930s. During the Second World War, Stalin evoked religion as a patriotic factor, and persecution stopped. It resumed for a while under Nikita Khrushchev (1953-1964), but ceased under Leonid Brezhnev (1964-1982), though advancement still depended on keeping religious affiliations private (Aktin, 1989).

¹¹ On the effect of Islam on Central Asian societies, A. Bennigsen (1998) quoted from an article: 'Religion [Islam] is like a cancer spreading over our land and contaminating more and more people. Yesterday believers used to gather for an inoffensive prayer; today they take part in collective mass ritual. What will they do tomorrow?'

In the post-independence era, in general Islam re-emerged as a public faith, although, with different tendencies in each republic. As the Soviet empire fell apart, the people of Central Asia obtained an opportunity to reconnect spiritually and culturally with their Islamic past (Ro'i & Wainer, 2009). In fact, Islam has gone from being a largely suppressed religion of the colonised to being the publicly-expressed majority faith of the peoples of the republics. This is most evident in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, where Islam has taken deepest root. However, Kazakstan and Kyrgyzstan, and to some extent Turkmenistan, due to their nomadic characteristics and Islam's much later arrival, have lacked equally strong attachment to Islam.¹² The Kyrgyz republic, for example, is categorised as one of the more tolerant in its secularist development approach. Former Kyrgyz President Akayev had stated that Kyrgyzstan is 'against any kind of Islamic fundamentalism. It is a way to regress not progress'(Dinmore, 1992).¹³ In effect, different approaches toward Islam in the region are due to the ethnic orientation and structure of each state. Furthermore, the strength or weakness of the democratic forces, their capacity to institute an inclusive rather than exclusive method of governance, and the nature of the government of each country have had an effect on the approach.

As for Islam's role in restructuring the region and its importance as a factor affecting nation-state building is still being fiercely debated. Some observers believe that Islam could play a role in rebuilding the nation and even the political system. Shireen Hunter (1996), for instance, has argued: 'Islam's legacy thus has important implications for the current process of nation and institution-building and governance in this region'. G. Bondarevsky and P. Ferdinand(1994) have also pointed out that Islam undoubtedly now plays a visibly more important role in Central Asian politics and public life than before. Yet, existing conditions in the states indicate that Islam has had no room to play an effective role in their politics. The leaders' intention has certainly not been to create Islamic theocracies.

Besides Islam's role in Central Asian internal affairs, its role in the region's international relations is also a matter of debate. Nevertheless, some Muslim nations such as Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia have viewed Islam as an important factor in their relations with the republics. They hoped that Islam could play an important role in their relationships with the independent republics, Yet, about three decades of relations has demonstrated that Central Asia's historic ties have had little impact on the republics' policies toward Muslim countries (Jones, 2017). Partly, as John O. Voll(1994) has also pointed out, this is because Muslim Central Asia had become a weak part of the Islamic world, so Islam could not be accounted the prevailing factor in determining the states' international relations. Instead, economic relations and interdependence have bound republics more than the ideological/civilizational leverages dividing them. States consort with any civilization, however alien, as long as the price is right and goods are ready. As Fouad Ajami(1993) has argued, civilizations do not control states, instead states control civilizations. It seems that for the countries of Central Asia economic development has been more essential than ideological matters. During the last three decades, the greatest challenge to the newborn republics has been how to rebuild their economies, and change all sectors of society. They, as mentioned earlier, have sought secular models, like that of Turkey, rather than an Islamic mode(EurasiaNet, 2017).

However, some observers argue that even the relations of some figures in Muslim countries such as Iran, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan with Central Asia have had a negative effect on the region's governments. Shahram Akbarzadeh(1996), for instance, has pointed out that, although Karimov initially spoke respectfully about the importance of Islam to the Uzbek way of life, increasing Saudi, Iranian and Pakistani investment in building new mosques and seminars in Uzbekistan, particularly in the first years of independence. On the other hand, some have seen Islam, particularly political Islam, as a factor that has affected outsiders' relations with these countries(Lemon, 2017). According to John Schoeberlein, Director of the Program on Central Asia and the Caucasus at Harvard University, 'armed incursions into Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan by radical Islamists whose declared aim is to establish a religious state in Central Asia have sent shock waves through Central Asia, and have drawn as much international attention to the region as any issue since independence'(ICG, 2001). Similarly, G. Fuller (1994) argued that after the issue of nuclear weapons, no other problem in Central Asia rivets international attention as much as the potential spread of 'Islamic fundamentalism'.

