

Centripetal vs. Centrifugal Forces and Emergence of Middle Powers in Central Asia and the Caucasus

Svante Cornell

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Executive Summary

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has drawn renewed attention to the geopolitics of Central Asia and the Caucasus. These are countries that have all faced a variety of assertive or aggressive Russian measures designed to undermine their sovereignty. Their responses have varied, however, both among states and over time. This raises the question of centripetal and centrifugal forces in Central Asia and the Caucasus.

Over the past three decades, internal and external forces seeking to strengthen the sovereignty and resilience of these states have clashed with forces seeking to undermine them. This has led to a growing divergence between stronger and weaker states, as centrifugal forces have come out on top in some countries while centripetal ones have dominated in others. To wit: several states have succeeded in building the institutions of independent statehood, have embarked on efforts to reform sclerotic institutions, have gained a meaningful ability to resist the entreaties of Russia and other regional powers, and are drivers of genuine regional cooperation. Others, by contrast, have seen their statehood compromised, and find themselves in a position where they are frequently unable to resist external pressure. Some lie somewhere in between.

The development of resilience in the region is linked to the social and economic changes taking place across Central Asia and the Caucasus. Countries that were locked into the Soviet system have now opened to the influences of the world, for better and for worse. As a result, a clear divergence has emerged between the Soviet and post-Soviet generations, with the latter considerably more independent of Russian-centric

information sources and thinking, and considerably less passive with regards to social and political matters.

While this social development has been largely common across the region, economic development has been vastly divergent. The region has split into oil importers and oil exporters – with the region challenging academic notions of a “resource curse.” Indeed, oil exporters have proven much more resilient against centrifugal forces than oil importers.

This is visible not least in the varying ways through which political and economic change have taken place in the region. In the mid-2000s, “color revolutions” overtook mainly the region’s weaker semi-authoritarian states, generating much hope among well-wishers of democracy in the West. But over time, it became clear that revolutionary change did not succeed in producing sustainable democratic development – either in this region or in the Middle East and North Africa following the 2011 Arab upheavals. Indeed, no country that experienced these upheavals has progressed in a sustainable way toward democracy. Even those that seemed to do so, like Georgia and Tunisia, have visibly backtracked.

By contrast, from 2015 onward another trend has emerged, whereby the leadership in stronger regional countries – Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan – have concluded that they can no longer engage in business as usual, and must answer the popular demand for change while seeking to maintain stability. As a result, they have engaged in processes of gradual political, economic and social reforms. None of these reform programs are intended primarily to liberalize the political system or transform these countries into democracies. But they contribute to shifting the logic of the state-society relations from the Soviet model, where the state dominated society, to a modern one where the state’s task is to provide services to society. In so doing, they play a significant role in strengthening the resilience of the political and economic systems.

Meanwhile, these three states have also taken a lead in the development of mechanisms of regional cooperation. In the South Caucasus, the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict made regional cooperation impossible, and led instead to the formation of trilateral Azerbaijan-Georgia-Turkey cooperation. This began with the major oil and gas pipeline projects connecting the three states, but branched out into a formalized trilateral cooperation format with periodic meetings at the foreign minister and defense minister level, which now includes cooperation in defense industrial development and joint military exercises.

In Central Asia, efforts at regional cooperation in the late 1990s were unsuccessful, being smothered by Russian-led processes of Eurasian integration. Following the shift of power in Uzbekistan that brought Shavkat Mirziyoyev to the presidency, however, a new wind of regional cooperation has swept Central Asia. This was made possible by a greater sense of confidence in countries' sovereignty and statehood, as well as a greater sense of political and economic urgency resulting from geopolitical competition. Simply put, regional cooperation had become a necessity to avoid great powers dividing and ruling among Central Asian states.

Five years into this new period of cooperation, Central Asian leaders are meeting more frequently than ever, and coordinating policy on various issues in a novel way. They have sought to institutionalize this cooperation, based on international examples like ASEAN and the Nordic Council. Very clearly, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have led this process, even going so far as to conclude a treaty on allied relations – a clear signal to outside powers that Central Asians will not be divided by them.

Finally, particularly since the geopolitical situation deteriorated following the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan and Russia's assault on Ukraine, Trans-Caspian cooperation has bloomed. This began even earlier with Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan overcoming long-lasting disagreements on the development of Caspian oilfields. More recently, there has been a

major expansion in Azerbaijan-Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan-Uzbekistan ties, complementing the intensification of Kazakhstan-Uzbekistan relations.

Thus, two groups of countries have crystalized in Central Asia and the Caucasus. In one group, centrifugal tendencies remain dominant, making countries weak and vulnerable to a combination of internal and external upheavals. In another, the emerging middle powers, centripetal tendencies have come to dominate, as states have developed an ability to secure their sovereignty and act to preserve it. Importantly the emerging middle powers have paid close attention to cooperation with their weaker neighbors, while also serving as a model for them.

Over the past decade, this disparity has grown clearer. Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have all established themselves as middle powers in part through their internal development, seeking to balance the demand for change from their societies with the imperative of maintaining stability in dangerous times. Their actions on the regional scene have indicated their growing agency: by cooperating with one another and establishing relations with an assortment of foreign powers, they are strengthening their external sovereignty while also helping some of their weaker neighbors avoiding falling into dependence on great powers.

This is not to say that the weaker states totally lack resilience or that there are no vulnerabilities in the stronger ones. As evidenced by Kazakhstan's January 2022 crisis or the unrest in Uzbekistan's Karakalpakstan region that summer, all regional states face challenges. Still, the difference is that the emerging middle powers have taken coherent and sustained action to address the deficiencies in the provision of public services, and their leaders have spoken honestly and forcefully about the problems plaguing their government and bureaucracy. They have announced many reforms, but the hard work lies in the implementation of these initiatives, a work

that is decidedly one in progress. And going forward, the risk that anti-reform forces will succeed in slowing down implementation is considerable.

The emergence of middle powers is of crucial importance for the region's future, and for the approaches taken by foreign forces that wish the region well. In short, it means that the notion of this region as a playground of great powers is no longer valid. As the middle powers have sought to devise strategies to prevent the domination of one or another regional power over them, they have also reached out beyond the confines of the region for partners. Seeking to engage East Asian, Middle Eastern and Western powers, the middle powers of Central Asia and the Caucasus are by default partners to the West, sharing a common interest of maintaining what amounts to geopolitical pluralism in the region.

Introduction

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has drawn renewed attention to the geopolitics of Central Asia and the Caucasus. Western experts have examined voting records at the UN and public statements from these countries to gauge their reactions to Russia's actions. But while the Russian invasion came as a shock for Western countries, states in Central Asia and the Caucasus were less surprised. Only one, Georgia, has been subjected to direct military assault; but all have long been dealing with a variety of assertive or aggressive Russian measures designed to undermine their sovereignty. Their responses have varied, however, both among states and over time. Instances of regional states vocally resisting Russian advances are plentiful. Instances of states bandwagoning are equally plentiful. Less visible, at least to the casual observer, are instances in which regional states say one thing and do another – while they seek to avoid challenging Russia rhetorically, they *act* in ways entirely contrary to Russian desires. The most recent examples are states that refuse to condemn Russia's invasion of Ukraine, but send cargos of humanitarian aid to Ukraine, and issue press releases of their leaders speaking with President Volodymyr Zelensky.

