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Author(s): Martha Brill Olcott

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Martha Brill Olcott

CENTRAL ASIA'S CATAPULT TO INDEPENDENCE

Few peoples of the world have ever been forced to become independent nations. Yet that is precisely what happened to the five Central Asian republics after Russia, Belarus and Ukraine—the three original signatories of the U.S.S.R.'s founding 1922 constitution—met in Minsk on December 8, 1991, and created a new Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS).

That action by the three Slavic presidents left Central Asian leaders with an unpleasant choice: they could go it alone—either singly or as a group—or they could shrug off the intended snub by their Slavic counterparts and agree to join the Commonwealth. After a hurried meeting in Ashkhabad, Turkmenistan's capital, they chose the latter course. If independence had to occur, it was best achieved gradually; the new Commonwealth structures, they conceded, would make it easier to regulate their interdependent economies.

To salve the smart of their initial exclusion the first meeting of the expanded Commonwealth was held in the Kazakh capital of Alma-Ata; the original Slavs-only club was thus recast in a Eurasian mold. That December 21 meeting declared the former Soviet republics sovereign and independent, as well as part of an extragovernmental union. Each republic, for the first time, had full control of its own natural resources and local economic enterprises.

Newly independent nations face extraordinary challenges, even under the best circumstances, and they usually hold the leaders who "won" that independence in high regard. The Central Asian leaders, however, were inadvertent founding fathers. Most were once part of the old Soviet Union's nomenklatura, which was in turn largely drawn from the region's traditional ruling elites. These leaders were neither democrats nor dictators, nor nationalist heroes. Some were opportunists; most were sincere in the desire to secure their countries'

Martha Brill Olcott is Professor of Political Science at Colgate University and Senior Fellow at the Foreign Policy Research Institute, Philadelphia.

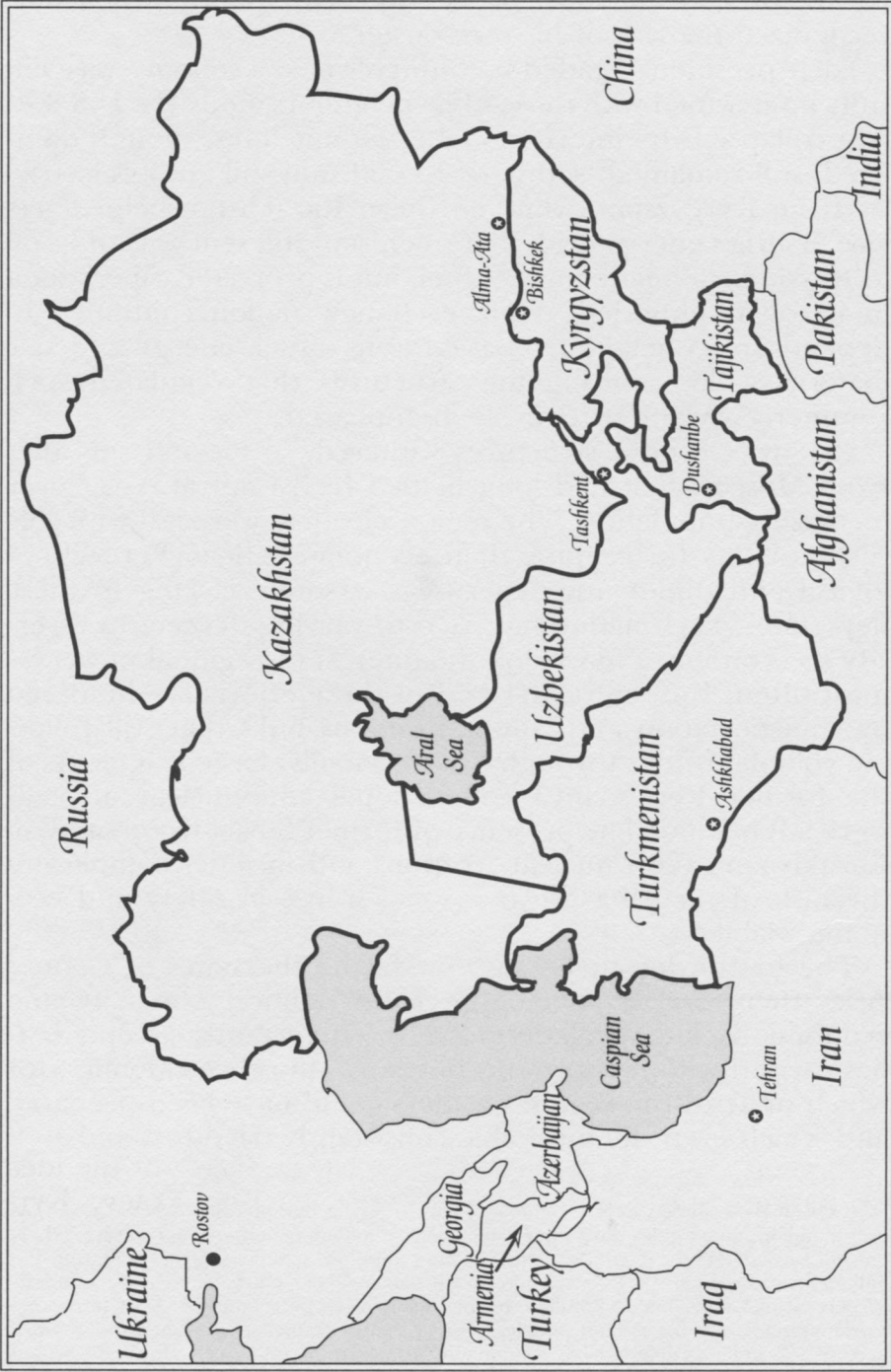
economic survival. All were aware of the highly vulnerable nature of their nations' premature births, and each leader recognized the risk of his own ouster.¹

Each president headed a country whose economy was still fully intertwined with those of its neighbors. Only the U.S.S.R. had collapsed. Its interregional economic links, though damaged, still remained: southern Kazakhstan still got its electricity from Kyrgyzstan, while northern Kazakhstan helped service Siberia's energy grid; Turkmenistan still sent part of its oil to Russia to be made into jet fuel, but it processed Siberian oil in its own refineries. While each new nation continued to depend on its neighbors' basic inputs—fuel, energy and raw materials—the coordinating structures that regulated such commerce shrank or entirely disappeared.