¹² According to Bennigsen and Wheeler, this wide disparity is intimately related to the broad nature of Central Asian societies within which Islam gained popular acceptance. Islam first penetrated the sedentary regions of Central Asia where it succeeded in altering the structural makeup of the Uzbek and Tajik societies. In contrast, the Kazak, Kyrgyz, and Turkmen societies were nomadic. It was much harder to establish religion among nomads, building mosques, *madrassas*, and training *ishan*, let alone imams, mullahs, *qadis*, and administering *waqf*, conducting *sharia* courts and so on, among people who were always on the move. Also, most of the work of converting the nomads was done not by Central Asian *Ulama* but by Tatars from Kazan in Russia, sent there by Catherine the Great, who believed the nomads were already Muslim and needed pastoral care. As a result, these countries have much fewer new religious schools, print fewer religious books, and have fewer religious institutions, and much weaker pull to the holy places. For more information (Wheeler, 1997).

¹³ However, a mid-1990s survey shows 86 percent of the population in Kyrgyzstan was sure that Islam's role in public affairs would grow(Malashenko, 1999).

Therefore, it is not easy to view the Central Asian republics as part of the modern Islamic world. After about three decades, Islam has had no effective impact on the republics' political establishments. This is partly because of the 'long isolation of Central Asia from the main centres and cultural processes of the Muslim world, and shortage of religious literature and restricted religious practice' and the decline of the level of religious education, the result of an anti-religious policy (Kulchik, Fadin & Sergeev, 1996). The region's regimes have given only lip service to traditional Islam as a factor of social conservatism.

6. Central Asia's economic situation

Economy in Central Asia had been shaped in the framework of the Soviet centralised economy. As a result, the the region's republics in the post-Soviet era faced challenges and problems.

6-1. Economic background

Theoretically, in all types of colonial relations, the needs and requirements of the colonial centres rather than those of the colonised periphery, determine the pattern of colonial economic development (Hunter, 1996). The Soviet Union had many of the characteristics of colonial empires, notably the domination of centre over periphery, which in its case reached extremely high levels (Ibid, 1996). Central Asia's economic system was formed by seven decades of centralised Soviet rule, was centrally planned and followed development strategies determined in Moscow, so that the republics were unable to pursue their own economic policies. In a speech in 1994, Nazarbayev said that 93 percent of Kazakhstan's economy was managed by Soviet ministries in Moscow (FBIS-SOV, 1994). Indeed, without heavy subsidisation from the central budget, ranging between 10 and 20 percent of GDP, these republics did not have viable economies capable of sustaining the standard of living to which people had become accustomed. The main peculiarity of such subsidisation was the extremely low level of prices on fuels and electricity. In the last Soviet years the domestic wholesale price for one ton of crude oil was just 26 rubles (\$15.2) and for one thousand cubic meters of natural gas only 12.20 rubles (\$7.1) (World Bank, 1992). Economic objectives were set by the central government of the Soviet Union. In effect, the economies of the Central Asian states were cut off from opportunities for independent development, dependent on the Soviet economy, and unable to engage in free trade with their neighbors or others beyond the Soviet borders. The pattern of economic development in the region was determined by the needs and requirements of the central government rather than those of the locals. The republics performed two essential functions for the central economy: 1) providing agricultural, particularly cotton, and other raw materials; and 2) providing markets for products from other parts of the Soviet Union (Hunter, 1996). However, compared with Tsarist times, during the Soviet period the region's economy was far more diversified and advanced.

The main characteristics of this economy were as follows:

- a. a bureaucratic and over-centralised financial system;
- b. artificially and unreasonably high specialisation and concentration or monopoly of production;
- c. indirect inter-republican economic relations based on strong vertical ties to the centre, rather than horizontal ties among republics; and
- d. a distorted system of prices, taxes, subsidies, grants, and so forth. This system was used as an instrument of market formation by the central government through interference in trade, financial flow, income distribution and redistribution between the centre and republics, and among the latter (Islamov, 1994).

