

Is Russia becoming Central Asia's 'near abroad'?

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Russia's relationship to Central Asia has always been distinctive and ambiguous. Only in the 20th century did it develop a deep sense of mission in this region. Today, Central Asia is fast recovering its traditional regional spirit, which increasingly impacts its former imperial ruler. As this happens, Russia, while remaining a force to be reckoned with in Central Asia, is also becoming an object of Central Asian geopolitical and cultural influence. Hence the notion of Russia as Central Asia's "near abroad". We are publishing excerpts from an address at Kennan Institute, Washington, D.C. on 2 October 2018 by S. Frederick Starr, Founding Chairman and Distinguished Fellow, Central Asia-Caucasus Institute, American Foreign Policy Council, and Founding Director, Kennan Institute:

President Putin's, and hence Russia's, attitude towards Central Asia is no secret. He called the collapse of the USSR "the greatest geopolitical tragedy of the twentieth century." It left Putin with the greatest geopolitical hangover of the twenty-first century.

When in the 1990s the Central Asians formed a kind of regional union, Putin demanded to be included as an observer. Two years later he demanded to be a full member. And then he closed down the organization, merging it into what became his Eurasian Economic Union. Immediately after 9:11 he laid out his position: in phone conversations with every Central Asian president he told them they had no right to deal with the Americans without first receiving his OK.

Unfortunately for Putin, the Central Asians were also in touch with an emerging China. First in the economy and eventually even in the area of security, China gently but firmly began nudging Russia to the side. Kazakhstan's Chinese-speaking foreign minister at the time, Kasimjomart Takayev, adroitly proposed to use China as a balance to Russia. A few years later he was to seek to balance both Russia and China with the United States and Europe. Soon all the Central Asian countries had developed their own versions of Takayev's tactic. By these means they not only hedged in Putin, but accomplished this while maintaining correct and outwardly cordial relations with Moscow.

Meanwhile, Moscow's imperial shadow in the region was fading, just as happened in other post-colonial countries. Kazakhstan had become two-thirds Slavic by 1990, but massive emigration has left it four-fifths Kazakh today. The other Central Asian countries have experienced similarly massive outflows of Russians and Ukrainians.

Kazakhstan, which had no choice but to join Putin's Eurasian Economic Union, made the study of English universal and reduced Russian to the status of a medium for inter-ethnic communication. The new university named for Nazarbayev adopted English, not Russian, as the language of instruction. When Uzbekistan's new president, Mirziyoyev, addressed a formal dinner in Washington last January he spoke in Uzbek, not Russian.

Information is following the same pattern. A decade ago Central Asians' main window to the world was through Russian television and other media. Local language newspapers relied heavily on Russian news sources. Today the Internet is opening new horizons, local language publications are multiplying, and the regional presidents are discussing expanding their own region-wide media.

To be sure, thousands of Central Asians still go to universities in Russia. But the older, deeply Russified generation is passing from the scene, to be replaced by men and women with more cosmopolitan contacts and outlooks.

It is all too easy to overlook the subtlety and effectiveness with which Central Asians manage their geopolitics. Notwithstanding the genocidal fate of Kyrgyz and Kazakhs at the hands of the Russian tsarist and Soviet armies, and in spite of the massive and often corrupt economic and political pressure from their northern neighbor, they preserve correct relations with Moscow, even while adroitly seeking to maximize their own sovereign prerogatives.

This is not new. During Soviet times the Communist Party first secretaries of the five Central Asian states were in constant phone contact with each other in order to coordinate their efforts. During the decades from the 1960s to the 1980s they consulted daily on how to handle Moscow's demands. This region-wide show of independence took place under the leadership of Sarof Rashidov, First Secretary of the Communist Party of Uzbekistan. The late Turdakun Usubaliev, the Kyrgyz first secretary, told me that in the end the Russians gave up. Unless they were prepared to call in the army, they had no choice but to allow the Central Asians to manage their own affairs, provided they turned over to Moscow the cotton, uranium, meat, and fruits they demanded. This important reality confirms that the Central Asian autonomy and self-government has far deeper roots than has generally been recognized.

During the first years after independence every Central Asian state strove to confirm its identity by contrasting it to everyone else. And so we got the cults of Tamerlane in Uzbekistan, Manas in Kyrgyzstan, the Samanids in Tajikistan, Abai in Kazakhstan, and Sultan Sanjar in Turkmenistan.

By 2010 all of the regional states had survived and consolidated. Even the poorest of them, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, could look forward to future income, in their cases from selling hydroelectric power to Afghanistan and Pakistan via the CASA-1000 project. All this brought greater confidence and a greater willingness to interact with neighbors. Beginning in 2014 Putin's Eurasian Economic Union was putting pressure on all the Central Asians, which only strengthened their desire to consult with one another. It also encouraged some of them, especially the Uzbeks, to get on with reform. The astonishing reform project going forth in Uzbekistan today has deep roots in the Karimov era, when President Karimov quietly allowed his Prime Minister, Mirziyoyev, to start scoping out reforms in several fields.