As Soviet central structures withered, so too did subsidies from Moscow that had long helped feed Central Asia's ever increasing population. The region's leaders were left with sole responsibility for keeping their economies afloat. Yet technological and diplomatic expertise was sorely lacking in these new states. Each nation has tried to varying degrees to diversify its economy and exploit the interest of regional powers—most often, Iran and Turkey. But those efforts are hindered by transportation and communications links that still follow old colonial routes through Russia. Finally, large fragments of the former Red Army's conventional and nuclear arsenals were left behind. The presence of former Soviet troops and, in Kazakhstan's case, nuclear weapons and facilities complicates the task of securing the five states' physical safety and economic viability.

The first-order challenge now facing the states of Central Asia, therefore, is to emerge from political obscurity and economic isolation. Nationhood was reluctantly accepted. It has carried with it enormous burdens—mostly economic—for which none of the region's leaders could have been prepared and which even the most able consistently tried to avoid.

¹Central Asia consists of five republics. The largest, geographically, is Kazakhstan, just over a million square miles, with a population of 16.5 million people—40 percent Kazakh, 38 percent Russian and 6 percent German. The most populous republic is Uzbekistan, with 19.8 million people—71 percent Uzbek, 8 percent Russian and 5 percent Tajik. Kirghiz account for 52 percent of Kyrgyzstan's 4.2 million people, Russians 22 percent and Uzbeks 13 percent. Turkmenistan, with 3.5 million people, is 72 percent Turkmen, 9 percent Russian and 9 percent Ukrainian. Tajikistan has 5.1 million people and is 62 percent Tajik, 24 percent Uzbek and 8 percent Russian. The Central Asians are overwhelmingly Sunni Muslim, and all but the Persian-speaking Tajiks are of Turkic stock.



II

With hindsight it seems obvious that the developments of December 1991 were preordained by the failed August coup. Yet no one was more outspoken in defense of a revitalized U.S.S.R. than Kazakhstan's President Nursultan Nazarbaev. Shortly after the coup it was Nazarbaev who appeared before an agitated Supreme Soviet to deliver Mikhail Gorbachev's appeal to save a looser union. In October it was also Nazarbaev who hosted a meeting of republican leaders to reach an economic agreement among the 12 remaining Soviet republics.

As head of a republic with several thousand miles of common border with Russia and whose population is almost evenly divided between Kazakhs and Slavs, Nazarbaev was anxious to minimize a potential split between Kazakhstan and Russia. Then as now his position was that Kazakhstan was unique—"a link between Central Asia and Russia"—and its strategic role would be enhanced if the union were preserved.

Despite the declarations of independence by other Central Asian republics—beginning with Kyrgyzstan on August 31, 1991—Nazarbaev lobbied his fellow republican presidents to sign a new union treaty, which was completed in October. In the end all but Uzbekistan's President Islam Karimov agreed to sign. Angered by Russia's refusal to pay higher prices for cotton and fueled by his own personal ambition, Karimov decided that both Uzbekistan's fate and bargaining position would improve through a more independent stance.

Even after the Minsk accord Nazarbaev made one last and unsuccessful plea for reorganization of the Soviet republics as a loose confederation. Finally on December 16, 1991, when the state's political emancipation was already an accomplished fact, Kazakhstan joined the other republics in declaring independence.

While Nazarbaev was obviously the most reluctant Central Asian leader, none was genuinely enthusiastic about the idea of national independence. All—save Askar Akaev, Kyrgyzstan's physicist turned president—had spent most of their careers closely tied to the management of their economies. Each was well aware of the economic vulnerability of any republic that might try to go it alone.

Reports of freight backups at local rail yards and flights canceled for lack of jet fuel—regular features on the local news

throughout autumn 1991—were obvious reminders of the fragility of Central Asia's existing transportation and communication links to the outside world. Yet these leaders knew that alternative foreign access routes—through Iran, across China's Xinjiang mountains or by way of war-ravaged Afghanistan—were more tenuous still.

Central Asia's leaders were also aware that, although each republic was named for a local nationality, none was a "national homeland." The Kirghiz, Uzbeks and Tajiks all have border claims on one another—and large irredentist populations on which to base them—as do Uzbeks, Turkmen and Kazakhs. Stalin's map-making skills were sufficient to ensure that no Soviet republic would have an easy transition to nation-statehood. There is no historically recognized border between Russia and Ukraine, certainly none between Armenia and Azerbaijan, and Russian "migrants" make up a far greater percentage of the population in the three Baltic republics than they do anywhere in Central Asia, other than Kazakhstan.

There is, however, one striking difference between those cases and the republics of Central Asia. The popular movements for independence that paralyzed the communist-led governments of Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia in the late 1980s, then Moldavia, Armenia, Georgia and finally Azerbaijan and Ukraine in the early 1990s, did not exist in Central Asia prior to the August coup.