6-2. Economic reconstruction in the post-Soviet Era

With the demise of the Soviet centralised and subsidised economic system, the Central Asian republics have each faced a myriad of issues and problems. Accordingly, the key issue for the region's societies was how to resolve the problems and survive. In losing Moscow as the centre of gravity, they indeed 'lost crucial subsidies for budgets, enterprises and households, inputs for regional industries, markets for their products, transportation routes, and communications with the outside world – much of which was filtered through the Soviet capital' (Hill, 2002). According to the World Bank's (2020) estimate, between 1990 and 1995 the region's countries saw their economies decline by 20-60 percent of GDP. Since late 1991 they have pursued a variety of development strategies to reconstruct their economies (Vaughn, 1994). Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan began reform early and relatively rapidly. Kyrgyzstan, for example, embraced advice from Western institutions to institute rapid change. Within limits, its president fostered the emergence of a liberal economic regime. This was strongly supported by international institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, and Kyrgyzstan became the first former Soviet republic to join the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in July 1998 (Pomfret & Anderson, 2001). Kazakhstan has

also taken some significant steps toward economic reconstruction (Gurgen, Snoek, Craig, McHugh, Izvorski, & van Rooden, 1999). Because of these, its greater resources base compared to other republics and some minor political reforms, Almaty has been leading in terms of attracting foreign direct investment (Nikolayev, 1995). Turkmenistan is the polar opposite; the process of reform has been very slow. The president has revived the personality cult and aims to limit economic changes. Uzbekistan's movement toward restructuring its economy is in some respects considerable. In 1995, Karimov, the former Uzbek president, had expressed willingness for economic reform based on reducing government support for state-owned industries and restricting the distributive role of the state (Hunter, 1996). But whether Karimov's regime, with its undemocratic characteristics, had done enough to transfer Uzbekistan's economy to a market economy is questionable, and it seems that the country still has a long way to go (Eskender & Turshin, 2000). Tajikistan is categorised as the worst case in economic reform; civil war (1992-1997) and its aftermath have hindered efforts for reconstruction.¹⁴ In recent years however, Tajikistan has made significant efforts to reconstruct its economy (Gurgen, Snoek, Craig, McHugh, Izvorski, & van Rooden, 1999).

Economically, the region's post-Soviet experience can be divided into two periods: a precipitous decline until the mid-1990s and modest recovery since 1995. During the first period the region's countries experienced a wide economic decline during 1991-1995, GDP fell by 58 percent in Tajikistan, 49 percent in Kyrgyzstan, 39 percent in Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan and 19 percent in Uzbekistan. Such decline affected every aspect of their economic system. For example, agricultural production dropped 45 percent in Kazakhstan, 40 percent in Tajikistan, 38 percent in Kyrgyzstan, 32 percent in Turkmenistan and 12 percent in Uzbekistan. The decline in industrial production was even more precipitous, by 68 percent in Kyrgyzstan, 57 percent in Tajikistan, 52 percent in Kazakhstan, 38 percent in Turkmenistan, and about 7 percent in Uzbekistan in some years (Zhukov, 2002).

In the second phase (from 1996), the dynamics of the region's economy took a turn for the better. However, one can assume that economic reform in Central Asia is still in its initial stage, and much remains to be done. The republics still have a long way to go to develop a non-state economy (Gleason, 2003). According to Freedom House's Economic Freedom assessment, for the period of 1998-2002, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are ranked as 'Mostly Unfree' and Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan as 'Repressed'. And for the period of 2002-2019 all of the region's republics except Kyrgyzstan are ranked as "Not Free" and Kyrgyz republic as "Partly Free" (Freedom House, 2020). The republics need outside help, but the nature of the region's societies and particularly their regimes themselves to some degree impede the reform process.

6-3. Economic challenges

Although Central Asia is rich in natural resources, the republics have so far been unable to overcome their socio-economic backwardness and the problems they inherited from the centralised Soviet economic system (Pomfret, 2019). This system left Central Asia with primarily raw and agricultural material producing economies, with a monoculture of cotton, and mineral production; and maintained an orientation towards heavy industry, collective and state management in agriculture, expensive and wasteful irrigation, inefficient administration, and underdeveloped trade and services sectors (Akiner, 1997).