This raises the question of centripetal and centrifugal forces in Central Asia and the Caucasus. It is now three decades since these states gained their independence; but their process of state-building has been impeded by obstacles both domestic and external. This study aspires to take stock of this process, and to examine the similarities and differences between these states. It hypothesizes that there is a growing gap among them. Some states have succeeded in building the institutions of independent statehood, have gained a meaningful ability to resist the entreaties of

Russia and other great powers, and are drivers of genuine regional cooperation. Others have seen their statehood compromised, and are less able to resist external pressure. Some lie somewhere in between.

The study will begin with a short overview of the internal and external centripetal and centrifugal forces competing in these states since independence. It will then look at each country's trajectory, before considering efforts to strengthen internal resilience through reform; followed by an overview of efforts to build regional cooperation among these states. It will end with an analysis of the growing disparity among these states and its implications.

State of Regional Politics in Central Asia and Caucasus

Central Asia and the Caucasus have seen a competition between centripetal and centrifugal forces of both an internal and external nature. The main internal centripetal forces have been the efforts toward nation- and state-building that have taken place in the region. External centripetal forces include the support for these processes of state-building from foreign governments and organizations. Against these forces of cohesion and harmony are the centrifugal forces, which have been numerous. Internally, forces that have sought to undermine the nascent states, either by seeking to separate parts of their territory, violently overthrow their governments, or undermine their workings from within. Externally, finally, both governmental and non-governmental forces abroad have undermined the cohesion of regional states, ranging from Russia and Iran to radical Islamist organizations.

Centripetal Forces: Internal

States of Central Asia and the Caucasus are unrecognizable today compared to the reality at independence. All have engaged in serious processes of consolidation of nationhood and statehood since then. State institutions that were lacking are now largely in place, and state borders are largely demarcated, with some exceptions. Governments have built national education systems, military bodies, and law enforcement and judicial institutions. Whereas there was considerable unrest and strife in half of the countries of the region in the first years of independence, the region as a whole is relatively stable, though an uptick in unrest has been

visible in the past few years, the Armenia-Azerbaijan war of 2020 standing out.

The most important development since independence is perhaps the consolidation of national identities across the region. As most post-colonial states, the Central Asian states (but not those of the South Caucasus) were modern creations, never having existed with their current names or boundaries before the Soviet period. As such, their consolidation was not a foregone conclusion. They did, however, have a major advantage compared to the more artificial states created in the Arab world or Africa: they were created with some correspondence to ethnic settlement patterns on the ground. Soviet authorities certainly drew some illogical boundaries, but overall, the modern states of Central Asia and the Caucasus provided a relatively solid background to build modern nation-states that a majority of the population could identify with. This consolidation of nationhood happened everywhere, most dramatically in Kazakhstan, which at independence was a bi-communal state, with Slavs even outnumbering Kazakhs during parts of the Soviet era. But because of migration and birth patterns, this changed relatively rapidly, Kazakhstan becoming a truly Kazakh state over the three decades since independence, with Kazakhs now over 70% and Russians down to 16% of the population.

The internal politics of the regional states are nevertheless still a work in progress. No regional state is close to being a consolidated democracy, and all are either authoritarian systems or so-called hybrid regimes, which combine elements of authoritarianism and elements of political contestation. This is an important weakness, given the inherent instability of authoritarian regimes. On the other hand, the track record in the region thus far has indicated that hybrid regimes like those in Georgia, Armenia or Kyrgyzstan are at greater risk of unrest, whereas more consolidated authoritarian regimes have shown a greater ability to maintain stability.

Centripetal Forces: External

The gradual strengthening of sovereignty in Central Asia and the Caucasus has been the result, in considerable part, of the international environment. It contrasts brightly with the period following the first world war, when Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia gained independence. They never gained *de jure* recognition by the victorious powers, or membership in the League of Nations, and this contributed to their fate of being reabsorbed under Moscow's control in 1920-21.

The contrast with the post-1991 period is stark. The U.S. and other powers, not least Turkey, moved rapidly to recognize the independence of the regional states and support their membership in the United Nations, OSCE, and other multilateral organizations. Not staying at that, the U.S. formally made the sovereignty and territorial integrity of these countries a key facet of U.S. policy toward the region. Other powers, including China, have followed suit. It is true that respect for territorial integrity and sovereignty has sometimes been observed in the breach – Western efforts to address the occupation of Azerbaijani and Georgian territories have been lukewarm at best – and the West contributed further to the decline of this principle by severing Kosovo from Serbia in 2008. In subsequent years, great powers increasingly took the liberty to violate the sovereignty of smaller states. Central Asia, however, has largely avoided such adventurism thus far. The period from 1991 to 2008, thus, was crucial in providing an international environment that deterred potential challengers to the sovereignty of these new countries, and allowed them to consolidate statehood.

In the Caucasus, matters were more complicated. While Azerbaijan succeeded in restoring its territorial integrity following the 2020 war, both Armenia and Georgia have been weakened considerably over recent years – with both states being undermined by Russia. That said, even Armenia –

the country perhaps most seriously compromised by Russian ownership of its strategic assets – has begun to take steps to escape Russian domination. While the region's security situation has worsened, Russia's invasion of Ukraine has, if anything, strengthened the validity of the principle of territorial integrity in world politics.

For this region, China's stance will be key going forward. In the past, China has opposed challenges to the regional states' sovereignty, joining Central Asian states in refusing to legitimize Russia's invasion of Georgia in 2008. China's position in the Ukraine war has been more ambivalent, however. A senior Chinese diplomat in 2023 appeared to put into question the international status of former Soviet states, but was rapidly disavowed by his superiors. It remains unclear whether China will continue to support the sovereignty of Central Asian states, but its support cannot be taken for granted.

Centrifugal Forces: Internal

The sovereignty and integrity of the states of Central Asia and the Caucasus have been undermined to various degrees by forces that have challenged the legitimacy of the boundaries or forms of government of these states. The most serious challenge has come from separatist groupings that have challenged the territorial integrity of several states, to devastating effect. This is inextricably tied with external forces, as will be seen below. Still, the fact is that the legitimacy of the state entities of the region was shaky at first. The Soviet creation of autonomous territorial units within the territory of Azerbaijan, Georgia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan built in an institutional challenge to the sovereignty of these states. In the two states in the Caucasus, this challenge was weaponized during the transition to independence, leading to armed conflicts over Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia and Abkhazia that remain unresolved today. In Central Asia, the issue of Gorno-Badakhshan played a subdued role

during the country's civil war, but has remained thorny since. As for Uzbekistan, the autonomous republic of Karakalpakstan was not a hot political issue until the government of Uzbekistan announced its intention in 2022 to alter the constitutional provisions governing the territory's status, sparking rioting there.

A second key challenge has come from ideological opposition to the emergence of secular nation-states in the region, contesting the republican forms of government that have emerged. Across Central Asia and Azerbaijan, radical Islamist ideologies gained traction among a subset of the population, which denied the legitimacy of the independent states of the region. Such forces posed a considerable threat at independence in Tajikistan as well as in parts of Uzbekistan, and contributed to the civil war in the former country. They were expelled from Uzbekistan, but in subsequent years organizations like Hizb ut-Tahrir, which advocates for a global Caliphate, made inroads in several Central Asian countries. Still, the challenge these groups pose has been relatively manageable compared to many countries in the Middle East and South Asia.

A final, but very significant form of internal centrifugal forces has been the elite rivalries within governments in the region. In part because no regional state has established a system for the peaceful transfer of power through elections, political rivalries have tended to involve opaque, informal groupings within the governing authorities that vie against one another for influence, control over financial resources, and power. Such informal power rivalries have interlinked with popular protests to generate challenges against incumbents. This led to the overthrow of three governments in Kyrgyzstan in 2005, 2010, and 2021, and to a serious challenge to the government of Kazakhstan in January 2022, as well as a large number of less significant incidents in practically every country of the region.