Gorbachev's reforms prompted the same cultural and religious revival in Central Asia as occurred elsewhere. But Communist Party elites in these five republics were better able to insulate themselves from the fallout. They became patrons of their national arts, benefactors who helped transform state-owned buildings, mosques and religious institutions, and champions of the shift from Russian to their own national languages in public life.

For now at least, most have been successful and, with the exception of Tajikistan's Rahmon Nabiev, those that failed went quietly. Unlike in much of the rest of the Soviet Union, the roots of Central Asia's Communist Party elites reached down into traditional society. In Tajikistan and Uzbekistan their power was perpetuated through regionally based economic "clans." In Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan these ties were linked to tribal origin and reinforced through economic patronage. As one fundamentalist Islamic cleric from Uzbekistan put it, "Our communist leaders may have

been nonbelievers, but no Uzbek was really a communist—a liar yes, but not a communist.”² That insight applies throughout the region.

Given the intertwined nature of the party, local economy and traditional society, these republics’ communist elites can fall only when attacked from within. That was precisely what happened in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.

In October 1990 Kyrgyzstan’s Supreme Soviet chose the head of the Academy of Science, Askar Akaev, to be the republic’s president, instead of party First Secretary Absamat Masaliev. Masaliev’s defeat occurred only because many of Kyrgyzstan’s leading communist politicians had lost faith in his ability to rule. They thus preferred to join forces with Kyrgyzstan’s small democratic movement to bring in a political dark horse with which both groups could live.

Similarly Tajikistan’s President Kakhar Makhkamov was brought down in September 1991 when Nabiev, the Communist Party leader Gorbachev ousted in 1985, temporarily joined forces with the Islamic revivalist and democratic opposition groups.

In those two republics proclamations of independence had an important political component: they were part of an effort to distance the new state from its communist past. After winning election as president, however, Nabiev again legalized Tajikistan’s Communist Party and returned its property, shattering the political alliance that had briefly brought peace to the republic. After a month of peaceful demonstrations paralyzed public life, Nabiev used pro-government militia in May 1992 to try to squelch the protests. Pro-opposition forces overwhelmed Nabiev’s own defenders, however, leaving the government in disarray under an uneasy coalition comprised of representatives of the communist elite as well as their democratic and Islamic opponents.

In Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan the communists—now renamed socialists, democrats and national democrats—pressed for independence, with only minimal public support. It was rumored that support for Uzbekistan’s independence bill was so lukewarm, in fact, that President Karimov had to make a formal motion to mark its passage with applause. Although the Communist Party technically no

²Information on Islam is taken from my own interviews and travels throughout the region from March 24 to April 4, 1992.

longer existed, most Uzbekistani legislators voted for independence simply to toe the party line. For some the vote was an expression of support for the goal of eventual independence. But few if any who gathered in that Tashkent hall believed that Uzbekistan had seceded from the U.S.S.R by virtue of its own legislation.

Uzbekistan's leaders were using "independence" as a synonym for full economic autonomy.³ With substantial shortfalls in Russian deliveries of grain, wood, construction materials and oil, President Karimov was looking for new legal grounds to deny Russia the cotton and gold that Uzbekistan was required to supply U.S.S.R. enterprises. The logic behind the independence decree of Turkmenistan—rich in oil and natural gas—was similar.

III

Central Asia's leaders knew that the mere act of declaring independence would resolve few of their economic or political problems. They saw these decrees as a logical step in the battle for economic control waged between Moscow and the republics, a battle begun in 1987. Republics first requested financial accountability, then economic autonomy, and only then pressed for sovereignty and finally independence. The Baltic republics led the way; the Central Asian republics invariably pulled up the rear.

Thus even before the collapse of U.S.S.R. central structures, republics had received a degree of economic autonomy. They had been given the right to negotiate directly with foreign governments and companies, provided that plans were coordinated with appropriate central ministries and profits were deposited with central banking institutions. Republics could also invite in foreign banks—as Kazakhstan did with Saudi lenders in 1990. But they could not use those banks as repositories for foreign earnings. Moscow still owned the natural resources and finished goods that republics produced, and so the earnings went to the center.

Greater republican autonomy was intended to strengthen the Soviet economy as a whole as well as those of individual republics. For example, at a time when Sino-Soviet relations remained somewhat strained, direct ties between Kazakhstan

³From interviews conducted in Uzbekistan, Sept. 19–24, 1991.

and China's Xinjiang province led to completion of a rail link between Alma-Ata and Urumchi in July 1991, to the benefit of all concerned. Generally Gorbachev hoped that by ceding some authority to republics he could placate their demands for greater financial autonomy and, at the same time, increase the scope of foreign investment. Soviet laws were modified to encourage development of joint ventures that would introduce new forms of technology into various republics; but the strategies for investment were originally worked out in Moscow.

The U.S.S.R. Council of Ministers thus invited Chevron to develop the Tengiz oil field in Kazakhstan. Kazakh President Nazarbaev, however, did not join these discussions until 1990, a year after the initial agreements were signed. Even then his involvement is said to have come only because Chevron pressured Moscow for his inclusion. The Kazakhs did not become principals in the deal for another year. Public pressure and the findings of an independent foreign expert commission retained by the Kazakh government then prompted Nazarbaev to give Chevron a choice: completely reopen negotiations or withdraw from the deal. Even today Kazakhstan is not an entirely free actor in the project; it retains financial obligations to Moscow due to earlier investments by the U.S.S.R. Ministry of Oil and Gas.

IV

None of the Central Asian republics yet have complete control of their economies. To some degree this is the product of confusion over the purpose of the Commonwealth itself—whether it is designed to be a coordinating body between republics or a device for preserving an integrated economic zone on the territory of the former U.S.S.R. Adding to that confusion from the onset was the nature of Russia's relationship to the CIS—whether it was an equal partner in the union, first among equals or the inheritor of the U.S.S.R.