After about three decades of independence the countries still face some major economic challenges and there has not been any considerable economic development (Batsaikhan & Dabrowski, 2017). For example, because the Central Asian countries were economically integrated into the Soviet Union and were part of common administrative region for planning purposes, investment in transport and communication infrastructure was insufficient to facilitate intra- or inter-republic integration and trade after independence (Rumer, 2000). The location of railways and pipelines, in particular, was designed for taking raw materials to particular processing plants specified by Moscow's planners, rather than to local plants. Although railway transportation in the republics was relatively well developed, road transportation was less advanced. Intra-urban public transport was extensive, but inter-city transport, especially by road, was not a high priority of Soviet planners. As a result, no highway crosses the entire east-west length of the Soviet Union, and hard-surfaced road networks in Central Asia were sparse. The adverse economic consequences from this distorted pattern of infrastructure have been strongly felt since independence, complicating the task of economic reinvigoration (Hunter, 1996). Furthermore, the region's republics were left short of legal and financial infrastructure compared to the non-communist world.

¹⁴ The war in Tajikistan killed about 40,000-60,000 people, created around 500,000 internal refugees, and consigned 60,000 others to like status in northern Afghanistan (Menon, 1995).

Moreover, the result of uneven economic development was that the Central Asian societies had the lowest standards of living of all Soviet republics except Moldova, and most of their populations were living below the poverty line.

The region's countries also suffer from limited sources of water. This is a common problem, which could affect the region's economy and even stability (Fuller, 1994). Competition for water is increasing at an alarming rate, adding tension to an already uneasy region, since agriculture is the foundation of the Central Asian economy. Water use has increased rapidly since 1991 and is now at an unsustainable level, manifested by reduced flows in the Amu- and Syr-Darya Rivers and the shrinking of the Aral Sea (ICG, 2002). The problems of increasing demand and declining supply have been compounded by the failure of the region's states to work together appropriately (O'Hara, 1998). Instead they have been trying to win more control over their resources and to use more water for electricity generation and farming. Water shortage has led the republics toward conflict, especially between Uzbekistan, which depends for irrigation on water from the Syr Darya and Amu Darya and its tributaries, and Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, where these rivers rise.¹⁵

Moreover, the economic situation in Central Asia, particularly in Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, is dependent on world prices for oil, gas and other raw materials, and, more significantly, the influx of foreign direct and indirect investment. Above all, the Central Asian states have an acute need to develop a new strategy of economic reform, and in that context have sought to expand relations with outside powers in order to receive financial support for development. In addition, the region's states also faced politico-social crises caused by economic problems and challenges, such as the growing rate of unemployment, poverty and public health problems (Batsaikhan & Dabrowski, 2017).

All these economic obstacles have forced the republics to place a high priority on expansion of relations with outside world in order to resolve their economic problems.¹⁶ Accordingly, any project and policy which might transfer investment and money to the region is greatly welcome by the Central Asian governments. To this, for example, China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which was announced by Chinese president in 2013 in Kazakhstan, has been greatly welcome by the region's leaders (Sim & Aminjonov, 2020).

7. Political instability in Central Asia

Central Asia has a history of political instability. From the time of Independence this region has been referred to as a "hotbed" of instability, violence, Islamic extremism, and other nefarious qualities that once led Zbigniew Brzezinski to call it "the Eurasian Balkans" (Kendzio, 2013). The causes of instability in Central Asia are rooted in its internal problems, and external as well. The main threat to regional stability has emerged from internal problems; however, the external factors should not be overlooked (Crisis Group, 2011). Internally, perhaps one of the most significant factors contributing to instability is the very rapid and unexpected independence. Niyazov noted in late 1991: 'Of late, the consciousness of the people has undergone dramatic change. Only yesterday most of the people could not even imagine living outside the empire, and today they cherish 'independent Turkmenistan'' (Bal, 2002). He then observed, '[h]owever the fears caused by the empire, the inferiority complex deeply rooted in the minds of the people, are still there' (Ibid, 2002). Some observers have argued that independence came far earlier than Central Asians could have expected, and probably faster than most would have wanted (Patnaik, 2018). This unforeseen independence, indeed, forced the republics – without political, economic or psychological preparation – to face a brand new world, and confront a host of problems and challenges related to the process of nation-state building, the most immediate issue.

The region's countries have attempted to rebuild their nation-states; however, they have faced many politico-economic and religious challenges that have not allowed them yet to complete the process (Isaacs & Polese, 2015). Instead they have been led towards actual and potential instability and security as well. For example, in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, there are some disputes over their borders, such as between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, and political and religious opposition groups are active, particularly underground in Uzbekistan (Baizakova, 2017).