Centrifugal Forces: External

A striking feature of the region is its position surrounded by larger powers, coupled with the absence of reliable mechanisms of collective security. The main instruments for security in the region have been Russian-led, and because Moscow has repeatedly indicated its lack of respect of the sovereignty of former Soviet states, such instruments have been more the problem than the solution.

Indeed, Russia's pervasive efforts to undermine the security and sovereignty of regional states has been the most serious challenge to statehood across Central Asia and the Caucasus. This challenge has been present throughout the thirty years of independence: Russian interference in Georgia's separatist conflicts, for example, dates back to the country's struggle for independence, and has continued ever since. The level of violence Moscow has proven willing to use has accelerated with time: the invasion of Georgia in 2008 was a watershed moment, followed by the annexation of Crimea six years later, the war in Donbas, and the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. While Georgia has been affected disproportionately, all states of the region have been exposed to Russian efforts to limit their sovereignty in order to maintain or restore Russia's sphere of influence in the region.

For long, however, Russia paid greater attention to the South Caucasus compared to Central Asia, seeing the region as more central to Russia's security interests, while viewing it as more exposed to Western influence compared to Central Asia. To some extent, this difference remains in place, compounded by the fact that the main foreign challenger to Russian interests in Central Asia is not the West but China. Because of Moscow's alignment with China against the West on the global level, Russia has been forced to tolerate a greater level of Chinese influence in Central Asia. That is not to say that Central Asian states are not exposed to Russian pressure. Moscow actively worked to trigger the 2010 unrest that overthrew the

government of Kyrgyzstan, and since 2022 leading Russian officials have issued direly worded threats against Kazakhstan on account of the country's refusal to support Moscow in Ukraine.

Going beyond violence or the threat of violence, Russian efforts to undermine sovereignty across the region take multiple forms. They include economic coercion, subversive activity, and the use of Russian-controlled media resources that continue to shape public opinion across the region.¹

Moscow is far from the only foreign force that undermines the security and stability of regional states. Other state actors have done so as well. Iran has continuously sought to check the emergence of a strong Azerbaijani state on its northern border, fearing its potential attraction for the restive ethnic Azerbaijani population of Iran. As a result, Iran has fanned the flames of radical Islamism in Azerbaijan, supported the Armenian occupation of Azerbaijani territories, threatened the exploration of energy resources in the Caspian Sea, and following the 2020 Armenia-Azerbaijan war, threatened military action against Azerbaijan while seemingly orchestrating a terrorist attack on the Azerbaijani embassy in Tehran.

Afghanistan has been an additional external source of insecurity. This has been the case through acts of omission as well as commission. During the Taliban rule of 1996-2001, Afghanistan provided refuge to Central Asian radical Islamist groups, including the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan. The IMU conducted raids into Central Asia in both 1999 and 2000, deeply shaking the region's security. From 2011 to 2021, the Western-supported Afghan government failed to control the country, leading to the continued presence of radical Islamist militant groups in northern Afghanistan that

¹ See S. Frederick Starr and Svante E. Cornell, eds., *Putin's Grand Strategy: The Eurasian Union and Its Discontents*, Washington: Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program, 2014. (<https://silkroadstudies.org/publications/silkroad-papers-and-monographs/item/13053>)

posed threats to Central Asian states. Importantly, however, no incursion into Central Asia took place during those twenty years. After the Taliban takeover of 2021, the Taliban government itself has sought to reassure Central Asian states that it harbors no ill will against them, but it has failed to assert control over the country's territory, again allowing the persistence of other radical groups threatening Central Asian states to maintain a presence in the vicinity of their borders.

More broadly, the regional states are concerned by the shifting norms of behavior in international politics. Whereas a certain respect for international rules and norms existed in the 1990s and early 2000s, this has gradually eroded, leading instead to a situation where great powers increasingly do what they think they can get away with. Russia is the most obvious example, but others include Iran's behavior in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and Yemen; China's activity in the South China sea and vis-à-vis Taiwan; and even Turkey's inroads into Syria and Libya, and Saudi Arabia's intervention in Yemen. This has contributed to a much more insecure international environment where smaller states are considerably more vulnerable than they were two decades ago.

In recent years, none is more concerning than the actions taken by Moscow against Kazakhstan, and the threats associated therewith. Shortly following the annexation of Crimea, Putin shocked Kazakhstan by stating during a visit to the Seliger youth camp that "Kazakhs never had any statehood" and that Nazarbayev had created "a state in a territory that had never had a state before."² Russian state television talk show hosts such as Vladimir Solovyov regularly issued threats against Kazakhstan. In 2020, ruling United Russia parliamentarian and provocateur Vyacheslav Nikonov opined that northern Kazakhstan had not been settled before the

² Farangis Najibullah, "Putin Downplays Kazakh Independence, Sparks Angry Reaction," *RFERL*, September 3, 2014. (<https://www.rferl.org/a/kazakhstan-putin-history-reaction-nation/26565141.html>)

Russian empire, and that the country's territory was a "great gift from Russia and the Soviet Union." After Russia's invasion of Ukraine, such sleights were replaced with outright threats, as Kazakhstan distanced itself from Moscow's actions. Former President Dmitry Medvedev threatened to invade Kazakhstan, and verbal attacks on Kazakhstan became commonplace in Russian state media. Because such media campaigns had built for years before Russia's military aggression against Georgia and Ukraine, this creates profound concerns in Kazakhstan for the future of the country's relations with Russia.

Even aside from such direct acts of destabilization, Moscow contributes to centrifugal tendencies in the region by manipulating conflicts between and within countries; supporting forces that oppose political and economic reforms; works to sabotage regional cooperation that is controlled by Moscow; and continues to maintain influence in security institutions across the region that circumvent and undermine the authority of central governments. Simply put, Moscow continues to seek to be surrounded by weak, corrupt, authoritarian and malleable vassals rather than strong, well-functioning and stable states.

If Russia is a consistently negative force in the region, China's role is more complex. On one hand, China's behavior elsewhere in the world is an indication that Beijing's long-term ambitions in Central Asia would eventually come at the expense of the sovereignty of the regional states. Already, China is extremely sensitive to any manifestation of Uyghur political expression in Central Asia. Moreover, Chinese loans to Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan has helped plunge these countries in a potential debt trap to China, something that has contributed directly to the destabilization of countries on several continents, ranging from Montenegro to Sri Lanka.

On the other hand, China also serves as a deterrent to Russian adventurism in Central Asia. In 2010, as Moscow pondered a direct intervention into the unrest in southern Kyrgyzstan and sought to secure a second military base in that country, Uzbekistan solicited Chinese backing in preventing the deployment of Russian forces in Kyrgyzstan.³ It has been reported since then that Beijing has made it clear to Moscow that it will not tolerate Russian efforts to destabilize Central Asian states, in particular Kazakhstan. Chinese backing may be an important reason that President Tokayev was able to ensure the rapid departure of CSTO forces in January 2022, only two weeks after their deployment to help quell unrest in the country. And in January 2023, China made its support explicit: Chinese President Xi Jinping not only made Kazakhstan the destination of his first foreign trip following the Covid-19 pandemic, but published an article that explicitly expressed support for “Kazakhstan’s territorial integrity and independence,” and its opposition to foreign interference in Kazakhstan’s internal affairs. Coming after the growth of Russian threats against Kazakhstan, it could only be interpreted as a shot against Moscow’s bow. China’s role in the region is thus a mix of centrifugal and centripetal tendencies.