Russia's leadership has variously played each of those roles. Russian President Boris Yeltsin was quick to take control of the U.S.S.R.'s foreign holdings and ministries and to use economic blackmail to press republics to accept Russia as the center of a single financial system and currency zone. When CIS republican presidents gather, Yeltsin makes symbolic gestures to reinforce the image that all are on an equal footing. Yet everyone knows that Yeltsin does not treat them as equals.

When Yeltsin felt pressed to free prices in Russia, for example, all were pushed to adjust their price structures in accordance with Russia's own timetable.

Though each president must now defend the "national" interests of his republic, all are expected to allow Russia's interests to take precedence over their own. This has been a particular problem in a number of Central Asian republics, where the leadership's limited foreign policy experience may have made them appear pliable to economic pressure from Moscow. Central Asia's leaders, however, have proven less malleable than expected. Rather than ceding power back to Russia, Central Asian presidents have increasingly sought foreign partners to help them develop their economies in ways that are beneficial to their own republics but of little advantage to Russia.

Turkmenistan, for example, which produces just over ten percent of all natural gas exported by the former U.S.S.R., temporarily shut down foreign gas shipments in early 1992; the Russian successor to the U.S.S.R. Ministry of Oil and Gas was not passing on hard-currency earnings to a now independent and sovereign Turkmenistan, which still shipped all its oil and gas through Russia. Turkmenistan is obviously still sensitive to Russian pressure. In April 1992 Moscow got Turkmenistan to cut off gas shipments to Azerbaijan, and some see the Turkmen decision to increase by more than tenfold the price for natural gas shipments to Ukraine as a concession to Russia as well.

At the same time Turkmen President Saparmurad Niazov is pursuing a strategy independent of Russia, depositing his 1992 oil profits in a New York bank that has no ties with Russia or the former U.S.S.R. Moreover he has listened with great interest to the propositions of neighboring Iran. Since 1990 the two states have signed nine bilateral agreements containing plans for joint development of some of Turkmenistan's oil and gas reserves, including construction of a pipeline across Iran to ship gas to Turkey, Pakistan and parts of Iran.

Iran has also taken a stake in supporting the economic independence of other republics. Iranian interests have agreed to support construction of new oil pipelines across Azerbaijan to supply Ukraine with Iranian oil. Nazarbaev led the Iranians to believe that he favored expanding Kazakhstan's Caspian Sea ports so that Tengiz oil could be shipped through Iran; Russian authorities, meanwhile, as-

sumed Tengiz oil would be exported by improving pipelines already running through their republic.⁴ A provisional deal signed between Chevron and Kazakhstan in May 1992 is said to provide for possible construction of a new pipeline to ship the oil through a Black Sea port.

Of all the region's republics Kazakhstan has found it most difficult to distinguish its economic interests from those of Russia. The industrial economy of northern Kazakhstan is more closely linked to southern Siberia than to Kazakhstan's own agricultural south. Nazarbaev has thus been careful to make sure that the pace of Kazakhstan's economic reform proceeded in step with Russia's, often sending to his legislature for minor modification bills previously passed by the Russian parliament.

Moscow has also held Kazakhstan to a tighter definition of "shared mutual self-interest" than the region's other republics. When Kazakhstan carved out a degree of financial autonomy for itself in December 1991, Russia began to boycott the republic. A month later, with many of Kazakhstan's key industries standing idle, Nazarbaev caved in. The two neighboring republics signed an agreement calling for full coordination of their financial and trade policies. Goods priced in rubles were guaranteed free movement between the two republics, but each would pay in hard currency for transit shipments. While seemingly equitable, the agreement worked to Russia's advantage; Kazakhstan sends a much larger percentage of its transit goods across Russia than vice versa. The financial agreement also puts Kazakhstan under enormous pressure to join Russia in a convertible ruble. Given Kazakhstan's greater isolation and generally low standard of living, the agreement could lead to disproportionate hardship.

At the same time Kazakhstan has tried to delineate an economic policy that is, at least in part, independent of Russia and the CIS. Like Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan is more eager to sell rights to new oil fields than to those already explored; earnings from newly negotiated agreements will go directly to the republics' own treasuries. Hence in addition to Tengiz, rights to new oil fields in Akmolinsk have been sold to the French concern Elf. British Petroleum, British Gas and AGIP

⁴Interview with Ali Reza Sheikhattar, adviser to the foreign minister, Islamic Republic of Iran, March 3, 1992.

have bid against one another for rights to oil and gas fields in Uralsk as well.

These arrangements, however, will take several years to reach maturity. For the moment Kazakhstan, like other republics, still does not control the hard-currency reserves necessary to pay its shipping bills. With nine percent of the U.S.S.R.'s gold reserves, Kazakhstan has begun smelting its own gold bars. In February 1992 it also offered to sell \$500 million worth of chromium in multiyear, third-party transactions with Western bankers in an effort to pay off its foreign purchases.

V

The need to pay the bills and, more important, to fill the stores with food and basic consumer goods is propelling the former Soviet republics to pursue independent foreign policy strategies. The emergence of the Central Asian states as independent or quasi-independent international actors is already beginning to change the geopolitics of the region.

Iran, Turkey and Pakistan—all of which more or less border the region—are interested in expanding their influence both individually and as a group formed around the Economic Coordination Council. Certainly the dissolution of the U.S.S.R. sparked the council's revitalization; in February 1992 the group expanded to include all Central Asian republics save Kazakhstan, which accepted only observer status. More distant Muslim neighbors—Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, United Arab Emirates, Libya and Egypt—are also keenly interested in the region. Central Asia not only offers the chance to develop new economic links and to advance religiously based geopolitical interests but it could also be a source of nuclear technology, nuclear materials and advanced weapon systems.