The full range of the Mirziyoyev reform program is stunning, well beyond that undertaken by the government of any other Muslim society. Tashkent has launched a comprehensive outreach to all of Uzbekistan's Central Asian neighbors, including Afghanistan. It has delineated all disputed borders, opened borders to cross-border transport and trade, removed check points that hinder trade, allowed Uzbeks to invest abroad and receive investments from abroad and, significantly, made their currency easily convertible. Uzbekistan has also mounted region-wide conferences on water, Afghanistan, and other important topics. No major power played any role in planning or sponsoring these initiatives. The cooperative spirit of these ventures is embodied in the first call to renew meetings of the regional presidents (including, now, President Ghani of Afghanistan). Proposed by Mirziyoyev, the event was held in Kazakhstan's capital.

One of the central focuses of this new region-wide current of thought has been to reclaim Central Asians' common past.

For half a millennium Central Asia had been the center of the world. Placed in direct contact with all the great centers in the Middle East, China, India, and Europe, its merchants (and not the Chinese) organized and managed the so-called Silk Road between India, China, and the Middle East. They also minted most of the currencies in which the trade was conducted. This made them wealthy: in 1200 regional cities like Merv in present-day Turkmenistan were the largest and

richest on earth. Besides being trading hubs, these cities were centers of manufacturing. Central Asians reinvented paper using their ample cotton fibres instead of the bamboo and hemp used by the Chinese; they invented crucible steel (known mistakenly in the West as Damascus steel); and they exported printed fabrics in every direction.

No less important, the rulers and wealthy elites of cities like Bukhara, Merv, Gurganj, and Balk generously supported culture. Avicenna from Bukhara wrote the Canon of Medicine that became the standard text in European medical schools down to the seventeenth century. Al Khorezmi from Gurganj in Turkmenistan gave algebra its name and is remembered in the term Algorithm, which is a corruption of his name. Omar Khayyam from Nishapur developed trigonometry and sine law, and came close to devising a non-Euclidean geometry; and yes, this is the same guy whose poetry is so widely read today. Al-Farabi from present-day Kazakhstan became the world's chief expounder of Aristotle's writings, and the source to whom Thomas Aquinas and other western thinkers turned for wisdom. Finally, there is the great Biruni who, working in Afghanistan, measured the circumference of the earth more accurately than anyone until the seventeenth century, opened the possibility of a world history by combining the calendars of every culture, invented the concept of specific gravity, and hypothesized the existence of North and South America as inhabited continents — all by the year 1035.

In short, beside its riches, Central Asia was the intellectual center of the world. So why do we not know of this? The answer is simple. Because most of them wrote in Arabic, Europeans and Americans assumed they were Arabs. But they weren't, any more than a Japanese who writes in English is an Englishman. Central Asia, far more than the Arab world, was responsible for the so-called Islamic Renaissance of 1,000 years ago.

Having been reminded of their own history, Central Asians are now busy reclaiming their past.

President Nazarbayev, at a meeting in Astana in 2017, criticized the Russian officials present for using the term Eurasia and even Greater Eurasia. "I have many maps, but none of them depict anything called Greater Eurasia," he said. "Show me where it is! What I do know is Central Asia, which includes Afghanistan. I know we have common interests, common understandings and values, a common history and a common culture. I also know that we Central Asians know each other far better than any outsiders know us."

This awareness has led to many region-wide initiatives. Intra-regional trade is soaring, with trade between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan having doubled in a year. Uzbekistan provides electricity to Kabul and impoverished Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are selling hydroelectric energy to Pakistan. On its own, gas-rich Turkmenistan is advancing a pipeline clear across Afghanistan to Pakistan and India, after US oil majors dropped the project four years ago. Afghan businessmen from relatively peaceful Mazar-e-Sharif and Herat are to be seen in Central Asian capitals. In June of this year the UN General Assembly passed a resolution supporting the emergence of Central Asia as a region capable of taking charge of its own economic and social development and—very significantly—of its security — without the interference of outsiders.

Central Asia in some sense constitutes a single entity. But how can it be organized to reflect that reality? This is a question that Central Asians leaders are now pondering. As they grope towards forming a new regional organization, they are looking for guidance to foreign models: the Nordic Council, Mercosur, etc.

How is Russia responding to all this activity? Mr. Putin may aspire to rebuild the empire, but so far he has been unsure how to handle Central Asia's new activism.

True, Russia voted in support of the UN's pro-Central Asia resolution, but so did China. On the international front, Putin regularly warns anyone who will listen that Central Asia and especially Kazakhstan are part of what he brazenly claims as Russia's "zone of privileged interest," and

they should stay out. But he has yet to back such threats with action. Foreign Minister Lavrov has grudgingly accepted America's C5+1 project of annual meetings with regional leaders, which I first proposed a decade ago. But he has also claimed that America is trying to create a "Greater Central Asia" under Washington's control, as purportedly proposed by one S.F. Starr in Foreign Affairs in 2008. This accusation was based not on original research by Lavrov's staff but on a nearly identical article in China's Peoples' Daily several years ago. I should candidly state that the purpose of my article was mainly to identify the broad cultural zone to which all of the "stans" belonged, not to claim out a new zone of influence for the US. And I know of no such plot by the State Department.