Western states would in principle appear to be supporters of centripetal tendencies in the region. And this they are, for the most part. In fact, for states that truly seek to embark on political and economic reform, the West would seem to be the only viable partner that could aid countries in designing and implementing reforms. Furthermore, both the U.S. and EU are strongly supportive of Central Asian efforts to strengthen regional cooperation.

Inadvertently, however, Western states occasionally support centrifugal tendencies in the region. A remarkable example is the Western criticism of

³ Stephen Blank, “A Sino-Uzbek Axis in Central Asia?” *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, September 1, 2010. (<https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/12123>)

the secular statehood embraced by the regional states, and the urge Western interlocutors express to open up political space for Islamist movements. Moreover, Western powers have occasionally picked favorites among regional states, thus inadvertently weakening the bonds between them rather than strengthening them. This occurred as Western states sought to emphasize Kyrgyzstan's role as an "island of democracy" in blatant contrast to Uzbekistan, and even more prominently when Western powers actively sought to undermine cooperation between what they considered "democratic" Georgia from "authoritarian" Azerbaijan.

Western efforts to support democratic institutions and human rights are in principle supportive of centripetal forces, as they would, if successful, make the regional states more resilient both internally and externally. But on many occasions, the chosen priorities have unintended consequences. Western insistence on full liberalization of political systems in the absence of strong state institutions, for example, is a questionable priority. The balance sheet thus far suggests that a focus on political change at the top through revolutionary change – as in Georgia in 2003, Kyrgyzstan in 2005, or the Arab spring countries in 2011 – does not have a track record of leading to sustainable democratic development, instead triggers the risk of countries avoid falling back into instability and even civil war. This urge on the part of Western states and institutions must be understood as a result of impatience rather than ill will, however, and there are signs that Western governments are coming around to a more realistic expectation concerning the pace of political change in the region. Both the EU Strategy for Central Asia, issued in 2019, and the analogous U.S. document published in 2020 signified a move to a more cooperative rather than confrontational approach to issues of democratic development.

Interaction of Internal & External Forces

The discussion above has divided centrifugal and centripetal forces into external and internal. In reality, of course, these interact. International organizations, chief among them the United Nations, and foreign powers have supported the internal centripetal forces to strengthen the sovereignty and stability of states, while seeking to support reform efforts that further strengthen their internal stability.

The interaction of external and internal forces is even more stark on the side of the centrifugal forces. The elephant in the room is Moscow's continued manipulation of Soviet legacy institutions in regional states to undermine their sovereignty. Moscow has played a key role by supporting – or threatening to support – separatist minorities in countries that don't follow its lead, as in the cases of Georgia and Azerbaijan, and to a lesser degree Uzbekistan. Equally pervasive has been Moscow's continuous interaction with regressive elite groups in regional states – including both political and business elites, groups that are often joined at the hip as a result of the particular political economy of post-Soviet states, where political status was key to the appropriation of economic assets during the transition to independence. Because this junction of political and economic interests created strong vested interests, Moscow has found a willing partner in forces benefiting from the *status quo* in regional states, who oppose political and economic reform.

In virtually every state of the region, the security services have been the most influential institution harboring such interests. The security services were the key institution propping up the Soviet system of government, but were, unlike the Communist Party, relatively untouched by the collapse of the USSR. The Soviet security services possessed a large infrastructure in each union republic, the remnants of which formed the cornerstone for Russian subversive activities after 1991. The newly independent states built their security sector largely on the basis of legacy personnel from the

Soviet period, which were deeply penetrated by the central Soviet security services. Thus, as a rule of thumb, the less reformed a post-Soviet country's security sector is, the more it is penetrated by Russian interests. Some countries, such as Estonia and Georgia, concluded that the only solution was to completely dismantle these structures and build them from scratch with younger personnel without a Soviet background. But most countries did not follow this path until much later.

A classic example occurred following Georgia's Rose Revolution, when new President Mikheil Saakashvili was told by Vladimir Putin to "take care of" the old regime's security minister, Valery Khaburdzania. (Saakashvili immediately demoted and subsequently fired Khaburdzania, angering the Kremlin.) The point is that Putin's statement to Saakashvili suggests an expectation by Moscow of a *droit de regard* over the security institutions in post-Soviet states. It is a certainty that many conversations of the type Saakashvili retold have taken place, but that other post-Soviet leaders have chosen not to make them public.

Building Resilience: Country Trajectories

Over the past thirty years, the countries of Central Asia and the Caucasus have faced similar challenges, but grown increasingly dissimilar over time. The differences between them have become clear in terms of the building of both internal and external resilience.

A common facet across the region has been dramatic social and economic change. Countries that were locked into the Soviet system were now opened to the influences of the world, for better and for worse. As a result, a clear divergence has emerged between the Soviet and post-Soviet generations. This manifests itself among other in terms of approach to authority, ability to show initiative, and levels of critical thinking. The Soviet generations tend to be more acceptant toward authority, and show a certain amount of nostalgia for the late Soviet period – something that often baffles foreigners, but is understandable given the unrest and upheavals of the 1990s. The older generations also exhibit a tendency toward passivity – something inculcated by the Soviet way of life, where taking initiative was strongly discouraged. With this comes lower levels of critical thinking, as well as a reliance on television broadcasts for information – and to that, in many countries, Russian-sourced information.

By contrast, the post-Soviet generation tends to be more skeptical toward authority. It tends to expect some level of transparency, be less tolerant of corruption, and demand the delivery of services from the government. Conversely, the post-Soviet generation – particularly those who would be called generation Z in America – show greater initiative, and receive their information not from television but increasingly from social media. This

does not mean that their sources of information are necessarily more reliable, but they are less uniform in nature and less reflective of Russian propaganda. This generation has little or no connection to the Soviet past, and tends to view Russia as one among many foreign powers, and not necessarily as an obvious point of reference. As a result of this, the gradual generational shift in regional societies – mirrored in bureaucracies – has momentous implications.

While this social development is generally speaking common to the region, economic development has been vastly divergent. International Financial Institutions have for some time divided the region into two sharply different groups: the oil importers and the oil exporters. The former group consists of Armenia, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, and the latter of Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. This dichotomy has provided large distinctions in state capacity between oil importers and exporters. Scholars have noted that at least thus far, the scholarly prediction of a “resource curse” – whereby abundance of natural resources paradoxically leaves states worse off than their less endowed peers – has not applied in Central Asia and the Caucasus.⁴ Quite to the contrary, as will be seen, the resource-endowed states have been able to resist centrifugal forces of both an internal and external nature to a much higher degree than then oil-importing states. In the specific post-Soviet context, the resource-rich states were provided with an asset in cushioning the transition to a market economy. There is no question that resource endowment contributed to vast income inequalities, but it also provided a cushion that enabled governments in countries like Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan to reduce poverty quite dramatically by the late 1990s. This was missing in the oil-importing countries, leading to consistently high

⁴ Pauline Jones Luong and Erika Weinthal, *Oil Is Not a Curse: Ownership Structure and Institutions in Soviet Successor States*, Cambridge University Press, 2010.

poverty rates and massive labor migration. Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, for example, are fourth and fifth in the world in terms of reliance on remittances.⁵ The availability of financial resources made governments among oil exporters more able to withstand external manipulation as well, being able to exercise greater control over their security sector and strengthen internal resilience to outside powers. The financial shocks of 2009 and 2015 indicate that oil exporters are not immune from systemic economic problems, but their situation remains far superior to the oil importing countries.