Only Kazakhstan currently has a nuclear arsenal. Nazarbaev has regularly repeated his commitment to turn that arsenal over to Russia and to honor all international nonproliferation conventions. But there is reason to doubt his sincerity on both counts. Prior to the dissolution of the U.S.S.R. Nazarbaev publicly supported the idea of a "nuclear-free" Kazakhstan; he now seems in no hurry to get the strategic weapon systems out of the republic. Nazarbaev's vacillation on the nuclear issue has dampened the enthusiasm of some U.S. policymakers who had earlier viewed him as a possible future statesman of some distinction.

There is also reason for concern about the security of the

nuclear weapon systems in Kazakhstan. Assurances that Russia controls and supervises the strategic missiles are not themselves guarantees that those weapons are properly maintained and safely stored. All of Kazakhstan's shorter-range tactical nuclear weapons are said to have been shipped to Russia. Yet rumors of the sale of tactical weapons to Iran continue to surface, despite repeated official denials. Moscow and Alma-Ata also abound with rumors of Kazakhstan-based military commanders who are willing to sell—or who have sold—operational codes to tactical weapon systems.

Kazakhstan, along with Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, is a source for uranium. In fact a former Soviet Ministry of Atomic Energy factory that produces uranium-238 still operates in Tajikistan. Nabiev, in an effort to attract Western aid and assistance, announced a ban on uranium sales. But he also agreed to expand trade with Libya, and it is safe to assume that the Libyans may seek to circumvent any such ban.

Conventional weapon systems are themselves a potentially rich source of hard currency for Central Asian governments. Kazakhstan has the most sophisticated weapon systems in the region and has announced plans to sell off part of that former U.S.S.R. arsenal. The Nazarbaev government has bought the acquiescence of some of the republic's military commanders by permitting military factories and installations to reorganize themselves as private concerns and to sell their wares through local commodities exchanges.⁵ Profits are shared by Kazakhstan's government and its new military entrepreneurial class. Uzbekistan is offering its local forces similar opportunities.

The future role of the former Soviet military in Central Asia is critical. Though the officer corps of those armies is predominantly Russian, more than half the enlisted men are not. Moreover it is no longer certain that Russians, even officers, will prove loyal to Russia. The local republics are now feeding and housing these men, as well as creating opportunities for their financial enrichment.

Russia's plan to create its own army will only compound these problems. It will increase pressure on Central Asian republics to build their own armies—initially around those in

⁵For an account of the sale of SU-24 MK bombers, see *Izvestia*, Feb. 28, 1992.

the former Red Army who choose to stay and eventually staffed by officers trained in neighboring Islamic countries.

Though an unwanted expense, forming armies would be consistent with the current national aims of republics like Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan. Such a task, however, creates potential difficulties for the more pro-Russian Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. Those republics had hoped to have CIS forces guarantee their security. Now, defense by Russia's army would compromise national sovereignty, and creation of national armies would possibly be a grave affront to Russia.

VI

Notwithstanding the ambiguous status of former Soviet forces in the region, Russia's presence in Central Asia is constant. Even with the formation of national armies, Russia will remain an overshadowing military and economic power. And for at least the immediate future Russia will also remain Central Asia's main link to the outside world.

Central Asians still travel abroad on U.S.S.R. passports; plans for republic passports have yet to be announced. Central Asian states lack the resources to open their own foreign missions and are represented abroad by Russia, having rejected Turkey's offer to represent them instead. Neither do these new states have immediate plans for opening their own embassies, not even in neighboring Iran or Turkey, nations that have already opened several fully staffed embassies in the region.

There are only a handful of trained senior diplomats from Central Asia, and the number of junior diplomats is limited as well. Even Kazakhstan, which has paid more attention to its international representation than any other Central Asian republic, has a foreign ministry that employs only thirty people. Most professional diplomats that are available previously worked in the foreign ministry of the U.S.S.R. Uzbekistan, for example, has recalled senior Soviet diplomats to work in the republic.

Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan have sought to add to their diplomatic numbers by sending young people to train at the Russian foreign ministry's academy. But the use of former Soviet diplomats or others newly trained by Russia raises questions of how competent Central Asia's new diplomats will be to advance the national interests of their own republics.

Fearful of mixing Russian interests with its own, Turkmenistan in certain cases is using foreign-born children of former political exiles to represent it abroad. Uzbekistan is debating whether to do the same.

The problem of physical, rather than diplomatic, isolation is even more serious. These new states are still fully dependent on the old Moscow-based U.S.S.R. transportation and communication grids, which control international mail, telephone and telegraph links and most international travel. Those nearby states that help Central Asian republics emerge from that physical isolation will eventually enjoy a foreign policy advantage. A number of neighboring states realize this fact and are seeking to capitalize on new opportunities.

Iran has promised to aid neighboring Turkmenistan and Persian-speaking Tajikistan with new satellite-based communications systems. Turkey is negotiating with Kyrgyzstan, and Japan, Australia and even Israel have proposed similar systems for Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. Turkey has also announced plans to provide satellite television transmission to the entire region. Most of those contracts are yet to be signed; it is impossible to predict when independent and direct communication systems will exist with any of the new Central Asian states.

There is also competition—especially between Turkey and Iran—to help the Central Asian republics develop new air links. Both nations would like to serve as Central Asia's hub to the outside world. International air service between the five capitals and Tehran and Ankara will begin within the year, and sporadic direct service between Tehran and Dushanbe, and Tashkent and Istanbul, already exists. Full development of those air routes as well as that projected between Tashkent and Islamabad still depends on major investment by foreign partners, which has not yet been forthcoming.