Additionally, the Central Asian societies are suffering from lack of democracy. All, except, to some degree, Kyrgyzstan, are categorised as authoritarian. In Uzbekistan, for instance, the former president, Islam Karimov once had admitted that he is

¹⁵ Uzbekistan in particular depends on water from those two countries, with some 95 percent of its arable land requiring irrigation (UNDP, 1999).

¹⁶ For example Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan established the 'Program of Urgent Anti-Crisis Measures and the Promotion of Socio-Economic Reforms' in 1993 (ICG, 2003).

authoritarian, declaring that 'strong executive power is necessary to prevent bloodshed and confrontation, and to preserve ethnic and civil concord, peace, and stability in our region...My opponents would see Karimov as a dictator. I admit that my activities are somewhat authoritarian. But I have acted in this manner for the sake of economic progress and prosperity of our people'(Haghighi, 1995). The ruling elites have blithely ignored the interests of the majority of people. Their hardship and suffering, associated with the absence of democratic redress, have brought about mounting discontent(Omelicheva, 2018). Above all, the leaders, particularly in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, have used the dangers of drug trafficking, terrorism and especially political Islam to justify curtailment of basic liberties, and now openly reject democratic conceptions of political order. In particular there was a belief that because of ethnic tension and animosity between neighboring countries, the conflict in Tajikistan could spread. Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan were most likely to see outbreaks of violence, and many saw authoritarian government as the only way to prevent chaos(Rotar,1993). Karimov in 1992, for example, characterised the Tajik civil war as 'a time bomb', which could 'cause another conflict like Karabakh' in Central Asia, 'but a hundred times worse'(FBIS-SOV, 1992). Indeed, as E. Allworth(1994) has pointed out, the practical men failed in many instances because they lost track of the people's ideals and just tried to keep power.

In addition, since independence corruption has become endemic in all aspects of life in the Central Asian societies(Tskhay, 2017). German-based Transparency International (TI), an international non-governmental organisation, has ranked Central Asian states as near the bottom of its annual corruption survey. In 2019 TI's annual Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) report ranked Kazakhstan 113th Kyrgyzstan 126th, Uzbekistan 153th, Tajikistan 153th and Turkmenistan 165th among 180 countries(Transparency International, 2019).

Ethnic conflict has also affected stability of the region. In Karimov's (2004) words, 'the ethno-demographic situation in the region constitutes another threat. Changes in this situation have been constantly taking place in Central Asia. In different periods these changes were influenced by such factors as colonisation, the industrialisation of 1920s and 1930s, the deportation and forced displacement of peoples, active urbanisation processes.' The region has nine major ethnic groups of over a million, of which, Uzbeks, Russians and Kazaks are the largest. This ethnic diversity has caused conflicts both within and between the states. For example, tensions between the governments of Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan in 1999 resulted from ethnic conflict (ICG, 2000). These conflicts stem largely from the changes wrought in the region by the Soviet Union and from the chaos that accompanied its dissolution(Abashin, 2018). In this connection Karimov (2004) had pointed out that, '[these conflicts] result from the policy pursued by the Russian Empire which the Soviet power continued to pursue concerning the delimitation of the territorial and administrative boundaries of the republics in Central Asia.' Independence for the region's states reopened a Pandora's box of border disputes, as mentioned earlier. During the past decades they have been involved in high stakes negotiations to define their respective borders(Tashtemkhanova, Medeubayeva, Serikbayeva & Igimbayeva, 2015).

The economic problems and limitations, discussed earlier, have also destabilized the region's republics. The lack of appropriate economic development and the economic downturn since the collapse of the Soviet Union, particularly in the first decade of independence have created unstable circumstances, which have affected the social and political situation in the region(Batsaikhan & Dabrowski, 2017). And these circumstances have affected the region's governments' ability to stabilize their societies.

Moreover, the politicisation of Islam is viewed as a factor which has contributed to the instability in Central Asia. Both observers and leaders of the region have seen this and Islamic parties' efforts to gain power, as a threat(Laruelle & Kourmanova, 2017). In a meeting in April 2000, in Tashkent the republics' leaders described religious extremism as a threat to the region's stability and security that had to be countered(RFE/RL, 2016). In regard to the role of Islamic radicalism in the region in the late 1990s, M. Aydin(2000) argued: '...with Islamic extremism taking hold of neighbouring Afghanistan and movements like *Wahabism* – the Saudi Arabia-based strict sect of Islam – emerging both in Central Asia and in the North Caucasus, Islam might become an important source of tension throughout the region.'