Across the region, a clear economic downturn has been visible since around 2015. The collapse of the oil price in late 2014 combined with the growing confrontation between Russia and the West to pull the rug from under the economies of Central Asia and the Caucasus. Most countries in the region suffered from devaluations of currency in the 40-50 percent range, dealing a heavy blow to the emerging middle class, particularly as many had mortgages denominated in foreign currency. This was followed by the disruptions of the Covid-19 pandemic, and the ensuing rise of inflation.

In the following pages, a rapid overview of each regional country's trajectory will follow. This will in turn allow for a comparative analysis of the strength of centrifugal and centripetal forces across the region.

Armenia

Armenia's trajectory since independence has been dominated by its Faustian bargain, whereby it made a conscious decision to expand its dependence on Russia in the 1990s in exchange for Russian support for its continued occupation of Azerbaijani territories won in the 1992-94 First

⁵ Euan Burns, "The Fate of Remittance Dependent Economies in a Global Pandemic" *Global Policy Journal*, March 8, 2021. <https://www.globalpolicyjournal.com/blog/08/03/2021/fate-remittance-dependent-economies-global-pandemic>

Karabakh war. This exposed Armenia to a considerable vulnerability to Moscow's whims, something which would prove fateful in 2020.

Meanwhile, Armenia's political system did not mirror Russia's. Armenian leaders were not able to create the type of centralized "power vertical" that Vladimir Putin did; as Armenia remained semi-authoritarian, Russian leaders urged their Armenian counterparts to follow suit. But Armenian society did not accept such a model, something that emerged clearly with the 2018 popular upheaval that brought Nikol Pashinyan to power.

Armenia had for almost three decades alternated between political stability and instability. In 1996 and 2008 elections were marred by violence, and in 1997 a palace coup unseated President Levon Ter-Petrosyan. The Armenian government up to 2018 came to be increasingly dominated by the hardline forces rejecting concessions in the conflict with Azerbaijan. Individuals hailing from Karabakh, with strong connections to Moscow, served as President of Armenia from 1997 until 2018. That year, the semi-authoritarian regime collapsed in the face of public demands for change, leading to the velvet revolution that brought Pashinyan to power.

The aftermath of this event illustrated the strong connection between Armenian domestic politics and its security issues. Having come to power in ways that are anathema to the Kremlin, Pashinyan failed to obtain the trust of the Russian leadership. Moscow instead appeared to collude with the *ancien régime* and leaders in Karabakh to undermine Pashinyan's leadership. This created strong centrifugal forces that in turn led Pashinyan to choose to adopt a strongly nationalist rhetoric vis-à-vis Azerbaijan and Turkey, far exceeding the language employed by his predecessors. This in turn contributed to triggering the 2020 war, while failing to elicit sufficient Russian intervention to forestall the loss of most territories conquered in 1993-94.

Following the second Karabakh war, anti-Russian sentiment has grown markedly in Armenia, and the leadership has sought to diversify the country's foreign relations. Such efforts are nevertheless thwarted by Russian economic influence in Armenia – including ownership of critical infrastructure such as the country's nuclear power plant and natural gas grid. In addition, Russia's invasion of Ukraine has complicated Armenian efforts to reach out to the West, as the country's close association with Russia and its hostility to Ukraine has garnered some attention.⁶ Yerevan is therefore stuck in a difficult place: the government appears to be pursuing a peace deal with Azerbaijan that could, in turn, help improve its relations with Turkey and thus free Armenia from Russian influence. Meanwhile, Russia uses its continued influence in Armenia to prevent a peace deal from happening, thus forcing a recalcitrant Armenia to remain in the Russian orbit.

Azerbaijan

Azerbaijan was close to a failed state at the end of the First Karabakh War. Aside from losing a sixth of the country's territory, it experienced two successful coups that overthrew governments in 1992 and 1993, as well as additional failed coup attempts in 1994 and 1995. Internally as well as externally, centrifugal forces dominated, as internal division was connected to the machinations of great powers, primarily Russia but also Iran and Turkey.

From the mid-1990s, however, Azerbaijan's leadership began to reconstitute its internal sovereignty in parallel with building the country's agency on the international scene. The 1994 "Contract of the Century" with major international oil companies for the development of Azerbaijan's offshore resources was one key development and the 1996 OSCE summit

⁶ Taras Kuzio, "Why is Armenia Ukrainophobic?" *Geopolitical Monitor*, August 29, 2022. (<https://www.geopoliticalmonitor.com/why-is-armenia-ukrainophobic/>)

in Lisbon was a major diplomatic victory, as it cemented the international community's rejection of the secession of Nagorno-Karabakh. Finally, in 1997, President Heydar Aliyev's visit to Washington and summit with Bill Clinton signified that the country had gained a strong position on the international scene.

The prevailing of centripetal forces on the internal scene would nevertheless have to wait. Aliyev began ailing around 2000, and was succeeded by his son Ilham in 2003. The new president was initially saddled with his father's cabinet, which included a number of oligarchic figures that sought to build their own financial and political power centers at the expense of formal presidential authority. Their prominence presented problems with regard to external centrifugal forces, too, as several were blatantly connected to Moscow and in some cases overtly undermined the President's foreign policy.⁷

It took Ilham Aliyev over a decade to methodically consolidate power and remove the oligarchic contenders. He began doing so decisively after 2015, as the financial crisis that year forced a 40% devaluation of the currency, thus implicitly changing the social contract in the country. While the government had been able to provide for constantly rising living standards, demands for political change were muted. But the rapid loss of purchasing power broke this tacit understanding. Aliyev (like his counterparts in Kazakhstan) understood that this required the government to embark on reforms, intended not primarily to liberalize the country but to make government more transparent, efficient and less corrupt, delivering services to the population.

⁷ "In Azerbaijan Chief of Staff Writes About Western Colonialism," December 12, 2014. (<https://www.azadliq.org/a/26738991.html>)

Externally, Azerbaijan – uniquely in the South Caucasus – managed to build an independent foreign policy that eschewed dependence on any foreign power. It sought good relations with all, but clearly communicated to all foreign powers its red lines. Baku at different times lashed out against Russia, Iran, the West and even Turkey, when Aliyev felt the country's sovereignty and national interests were being infringed upon.

This approach provided Azerbaijan with the position in 2020 to wage a successful war to restore its territorial integrity by retaking territories lost to Armenia in 1993-94. It did so with the assistance of Turkey and Israel, while managing to avoid major intervention by either Russia, Iran or the West to stop its offensive. This shows the extent of Azerbaijan's agency in regional and international affairs. Meanwhile, the big question concerning the country's internal stability is the extent to which the government will be able to maintain a social contract with the population. This requires the reforms taking place to be sufficiently responsive to popular demands for change. Such demands will likely over time turn political as well, demanding greater voice and popular influence over decision-making. It remains to be seen whether the government is willing to meet such demands.

Georgia

Georgia has exhibited among the most significant levels of vulnerability since independence, on both the internal and external fronts. Domestically, the country went through a civil war in 1992, along with the loss of both Abkhazia and South Ossetia to Russian-supported secessionist movements. Like in Azerbaijan, a Soviet-era leader stepped in to provide normalcy. Unlike in Azerbaijan, however, Eduard Shevardnadze was unable to assert central authority over the government and territory. Around 2000, the capital Tbilisi still lacked stable supply of electricity, leading to the widespread quip that before using candles, Georgians once

had electricity. Shevardnadze, nevertheless, laid the institutional foundation for a more functioning state, and oriented the country toward the West and Euro-Atlantic integration.