Aeroflot, the former Soviet carrier, has been broken up into a number of competing national airlines. Even the largest of these, the new Ozbekistoni Hovo Iollari (Uzbekistan Airlines), is having trouble maintaining regular service because of the need to pay hard currency for Russian jet fuel and spare parts. The Uzbek airline is surviving for the moment through multirepublic trade agreements involving middlemen from Turkmenistan's oil industry. Smaller ventures, like Chimkent

Airways, which has promised direct service between Kazakhstan and Italy, face nearly insuperable challenges.

There is also the promise of new international rail connections through Iran, once the Turkmenistan-Iran rail spur is completed in late 1993. That project has the full support of all five Central Asian republics; it will create a direct rail link that stretches from Urumchi to Ankara. Ultimately the accessibility of an expanded Central Asian market depends on a resolution with Russia of questions of railway ownership and maintenance. The nationalization of rail and rolling stock has begun throughout the region and progressed furthest in Turkmenistan, in large part to avoid any ownership ambiguity of the planned railroad to Iran.

Pakistan would also like to play an important role in the area and has promised Central Asian republics full funding to complete a highway spur from Uzbekistan through Kyrgyzstan to the Karakorum highway in China. But, as part of this roadway runs through Afghanistan, that link between Central Asia and the Indian Ocean is far from assured.

VII

Central Asia's physical isolation and continued access mainly through Russia highlights an even greater problem. The international community has formally accepted the independence of Central Asian republics—granting them membership in the United Nations and even honorary status in Europe through participation in the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe and the NATO advisory council. Yet there is no interest in championing the cause of Central Asia, should Russia be offended. This is true of Muslim and Western states alike. Despite its crippled economy Russia is still regarded as a great power. For many states it is a potential arms broker of considerable importance. For others Russia is a vast market ripe for development—potentially far larger than the whole of Central Asia.

Even Iran and Turkey, which have made expanded ties to Central Asia a foreign policy priority, are reluctant to risk sacrificing good relations with Russia to advance their regional goals. Though their politicians are frequent visitors to Central Asia, Iran and Turkey maintain close and cordial relations with Russia as well. Moreover Iran's mediation efforts in the

disputed Armenian enclave in Azerbaijan, Nagorno Karabakh, were begun and sustained with Russian cooperation.

Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, which each sent high-level missions to Central Asia in early 1992, are also concerned about Russian opinion. For the moment at least, their economic involvement in Central Asia is less extensive than that of Turkey or Iran. Their financial capacity for future investment is much greater, of course, but these Arab states will not risk Russia's goodwill to improve ties to new Muslim states with uncertain political futures.

For now there is no conflict of interest. The emergence of independent states in Central Asia does not necessarily threaten Russia's position in the Middle East. Russia itself has a large Muslim population; it retains strong interest in friendly ties with many of the U.S.S.R.'s former Middle Eastern allies. That Russian interest, argue prominent Russian foreign policy advisers, should prevent potential dissonance between Russia's Middle East policy and those of its Central Asian neighbors. It might also make life easier for the millions of Russians who live in Central Asia and bring investment from the Middle East to Russia.

VIII

The situation in Central Asia is only one of many factors that Russia's new leaders consider in formulating their foreign policy goals. Central Asia's presidents, on the other hand, clearly formulate their foreign policies with an eye firmly fixed on Russia. This has made the region's leaders proceed cautiously in establishing ties with the Muslim world.

Russia is not only a powerful neighbor, it is the self-appointed guardian of the approximately ten million Russians who still live in Central Asia. Concern for Russian sensibilities is especially keen in Kazakhstan. President Nazarbaev is determined to remain the link between Russia and Central Asia rather than risk becoming identified as head of an "Islamic state."

Nazarbaev nevertheless has made clear that he feels a strong affinity toward Turkey. In early 1992 he angered local Russians by admitting he would contemplate joining some sort of Turkic multinational organization, should one be created. Nazarbaev is held in high regard by most of Kazakhstan's Russian community. He is concerned, however, over territorial claims made by Russian nationalists. Kazakhstan's own small

but armed Cossack population is also cause for worry. The Cossack defense of Russian rights in Moldova's Trans-Dnestr region was a frightening portent of what could someday occur in Nazarbaev's own republic.

Kyrgyzstan is also sensitive to the "Islamic state" issue, especially since President Akaev enjoys strong support from a large Russian minority. Kyrgyzstan joined the Economic Co-ordination Council, but Akaev would not permit the republic to enter the Islamic Conference Organization, precisely because its membership was explicitly restricted to Muslim states.

The other three Central Asian republics are more willing to pursue explicitly pro-Islamic foreign policies. Such policies, however, are not designed to drive out their Russian populations; an exodus of Russians would mean a critical shortage of trained personnel. The region's leaders recognize that even with foreign technical assistance it will be a generation before Central Asians themselves can replace Russians in upper levels of the work force. If official statistics are to be believed, however, Russian emigration from the region has dropped off in the last year. Undoubtedly this is due in large part to the difficulties of resettlement in Russia.

Jews in Central Asia are particularly concerned. If these republics become Muslim states, Jews fear, they will also turn anti-Israel and, by extension, anti-Jewish. Contrary to such fears, however, new Central Asian states seem eager to pursue close ties with Israel. Israel will open its second CIS embassy, in Tashkent, and plans full diplomatic representation throughout the region. Uzbekistan is interested in Israel's drip-irrigation technology and hopes to encourage investment by those Jews who have left the republic to live in Israel. Returning Jews, however, have complained that they are sometimes roughed up by nationalist Uzbek youths.