In addition to internal factors, some external factors have also shaken the political stability in the region's countries. Perhaps first and foremost is Russia itself. Although it may have been reluctant to lose Central Asia, it was not prepared to stay in the region at all costs; however, since mid-to-late-1992 it has expected to retain its influence. Indeed, some Russian policymakers are said to harbour the ultimate objective of compelling the region's reintegration with Russia on Moscow's terms(Skalamera, 2017). Accordingly, Moscow has claimed this area as a part of Russia's sphere of influence. This ambition has presented both security problems and opportunities for the regional states. Yet, Moscow invasion of Crimea and the

explosive crisis with Ukraine have heavily damaged Russia's image in the region's republics, spreading serious concerns about the Moscow government integration project in the security and political-economic field (Indeo, 2018).

Besides Russia some other countries are viewed as sources of destabilisation in Central Asia. For example, instability in Central Asia was seen as an extension of the civil war in Afghanistan, especially after the Taliban came to power in 1996.¹⁷ According to observers Afghanistan is perceived as "the main source of threats to the regional security architecture and the risk of spill-overs from this country appears concretely high: growing cross-border armed incursions of terrorists could trigger a dangerous condition of political instability in Central Asia, as well as the devastating social impact of drug and weapons traffics" (Ibid, 2018). Indeed, Islamic radicalism, ethnic conflict, terrorist networks, and drugs from Afghanistan have been posing threats to the region at large – the possibility that the republics might crack at their 'ethnic seams', as was occurring in neighbouring Afghanistan (Ibid, 2018).

Thus, one can argue that instability on the one hand affects the security of each republic and the whole region, and on the other hand slows the process of development. In addition, instability in any republic might affect other republics. For instance, Tajikistan's prolonged civil war stimulated security concerns in the neighbouring countries, especially Uzbekistan (Olcott, 1996). Conflict between the authorities and Islamist opposition groups in one republic could easily spread to other republics.

8. Conclusion

The Soviet Union's disintegration provided the Central Asian republics with opportunities to establish their own foreign relations. Yet, the five new republics faced serious political and economic challenges, which the dynamics of these problems and challenges and new geopolitics of Central Asia placed it in a new orbit completely different from the past.

In these new circumstances the republics faced the question of how to reconstruct their societies. For the region's states, developing the countries' economies, improving the people's quality of life and exploiting their resources have been major economic issues. Politically the immediate issues were building the nation-state and reducing the risk of instability and insecurity caused by problems inherited from the era of Russian and Soviet rule, and activity by external actors. From the cultural point of view, Islam's role has been a significant challenge. Despite expectations, Islam has not yet influenced the economics and politics of the region. The ruling elites have not allowed it to play a significant role in political life. And insurgency of political Islam has been used by some leaders, particularly Karimov, as an excuse not to promote political reform.

Emergence of politico-economic and cultural dilemmas, particularly until the mid-1990s, and lack of actual capability to cope with these problems properly, has made the situation challengeable in Central Asia since independence. Although since that time the region's economy has advanced, the republics still face daunting political, ethnic, economic, and environmental challenges to their stability and integrity. These factors have influenced the countries and threatened their security and stability.

Thus, the imprint of Russian colonialism, the politico-economic legacy of 70 years of Soviet rule, the republics' lack of sustained experience with nationhood and statehood, and the region's diverse ethnic and cultural make-up have all contributed to the degraded political and economic condition within the Central Asian republics. It has been very difficult for any of them to meet such challenges without support from outside. As a result, the region's states have attempted to establish a network of relations with the outside world in order to receive international politico-economic support. Accordingly, the Central Asian states have been forced to join the international community through establishing relationships with a broad spectrum of countries and joining international and regional organisations.

¹⁷ Ahmed Rashid wrote in 1999 'With their porous borders, weak security apparatuses, and crisis-torn economies, the five former Soviet Central Asian republic have every reason to fear the turmoil emanating from Afghanistan. The threats include the flow of drugs and weapons and a possible flood of refugees if the Northern Alliance is defeated.' Ahmed Rashid, 'The Taliban: Exporting Extremism', *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 78, No.6, November/December 1999, pp. 22-35.

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