

## The war in Ukraine may help Central Asia escape from Russia's grip

By Dennis Sammut

The five countries of Central Asia – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan – embraced independence following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 only very reluctantly.

For decades from Moscow the Soviet system had isolated them from the rest of the world, tolerated the corruption and archaic ways of their elites (as long as they wrapped themselves up in appropriate Communist rhetoric), and generally focused on milking the vast region of its natural resources. The five republics were even less prepared for independence than their counterparts in the rest of the USSR. When independence was finally forced on them, local communist leaders quickly re-invented themselves as the new nationalists. Most of them hanged on to power until only recently.

For thirty years the Central Asian republics remained loyal to Moscow, whilst trying to get used, and eventually exploit their newly achieved status as independent countries. But independence did allow an opening up of a sort to the rest of the world.

First came the Chinese, Central Asia's neighbour and erstwhile friend of Russia. The Chinese did not want to alarm the Russians so they focused primarily on trade, construction and investment. They very quickly became omnipresent. The Russians could hardly complain. After all the same situation developed simultaneously in the Siberian parts of Russia. And China was seen as a strategic ally in Russia's competitive, soon to be adversarial, relationship with the west.

Then came the Turks, professing common ancestry, and in the case of most, common linguistic roots and culture. They cashed in on some business opportunities, but failed to make any strategic inroads in the economic, let alone political spheres, as they initially hoped.

Others came too, including the Iranians, the Gulf Arabs, the Indians and the Japanese. But all, including the Chinese, had somehow to accept that this was Moscow's sphere of influence and adjust accordingly.

The west – particularly the US and the EU – were never comfortably doing this, and thus were relegated largely to the margins.

Many wondered why Russian predominance was so enduring? When the Russians arrived in Central Asia in the 19<sup>th</sup> century the great days of the Khans and the Silk Road were long gone. Instead what was left was feudalism, and backwardness. Kassym-Jomart Tokayev. The Russians brought progress, and the Soviets after them, brought widespread education and health care. If you had lived under the despotism of the Emir of Bokhara, Russian/Soviet rule would have looked very enlightened indeed. And so Soviet Central Asia in the 20<sup>th</sup> century developed an identity of its own, and many were sorry to see it go.

After independence in 1991 the "new" leaders, almost all reconstructed Communists, balanced between changing as little as possible, to responding to demands for change and needs to foster national identity.

Central Asia is predominantly Muslim. The communists by and large did not interfere, despite the fact that Islam was blamed for being part of the general backwardness of the area. But the Soviet invasion of neighbouring Afghanistan in 1980 opened Pandora's box, and by the time of independence radical Islamism emerged as a source of anti-government sentiment, and at times, like in Uzbekistan in 2005, spearheaded outright revolt, usually crushed with great severity but not completely. After the attacks of 9/11 in the US, the Central Asian governments, with a nod from

Moscow, allowed the Americans to establish staging posts for their troops to get to Afghanistan to crush the Taliban. They were quickly closed down once the main part of the operation had finished, also at Moscow's behest.

Independence brought new wealth, and new levels of corruption, as tiny elites for example in Kazakhstan, creamed off the benefits, whilst most of the rest of the population benefited little.

But things in Central Asia are finally changing. A new generation is refusing to accept the old certainties, and the leaders are finding themselves having to respond to demands from the grassroots. Leading the change are the two Central Asian giants, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. Their importance stems from different roots: Kazakhstan is huge, has plenty of energy reserves and had positioned itself as Moscow's closest ally in the region; Uzbekistan has a large population, a rich history, plenty of cotton, but has also the doubtful accolade of being a twice landlocked country with, until recently, one of the most despotic regimes in the world.

Uzbekistan's Islam Kerimov died in office in 2016 and was replaced by Shavkat Mirziyoyev.

In Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nazarbayev resigned in March 2019, whilst keeping most of the reins of power. In January this year unrest in the country, likely instigated by elements within the security forces as part of a plan to trigger a coup, shook Kazakhstan. Nazarbayev was accused of being involved, or at least of not responding properly and in a timely way, and this has now enabled his successor, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev to finally strip him of any remaining power.