While pleasing Israel is certainly an interest, concern for U.S. opinion and the desire to secure U.S. aid have been much more compelling reasons for Central Asian leaders to protect the rights of local Russian and European populations. The issue of Russian rights is complex, however. Many Russians living in these newly independent Central Asian states consider themselves entitled to the same privileges they formerly enjoyed as Soviet citizens. Many consider it a violation of their human rights that they now have to learn Uzbek to keep their state jobs, that their children are denied an exclusively Rus-

sian-language education or that Islamic holy days, rather than Christian, are becoming official holidays.

Central Asian leaders who make too many concessions to local Russian populations are also at risk. Today in Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan respect for Islam is closely interwoven with the public national consciousness. Even the Kirghiz and Kazakh populations expect some public recognition of their Islamic heritage. Political leaders are thus groping for ways to distance themselves from the atheistic Communist Party they had served earlier. They have sometimes even felt driven to make grandiose public gestures in the name of Islam.

But gestures alone have not been enough. Kakhar Makhkamov attended a well-publicized service in Dushanbe's main mosque to see off Tajikistan's pilgrims to Mecca; he was nonetheless deposed. Ignoring Islamic leaders, however, is an even surer route to failure. Karimov thus went to great efforts to save Uzbekistan's head mufti from two separate "palace coups" in the clerical establishment, hoping that the indebted mufti would help him gain favor among Uzbekistan's increasingly numerous Muslim believers. Karimov has spoken publicly of his own acceptance of Islam, permitted some religious education in public schools and in April 1992 appointed a leading Uzbek cleric to serve in his cabinet as adviser for religious affairs.

The Uzbek leader hopes for a foreign policy dividend from these public endorsements of Islam. Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates have traditions of investing in Muslim causes, as does Pakistan and to a lesser degree Egypt. Even quasi-secular Turkey has an interest in Central Asian Islam. That interest was manifest when Turkish President Turgut Özal told the visiting head of Central Asia's Naqshabandi (Sufi) order that he, too, was a Naqshabandi. One assumes that Karimov had some presentiment of this exchange; when the Uzbek president visited Turkey, the Naqshabandi leader was brought in tow.

The relationship between religion and politics is equally complicated for Central Asia's other neighbors. That is certainly true in the case of Iran, whose officials forcefully maintain that they are spreading commerce, not revolution, in Central Asia. Nonetheless it is easier for Iran's foreign ministry "moderates" to sell such a strategy to Iran's clerical establishment when recipient states publicly embrace Islam as well.

There is in fact little evidence to support rumors that Iran is

engaging in a massive clandestine effort to support Islamic fundamentalism in the region. Leaders of Central Asia's Islamic revivalist movement appear far more interested in the teachings of their Sunni Muslim brethren than those of fundamentalist Iranian Shiites.

For their part Iranian leaders appear happy to do business with a secularly oriented Kazakhstan. They take no public notice of the fact that Nazarbaev is an avowed atheist who has banned Islamic parties and groups from registering in his republic. Though accepted by the Iranians, Nazarbaev's policies are nonetheless encouraging a small but growing Islamic opposition movement in Kazakhstan.

Public linkages between Islam and foreign aid have nevertheless been made. Saudi Arabia announced plans to distribute to Kazakhstan some 400,000 Korans in the Kazakh language and to provide free passage to Mecca for thousands of pilgrims from Central Asia. Similarly Kuwait signed an oil deal with the Kazakh government that includes the construction of a large mosque in Gurev (now Akterau) as well as building oil extraction and refining facilities.

IX

Central Asia's leaders realize that in order to rebuild their economies they must attract aid from a wide variety of foreign sources. In recent months they have thus engaged in a frenzy of diplomatic activity, traveling to the capitals of neighboring and European states and receiving senior foreign delegations on an almost daily basis. None has a fully formulated foreign policy strategy. Rather, schooled in the Soviet state-planning tradition, each has been tempted to look for an intellectual "quick fix" in the form of a development package that would address political, economic and social problems all at the same time.

Regional cooperation in Central Asia was always more ideal than real. But the post-Soviet diplomatic strategies of the Central Asian leaders have pushed their republics even farther apart. When Central Asian leaders meet among themselves, as they did in April 1992 in Bishkek, they find little of substance on which to agree. Under Soviet rule the leaders competed for Moscow's favor. Now they are competing for investment from a far greater pool, and each is striving to define the uniqueness of his republic.

Development planning has been marked by a degree of

fickleness. Uzbekistan's President Karimov, for example, has most often embraced an Islamic variant of the "Turkish model." After a trip to an economic forum in Davos, Switzerland, however, he was sufficiently enamored with Western development planning to hire a group of American lawyers to help with Uzbek constitutional reforms. That was only four months after he had endorsed a "Chinese model"—without specifying whether he meant Taiwan or the mainland. Karimov has proven so impressionable, in fact, that some in Tashkent predicted he would return from Riyadh dressed like a Saudi prince.

Several close aides are understandably nervous that Karimov is not fully aware of the risks of his "Turko-Islamic" development strategy. Karimov, they warn, is setting himself up to be attacked as both a bad Muslim and a holdover from the republic's communist past. Meanwhile the Uzbek president is also trying to appease "Westernizers" in his midst. A long-time opponent of private property, he is now an advocate of radical economic reforms and supports development of a national currency to coexist with a convertible ruble. Karimov's critics fear that such reforms are both too little and too late to attract substantial foreign investment.