It would take the 2003 Rose Revolution to push Georgia farther onto the track of state-building. While Mikheil Saakashvili's government launched itself as a "beacon of liberty" in the world – largely to fit in with the Freedom Agenda launched by President George W. Bush in 2004 – the young Georgian reformers were really focused on revamping state institutions, more than expanding liberty. Paradoxically, as many reformers have discovered, getting the state to function requires a certain centralization of power, at least in the short term. But Saakashvili and his associates – and foreign partners – underestimated the challenge that his agenda posed to the regime interests of Vladimir Putin in Moscow. While Moscow was not initially very alarmed, the spreading of revolutionary fervor to Ukraine in 2004-5 changed the calculus. A modernizing, pro-Western Georgia might have been tolerable on its own, but the same development in Ukraine led Moscow to balk. If these two countries succeeded in their transformation, the Kremlin feared the winds of change would come to Russia as well. As a result, Moscow has invested heavily in efforts to ensure these two countries failed. The invasion of Georgia in 2008 was the first step, while Moscow initially bet on installing and bolstering a friendly semi-authoritarian in Ukraine, Viktor Yanukovich.

In more recent years, the script has been inversed. The developments in Ukraine from 2013 onward led Russia to drop its focus on manipulating the Ukrainian political scene, opting instead for more direct measures, first the annexation of Crimea and Donbas, and from 2022 an outright war of aggression. In Georgia, by contrast, the arrival to power of business tycoon Bidzina Ivanishvili in 2013 allowed Moscow to opt for a combination of carrots and sticks to subdue Georgia. By 2022, it appeared to bear fruit, as

Ivanishvili saw his regime interests threatened by closer integration with the EU and the West, and opted instead for a more directly hostile approach to the West – including accusing Western partners of seeking to open a “second front” and draw Georgia into the war in Ukraine.

There appears to be strong opposition to this approach in Georgian society, which is reliably pro-European. But unlike in 2012, when Saakashvili’s control over the state was matched by Ivanishvili’s control over financial resources, at present the latter is in control of both. Political change through elections therefore appears a distant prospect. The public’s remaining option is to dissent through public protests and demonstrations, as happened in 2022 when the EU decided not to extend candidate status to Georgia. Unrest in Georgia, however, could prove costly: it cannot be ruled out that Russia, reeling from its failure in Ukraine, would opt to get involved in unrest in Georgia and seek to prevent a revolutionary scenario in that country. That, in turn, could have devastating consequences for the country’s stability and future sovereignty and independence.

Kazakhstan

Kazakhstan faced formidable challenges at independence, which led some of its leaders to question whether it had the conditions to survive as an independent state. The Kazakh nation had been decimated in the politically induced famines of the 1930s, in which two in five Kazakhs are estimated to have died. In subsequent decades, tens of thousands of Slavs were moved to Kazakhstan as part of the Soviet “virgin lands” campaign, leading Russians to outnumber Kazakhs from the 1950s through the 1980s. Only as a result of the higher Kazakh birthrates and the outmigration of ethnic Russians did Kazakhs once again outnumber Russians in the 1989 Soviet census. With ethnic Russians settled compactly in the country’s north and east, and an enormous land border with Russia, Kazakhstan’s prospects were indeed challenging.

Kazakhstan, however, avoided the ethnic strife of the South Caucasus, thanks in part to cautious government policies in the fields of language and ethnicity. And as in Azerbaijan, the government led by Nursultan Nazarbayev used the country's plentiful natural resources to establish its presence on the international scene. Nazarbayev built relations with American oil majors even before independence, and used the existence of nuclear weapons on its soil deftly. In exchange for agreeing to renounce its nuclear arsenal, Kazakhstan gained considerable goodwill in the West, and continued for decades to expand its role as a leader on the global scale on issues of nuclear power and nuclear non-proliferation.

This effort was coupled with hyperactive diplomacy, including the creation of the Conference on Cooperation and Interaction in Asia, (CICA), designed as an Asian version of the OSCE. Such international diplomacy provided Kazakhstan with a modicum of implicit deterrence, while its activity in mediating international disputes made it useful to the West as well as Russia.

Over time, however, the Kazakh model was challenged on several fronts. Externally, an increasingly hostile international environment made its efforts to maintain geopolitical pluralism in Central Asia – while remaining part of Russian-led cooperative institutions – a shaky proposition. Meanwhile, more seriously perhaps, as in Azerbaijan the 2015 crisis led to rapidly growing demands for political change. But unlike in Azerbaijan, the population was not mobilized in support of the government on a national security issue; and as such, popular demands for change, including through public protests, grew rapidly following the economic decline of 2015. The Nazarbayev government proved unable to respond adequately to this challenge, with the leader himself visibly ailing by 2017-2018. From 2019 to 2022, an uneasy cohabitation existed whereby Nazarbayev handed formal power over to a successor – the esteemed

diplomat Kassym-Jomart Tokayev – while holdovers continued to resist meaningful political change that would jeopardize elite economic interests. Tokayev, however, pressed forward with a series of packages of political and economic reforms. These accelerated following the January 2022 unrest, in which forces from the “old guard” appear to have sought to overthrow Tokayev.

Looking ahead, Kazakhstan faces similar challenges as Azerbaijan, having opted for a model of gradual political and economic reform that focuses on the delivery of services while maintaining centralized political control. It remains to be seen whether this model will prove sufficient to quell the demand for change in society.

Kyrgyzstan

Kyrgyzstan, along with Tajikistan, had a particularly precarious economic position at independence. Both states are upstream and heavily mountainous, with limited arable land, and few natural endowments except water. The Soviet energy distribution system in Central Asia had downstream, hydrocarbon-producing states supplying energy to the two upstream republics, which was swapped with water being delivered to irrigate agriculture in the downstream republics. Following independence, this system created disputes, as downstream countries refused to pay for water, while demanding payment for the oil and gas they delivered.

Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan also happened to share the commonality of deep regional divisions that aligned in part with topographic divisions of the two republics into northern and southern parts. In both republics, Soviet leaders had favored northern elites, and concentrated industry into those regions, thus deepening socio-economic inequalities between north and south. In Kyrgyzstan, the north was more russified and more secular, with a significant ethnic Russian population; whereas the south tended to

be more traditional and religious. The south also had a significant ethnic Uzbek population.

However, Kyrgyzstan benefited from a change of leadership in the waning days of the Soviet era that brought the relatively open-minded academic Askar Akayev to power. Akayev pledged to make Kyrgyzstan the “Switzerland of Central Asia,” and indeed the country rapidly became a liberal haven, hosting the greatest concentration of NGOs and foreign aid agencies in the region. What Akayev did not do, however, was to build stable state institutions. Instead, informal rule festered, and in the latter years of Akayev’s tenure, corruption spiraled out of control. Meanwhile, in spite of Akayev’s efforts to build a common national identity, the divisions in Kyrgyz society were not overcome, and resentment in the south mounted against his rule. It was in the south that protests erupted in 2005 that led to Akayev’s downfall. He was replaced by southerner Kurmanbek Bakiyev, whose thuggish rule in turn generated resentment in the north. Bakiyev was in turn overthrown in 2010, after which Kyrgyzstan adopted a parliamentary form of government to avoid the concentration of power in one family’s hands. But by 2020, this system, too, had collapsed, and a third revolution brought populist Sadyr Japarov to power.