Russia is passive for now, but one must assume that zealots in Moscow, of which there are all too many, could eventually push the Kremlin into a more aggressive policy to counter Central Asia's ever more visible independence. Expect a reversion to classic "divide and conquer" policies.

In conclusion, let us consider the degree to which Russia has become, with respect to Central Asia, a land that is itself being acted upon, and is being influenced and shaped by its neighbors to the South.

First, let us consider the demography. From 4 to 8 million Central Asian laborers, mainly but not solely from Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, are working today in Russia. Their departure for the North relieves Central Asian countries of excess labor and has resulted for now in ample remissions sent to families back home. Most of these workers talk of returning home some day, but few will ever do so. Hundreds of thousands of the men have taken new wives and acquired property in Russia.

These immigrants have already had a profound impact on Russia. The outflow of Russians from rural regions of ancient Muscovy has left vast tracts of good land to be worked by Uzbek farmers. Most immigrants, however, flock to cities and small towns. Moscow's Muslim population is now two million, making it a larger center of Muslim life than Astana, Bishkek, Dushanbe, or Ashgabat. The only Central Asian capitols that surpass it are Kabul and Tashkent, but Moscow may soon surpass Tashkent. The city now has sixteen mosques and whole neighborhoods that seem to have been magically transplanted from Osh or Khojent.

These immigrants supplement Russia's indigenous Muslims, most of whom are Turkic: Volga Tatars and various groups in the North Caucasus. As a result, an increasing percentage of both contract and conscript recruits to the Russian army are Turkic, mainly immigrants from Central Asia, Azerbaijan and the Caucasus who receive bonuses and access to Russian citizenship for serving. Even in tsarist times the Russian army found a place for Muslims, but the current situation is different, as the number of such troops who are immigrants increase. If Russia should plan a military adventure in Central Asia, will troops from the region fight their relatives? Finally, a third of all inmates of Russian prisons are Turkic.

In the political realm, Putin might have reason to worry that if the reforms in Uzbekistan—and possibly elsewhere—gain sufficient momentum they will attract the attention of Russians, who might call for the same kind of reforms at home. Whether or not that happens, will Russia's growing Turkic and Muslim population stay as quiescent as it has been in recent years? And in the long run, won't the sheer numbers of immigrants from Central Asia and the Caucasus force Russia to decide whether it wants to continue to base policy on ethnic and cultural preservation or switch to a system defined by citizenship, independent of identity?

With regard to Central Asia itself, President Putin has tried to impose various economic and security organizations controlled by Moscow, but the Central Asians have responded coolly. To the extent that the six countries come to function as a region, Russia's old "divide and conquer"

methods may no longer work. Coordination among Central Asia could have the effect of constraining Russia's freedom of action. Even if Central Asian countries choose to enter into institutions sponsored by Moscow, greater coordination among them would mean that the Central Asian members would be more effective in asserting their interests. This already frustrates Moscow, as is evident from the fact that its generals excluded EEU and CSCO member Kazakhstan from last month's massive Vostok 2018 war games.

Finally, a note on the U.S., Europe, Japan, and other economically developed and democratic countries. If they come to view regional cooperation in Central Asia as a positive step, they will be more protective of the countries and institutions that define it. Similarly, the successful implementation of the reform program in Uzbekistan will inevitably cause them to support that country and the region as a whole more actively than has heretofore been the case. This, too, will limit Mr. Putin's freedom of action in Central Asia. Finally, the rise of east-west continental trade through Central Asia will engage both Europe and China in the region's stability and welfare.

One can hope that during the coming years Russia will evolve as positively as some of its former colonial subjects in Central Asia. If that happens, the transition that has now begun can go forward smoothly, and to the benefit of all involved. If not, however, Russia will face a serious dilemma. Either it barges forward with its present neo-imperial strategy towards the region or it adopts a posture that is less paranoid and more accepting of the sovereignties and aspirations of others.

However, to renounce empire as the organizing principle of the Russian state and its policies means massive, even revolutionary changes in the very fiber of the state and society.

Yet there is a more pacific path forward for Russia. Moscow claims that its claim to a "zone of privileged interest" in Central Asia is motivated mainly by security concerns. If this is truly so, it should embrace self-determination for that region as far the most likely to means of reducing extremism, quelling drug trafficking, and stamping out corruption. To the extent this happens, our story today can have a happy ending.

If not, Russia will become increasingly "Central Asia's Near Abroad," seeking to protect its own security at the expense of the insecurity of what will become its increasingly alienated neighbors to the South. Let us hope that Mr. Putin's successor, if not Putin himself, choose the latter course. Either way, Putin and his ministers are now facing a Central Asia that is undergoing its biggest change since the Russian conquest and, before that, Tamerlane. It's time for them to acknowledge this.