Nabiev decided to emphasize a "Persian model" in Tajikistan. As head of a republic whose main export is electricity—and which sometimes lacks even that—Nabiev could only play the cards in hand. Iran has provided Tajikistan with financial infrastructure, air links and satellite communications, as well as textbooks written in Persian script. Iran says it has no interest in missionary work among Tajikistan's overwhelmingly Sunni Muslim population. As proof, Iran is exporting Persian soap operas for local consumption rather than the religious broadcasting that dominates its own television. But the presence of religious activists in the Tajik government could make Iran a more attractive ideological model, especially if the new regime in neighboring Afghanistan proves to be pro-Iranian as well.

Turkmenistan is also adopting a variant of an "Iranian model," although one more reminiscent of the former shah than the current religious leadership. Turkmenistan's parliament has approved appointment of a special commission to evaluate the quality of the large number of new presidential portraits being printed and announced President Niazov's

selection as the first Makhtum Kuli laureate.⁶ Niazov's lust for personal power seems of little interest to his new Iranian partners. It remains to be seen whether they can build the infrastructure necessary to export Turkmenistan's oil and gas quickly enough to forestall a mass economic crisis.

Only marginally more self-sufficient than Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan has been harder hit by the shift to free prices than its more affluent neighbors. As the Turks seem willing to donate assistance, President Akaev has also embraced their development model. Without substantial foreign assistance there is real risk that Kyrgyzstan will feel compelled to resort to narcotics trade to pay its mounting debts. Kyrgyzstan was the last Central Asian republic to agree to international drug trade restrictions, but all the republics are potential drug-producing regions. Turkish aid to Kyrgyzstan will not come entirely without strings. Kyrgyzstan decided to shift the Kirghiz language from the Cyrillic to the Latin alphabet, a move that will increase Turkey's intellectual influence in the republic.⁷ For now Kyrgyzstan's religious elite is resigned to the balance between secular values and respect for religious freedom that the Turkish variant should provide.

Of all the region's leaders Kazakh President Nazarbaev has been most reluctant to embrace a particular development model. He too passed through a stage in which he searched for foreign experiences directly applicable to Kazakhstan's circumstances—South Korea's, then Turkey's and finally a market economy styled after America's. Nazarbaev now seems to have grasped that the answers to Kazakhstan's development lie somewhere in Kazakhstan.

Those close to Nazarbaev report that he is a strong Kazakh nationalist. His public statements contradict this. Kazakhstan, he persistently repeats, is striving to become a multinational, politically pluralistic republic with a market-oriented economy. His goal is to attract foreign investment from all quarters: Western democracies, Asian Tigers, Islamic neighbors as well as those who—like India and China—fear them.

Kazakhstan has no tradition of political participation. Few in the republic understand what is meant by a civil society, let

⁶Makhtum Kuli was an eighteenth-century Turkmen poet, and his name was given to Turkmenistan's new and highest national award.

⁷Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan have made similar decisions; Uzbekistan's officials have not yet decided among Latin, Arabic or Cyrillic alphabets.

alone support the ideals of national and religious tolerance upon which stable multinational democracies are based. The economy of the republic is strained; prices are rising quickly and goods are in short supply. There have already been ugly reminders of what can happen when nerves are frayed. In January Kazakhs and Chechens clashed in the western part of the republic. A small group of Chechens was then forcibly "resettled" back to the north Caucasus. A few weeks later a Kazakh military construction crew went on a rampage near the space center at Baikonur, leaving three Russians dead.

X

With the possible exception of Kazakhstan, Central Asian republics are having trouble defining their "national" interests. All, including Kazakhstan, have had trouble designing and implementing those policy choices already made. The situation is a nightmare for U.S. policymakers. How does America define policies in defense of its national interests in a region where local leaders have trouble defining their own?

Central Asia's presidents are not skilled international actors, but they are shrewd politicians. Each understands that their region is not a priority for the United States. U.S. recognition notwithstanding, they know that America cannot be relied upon as a major source of foreign investment nor as the primary conduit of technological expertise. Such help is more likely to come from their neighbors and from states that have traditional interests in Central Asia. Uzbekistan, for example, has received 500 scholarships from Saudi Arabia but funding for fewer than fifty students next year to study in the United States.

For the moment there is certainly no threat to U.S. interests from developments in Central Asia. No single state is willing to make the investment necessary to "conquer" the area. That is true of China, India, Pakistan and the Arab states. It is also true of Turkey and Iran, the two powers most interested in the region. In the long run the sum of this international activity will make Central Asia more interested in strengthening its Muslim and Turko-Persian heritage than salvaging residual Russo-European traditions. Such a development need not be detrimental to U.S. interests, particularly if America does not rely on surrogates to represent it in the region.

The United States will strengthen its position if it helps Central Asia gain a place in the international community that

is independent of intermediaries. Having just been freed from one form of political and economic dependency, Central Asians have had enough of "big brothers." Hence, though assistance from Turkey and Iran is eagerly accepted, the so-called humanitarian motives of both nations are regarded with considerable suspicion.

Russia's motives are likewise definitely distrusted by Central Asians. America should not rely on Russian judgments in defining its own interests in the region. Central Asia's presidents accept the inevitability for the immediate future of continued economic integration with Russia. But no Central Asian leader expects altruism from Russia, a nation that has repeatedly defined its historic destiny in terms of their region's subjugation.

Central Asians still fear that Russia will find new ways to reassert its will—if no longer by force, then through economic coercion. The United States must strive to reinforce Russia's newfound democratic instincts. America cannot do this if it aids Russia at the expense of the other republics. Central Asia deserves its proportional share of the technical assistance and educational training earmarked for the CIS. The colonizer and the colonized must separate on terms beneficial to both. Only then can they be expected to live alongside one another in peace.