Centrifugal forces have thus clearly dominated Kyrgyzstan’s modern political history, the country alternating between elite groups that sought control over the country’s politics and economy, but who never seriously attempted to build a stable institutional base.

The domestic troubles have been closely connected to foreign and security policy. Kyrgyzstan for a decade had the unique feature of hosting both a Russian and American military base on its territory, and the country’s inability to handle its relationship with superpowers contributed greatly to its instability. The 2005 revolution followed on those in Georgia and Ukraine, and was welcomed by Western forces that had come to see

regime change as a sustainable method to advance the democratization of post-Soviet countries. By contrast, the 2010 revolution appeared outright orchestrated by the Kremlin, occurring as it did following President's Bakiyev decision to renege on a promise, uttered in Moscow under duress, to expel the U.S. base in the country. The 2010 coup was followed by a dedicated effort by the Russian security services to establish control over their Kyrgyz counterparts. In turn, this Russian penetration of Kyrgyz state institutions has been a force every Kyrgyz leader has been compelled to deal with ever since. President Japarov, a nationalist at heart, appeared intent on strengthening the country's sovereignty vis-à-vis Moscow, but in the wake of the Russian war in Ukraine has opted for a very low profile.

In sum, Kyrgyzstan is one of the weakest countries in the region – poorly institutionalized, with an unstable political system, a large foreign debt mainly to China, and able to assert its sovereignty only partially.

Tajikistan

Tajikistan, as noted above, shares many similarities with Kyrgyzstan. However, its border with Afghanistan is a greater concern, while Russia's role in the country is somewhat more limited than in Kyrgyzstan. The country suffered a devastating civil war in the 1990s, which implied that Tajikistan effectively started off its effort to build a functioning state, and its place in the world, a decade after its Central Asian neighbors. By far the poorest Central Asian state, it also hosts a Russian military presence since the end of the civil war.

Tajik domestic politics for long essentially featured struggles between warlords from the civil war era – with President Emomali Rakhmon fending off warlords that had been part of the opposition in the civil war, but integrated with the government in the 1997 peace agreement, as well as warlords that had formed part of the government's side. While Rakhmon gradually consolidated power, he did so without broadening the

base of his government – relying instead increasingly on a core hailing from his home region in Kulyab. In parallel, the government has increasingly relied on the security apparatus and dark memories of the civil war to control society. Rakhmon's concentration of power in recent years led to growing tensions with regional interests, and led to armed confrontations with regional leaders both in the country's Garm region and in the eastern Gorno-Badakhshan area.

On the international scene, Tajikistan is quite isolated. While it has been a member of the CSTO, it has thus far succeeded in staying out of the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union in spite of Russian pressure to join. Rakhmon also sidelined the Kremlin's favorite politician in the country, speaker of the senate Mahmadsaid Ubaydullayev, from 2017 to 2020 to make place for his own son. China's footprint in Tajikistan has grown over time, and the country's debt to China now exceeds \$2 billion, 60 percent of its foreign debt. Bilateral relations with Western countries are relatively limited, and Tajikistan has instead boosted its ties with Iran, with which Tajiks share a common language. In recent years, the country's border with Afghanistan has become an increasingly thorny matter. While other Central Asian states have adopted a pragmatic approach to the Taliban and sought to establish ties with the new government in Kabul, Tajikistan has been an outlier in vocally opposing the Taliban and maintaining ties with the largely ethnic Tajik opposition to the Taliban.

The key question facing Tajikistan is whether the Rakhmon regime's control over the country is sustainable. In the short term, the Taliban takeover may have created a rally-around-the-flag effect that boosted Rakhmon's position in Dushanbe. But over time, the lack of meaningful reform in Tajikistan contrasts with developments in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, suggesting that the country's stability may not last.

Turkmenistan

Turkmenistan is in many ways an outlier in Central Asia. Linguistically closer to Azerbaijan and Turkey than to the rest of Central Asia, Turkmenistan's urban centers are separated from the rest of Central Asia by the Karakum desert. Indeed, Ashgabat, on the Iranian border, lies far from the other main urban areas of Central Asia. Historically, as well, Turkmen tribes' relations with neighboring peoples were tense at best, Turkmens being known for raids against trading caravans crossing the Silk Road. The Turkmen were also the last Central Asian people to submit to the Russian czar after the 1881 battle of Gök Tepe, decades after Khiva and Bukhara submitted.

Turkmenistan was also left behind in the Soviet era, Moscow making little effort to invest in the republic. At independence, Turkmenistan developed a more standoffish approach than its neighbors, depositing a document of "permanent neutrality" with the United Nations. Neutrality became the guiding principle of Turkmen foreign policy. And while it often veered into isolationism, Turkmenistan's foreign policy approach was one that allowed the country to steer clear of geopolitical rivalries in Central Asia and beyond. In other words, it was a rather deft move to allow the country to be left alone.

Turkmenistan is endowed with enormous natural gas reserves, estimated to be the fourth largest in the world. While this, in theory, could make the country the "Kuwait of Asia," the problem is that Turkmenistan is landlocked, and surrounded by other natural gas exporters – Russia and Iran, as well as Uzbekistan and Azerbaijan. In the first decades of independence, it was dependent on Russia for gas exports, and received pittance for payment. While President Saparmurad Niyazov orchestrated a major coup in agreeing with China to build export pipelines across Central Asia to feed the Chinese economy, Turkmenistan in the end ended up replacing one dependence with another. It is now the largest exporter

of gas to China, with China accounting for 80 percent of the Turkmenistan's exports.

Domestically, Turkmenistan has struggled to manage its economy. The country's currency is considered to be overvalued, kept artificially high by import controls and restrictions on access to hard currency. Restrictions on imports in turn have led to a drop in food availability, which combined with poor harvests to created instances of food shortages in the country in the late 2010s. This was further exacerbated by closures related to the pandemic. Politically, the country remains the most tightly controlled political system in Central Asia. Its political stability is therefore difficult to assess. Observers have noted the growing prominence of security services in the country's politics and foreign policy, in parallel with efforts to prevent political openings advanced by other government agencies. The country's recent tendency to develop closer relations with Russia is also attributed, at least in part, to the influence of the country's unreformed security services.

In the longer term, the main question is whether Turkmenistan will at some point follow the example of neighboring Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan and embark on a domestically driven reform agenda. It appears unlikely that this will happen in the short term, however.

Uzbekistan

Uzbekistan stands out as by far the most populous and strategically located country of Central Asia. Containing all major historic power centers in Central Asia, Uzbekistan is home to the traditionally settled Turkic peoples of Central Asia. It has borders with all other Central Asian states including Afghanistan, and its population approximates that of the four other post-Soviet Central Asian states combined. From the outset, this meant that Uzbekistan had a view of itself as a potential middle power,

with ambitions to make its mark on Central Asia. And so it did. Under President Karimov, who ruled from 1989 to his death in 2016, Uzbekistan had a highly defensive approach to regional politics. It played a key role in ensuring that radical Islamism did not get a foothold in Central Asia. This it accomplished by adopting harsh policies against suspected radicals, while taking active roles in the conflicts in both Tajikistan and Afghanistan. It played a key role in the arrival to power of Rakhmon in Dushanbe, while supporting allied warlords in Afghanistan – but also pragmatically seeking dialogue with the Taliban. Furthermore, Tashkent worked to prevent a return of Russian imperialism in Central Asia, decrying among other the expansion of Russian military presence in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. Importantly, Uzbekistan demonstratively left the CSTO in 2012, thus weakening Russian influence in the region.