Both countries now have relatively new and youngish leaders who, despite coming from the old elites, are trying to slowly restructure them internally and refocus them externally. It is not easy.

### **Escaping from Moscow's grip**

The biggest challenge that continues to face the Central Asian republics is to escape from Moscow's grip. Their relationship with the Kremlin is asymmetric. Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan are members of the Russia led military alliance, The Collective Security Treaty organisation (CSTO), whilst Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are also members of the Russia led economic bloc the EAEU. Uzbekistan is a member of neither, nor is Turkmenistan which declares itself officially a neutral country.

Moscow has up to now allowed the Chinese to do business in the region, tolerated a light Turkish presence, as long as it was firmly under control, and shunned any western involvement beyond diplomatic niceties. This fitted well in President Putin's overall strategy of maintaining Russian hegemony in the post-Soviet space. It also meant that Russia could still exercise overall control over the region's natural resources, mainly through the control of transit pipelines and other communication routes.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has triggered a global crisis. For Central Asia the sound of alarm bells has become deafening. Their dependence on Russia not only exposes the huge risks that their independence can be trampled at Moscow's whims, but it also now became toxic in terms of their economic survival. With Moscow under a stiff sanctions regime the Central Asian countries are already starting to feel the pain. However a weaker and distracted Russian may not be able to maintain its grip on Central Asia as firmly as before. We are now seeing a scramble to find alternative partners and friends: a cautious scramble, but scramble just the same, and there are many ready to fill any vacuum.

China and Turkey have been hovering around the region for decades. They have now increased their engagement. At the Beijing Olympics in February, the Central Asian leaders were present in force

despite the fact that with the exception of Kazakhstan the other four countries only had between them two athletes at the games. Senior Chinese officials have also been in the region re-assuring local leaders.

As for Turkey, Kazakhstan's president Tokayev was in Ankara this week to be feted by president Erdogan. Expect the leaders of the other nations to also arrive soon.

But the new situation creates opportunities for others too. The GCC countries have traditionally had good relations with the region. If the doors for economic co-operation were ajar until recently, they are now wide open. The region desperately needs investment. The GCC can also be a model for how to implement reforms without triggering a revolution.

One beneficiary of the current situation is likely to be the South Caucasus region. It offers, through the Caspian Sea, a route out to the rest of the world that does not go through Russia or China. Already one is seeing an uptake in the movement of goods and resources across this route. Azerbaijan sees the opportunity and is trying to exploit it, whilst Georgia and Armenia have been slower to respond.

That leaves western countries, and particularly the US and EU. The US for most of the last two decades contented itself with a symbolic relationship, including through a strategic annual dialogue at foreign ministers level – the 1 + 5. It now sees an opportunity to increase its role in the region.

Similarly, the European Union has had since the 1990s an ambition to engage with Central Asia but has failed to find the right formula of how to do that. The EU now finds itself knocking on open doors. The EU Central Asia strategy recently adopted by the European Council outlines a strategy going forward, but this now must be translated from words to deeds.

### **Afghanistan, the elephant in the room**

Central Asia's attempts to break out of Moscow's grip however remains fragile. And one development last year threatened to thwart it before it had even started. The return of the Taliban to Kabul in the summer sent shivers across Central Asia. An indigenous jihadist threat simmering under the surface across the region risked turning overnight into a serious and urgent crisis. Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, due primarily to their proximity and ethnic affinity with groups in Afghanistan felt particularly vulnerable to a jihadist threat supported by Islamist groups in Afghanistan. So far the threat has been managed but it has not gone away. Whilst the attention of the world is focused on Ukraine, the Taliban are consolidating their power, whilst even more radical elements, such as the fighters of Islamic State, appear also to have a strong foothold in the country. A threat from Afghanistan may end up derailing any reform agenda in Central Asia, and may renew the dependence of the Central Asian Republics on Russia for their defence and security. But after Ukraine, Russia may not be in a position to help much – another reason why the Central Asians need to start looking elsewhere for friends and partners.

### **Central Asia's place in a new world order**

A new world order is emerging after the crisis in Ukraine, even before the dust of war has settled. Central Asia is repositioning itself in this new reality. The extent to which it can succeed is still not clear. But back to the past does not appear to be what most Central Asians want. Mr Putin will be disappointed.

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