At home, however, Karimov's defensive approach also created stagnation. Especially in his last decade in power, it was clear that Uzbekistan needed a different type of leadership to realize its potential. Relations with neighbors were tense, while ties with the West had deteriorated sharply as a result of controversies over Uzbekistan's human rights situation. This in turn left Tashkent vulnerable once again as it grew increasingly isolated.

The arrival to power of Shavkat Mirziyoyev in 2016 provided a long-awaited opportunity for Uzbekistan to move to the next level. Mirziyoyev launched important reforms at home while ramping up diplomacy with neighbors, moving swiftly to resolve contentious issues over border demarcation and water. Uzbekistan opened up to the world, in search of greater foreign investments, while also working to expand the country's international relations. The country's positive transformation soon became recognized as a major success story in a region surrounded by countries and powers that went in the direction of greater concentration of power.

Domestically, Mirziyoyev confronted the country's powerful security services, abolishing the ministry of national security and pledging to

transform it into a modern security service. As in Kazakhstan, Mirziyoyev sought to transform the logic of state-society relations away from the old Soviet model where the state dominates society, into one where the state's role is understood to serve the interests of society. Needless to say, that is a major shift that is likely to take a long time to achieve. But in the process, Uzbek society has become much more open, with a vibrant blogosphere and independent media seeking to gradually expand the parameters of acceptable discourse. This has made Uzbekistan stronger, as it has gained much greater international legitimacy than was the case previously. Both internally and externally, thus, Uzbekistan has built greater resilience, and strengthened the centripetal tendencies both domestically and in Central Asia more widely.

Evolutionary vs. Revolutionary Change

The post-Soviet space has long been among the world regions most resistant to political change. The coincidence of the creation of new states with the transition to a market economy created a very particular political economy, in which the holders of political clout also took control over important economic assets. Having done so, these forces became protectors of the *status quo*, seeking to maintain influence and resisting efforts to reform political and economic systems.

Over time, however, it became clear that reform could not be postponed forever. Even the most hard-nosed leaders acknowledged as much: Azerbaijan's Heydar Aliyev once quipped that democracy is not like an apple, which you can buy in a market; it takes long time to develop. Uzbekistan's Islam Karimov was even more frank, once telling a Western journalist that his generation of leaders could not be expected to develop democracy, but that the next generation might.

The first upheaval came in 2003-05, when popular uprisings spread across the region, succeeding in toppling governments in Georgia and Kyrgyzstan, along with Ukraine. There were several remarkable facts about these uprisings. First, they targeted the more dysfunctional rather than the more authoritarian states. Georgia and Kyrgyzstan, in particular, were among the least institutionalized states, with the most rampant and disorganized corruption, and seriously mismanaged. By contrast, more authoritarian states like Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan were not affected – in part because government repression deterred popular

uprisings, but also because similar public resentment did not appear to exist.

Many Western observers, frustrated with the lack of political development across the region, enthusiastically supported the notion of political change through popular upheavals. They would do so several years later in the Middle East and North Africa as well, during the Arab Upheavals. But over time, it became clear that revolutionary change did not succeed in producing sustainable democratic development. The “color revolutions” and Arab upheavals must now be termed a failure: no country that experienced these upheavals has progressed in a sustainable way toward democracy. Some, like Libya, Syria and Yemen have descended into civil war. Others, like Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan, experienced recurrent political crises while continuing to be mired in corruption. For some time, Georgia and Tunisia appeared to go against the grain, and make sustained progress – but in recent years, those two have also backtracked. All in all, it seems clear that revolution is not a sustainable model to change entrenched authoritarian habits.

Another model is gradual and evolutionary change. As mentioned above, there are indications that the leadership in some regional countries have concluded that they can no longer engage in business as usual; they must answer the popular demand for change, while seeking to maintain control of the political process to maintain stability and avoid upheavals. This has happened primarily in oil-producing states like Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan.

In Azerbaijan, the government launched the Azerbaijani Service and Assessment Network (ASAN) model of single-window, electronic provision of public services ranging from birth certificates and driving licenses to real estate documents in 2012, thus largely eliminating petty corruption in the provision of public services. From 2015 onward,

President Aliyev went on the offensive, verbally speaking, against high-level corruption, and made more personnel changes in three years than in his previous thirteen in power. A new, western-trained generation of technocrats took over major ministries. With advice from Western consulting firms, the government adopted a new roadmap for reform, and specifically targeted the notoriously corrupt taxation and customs sector for wholesale reform, introducing transparent electronic systems that “eliminate the middleman.” In parallel, reform was introduced in the judicial system, and created industrial parks and special economic zones to attract investments.

In Kazakhstan, President Tokayev from 2019 through 2022 introduced a series of packages of reform, targeting the political system, the economy, and social reforms as well. To support the process, he established the National Council of Public Trust (NCPT), a presidential advisory board constituted of representatives of the public, of the government, and of civil society. Reforms made it easier to create political parties, strengthened the role of parliament, and expanded the direct election of local governors. Kazakhstan also partnered with international organizations to reduce corruption in all levels of government, including through a broad digitalization program. Reforms were introduced to modernize law enforcement and promote women’s rights, and in the economic field, the government in particular has focused on the diversification of the economy, through targeted investments in supporting the development of agriculture and manufacturing. Following the January 2022 events, the government embarked on another wave of exclusively political reforms, focusing on nine priorities concerning the powers of the president, the representative branch of government, the electoral system, political parties, human rights institutions, decentralization of local government, and anti-crisis measures.

Uzbekistan' reforms kickstarted when President Mirziyoyev launched his electoral campaign in late 2016. Opening a direct communication line for popular petitions, the President short-circuited the system and obtained information about the government agencies citizens found most problematic. The President focused largely on accelerating the market transition and making Uzbekistan's economy more attractive to investors. But the reforms also sought to strengthen the role of parliament versus those of the President, and focused particularly on reforming the judicial system in the country. In 2022, Mirziyoyev announced plans to amend the constitution of Uzbekistan to make it more compatible with demands of the times. While most western focus has been on the extension of the President's term limits, the amendments touch on a majority of articles in the constitutions, and provide a considerably larger social responsibility to the state for the well-being of citizens.

None of these reform programs are intended primarily to liberalize the political system or transform these countries into democracies. But they contribute to shifting the logic of the state-society relations from the Soviet model, where the state dominated society, to a modern one where the state's task is to provide services to society. In so doing, they play a significant role in strengthening the resilience of the political systems and laying the foundation for a more representative form of government in the future.

Building Regional Cooperation

The extent to which countries cooperate voluntarily in security, trade and transport in Central Asia and the Caucasus is a key variable to assess the respective strength of centrifugal and centripetal forces. Indeed, the absence of functioning mechanisms of regional cooperation for much of the period since independence has been a leading example of centrifugal forces, keeping regional states isolated from each other and thus contributing to their vulnerability and weakness. Here, three issues must be separated: cooperation within Central Asia and the South Caucasus separate from each other, as well as cooperation across the Caspian.

South Caucasus

Regional cooperation in the South Caucasus has essentially been rendered impossible during the past thirty years by the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict. While a peace agreement between the two countries could change that, in the meantime the region since the late 1990s saw the development of regional cooperation involving Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey. This form of cooperation began with the large infrastructural projects designed to bring Caspian energy to Europe. The prospect of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline and the South Caucasus Gas pipeline led leaders of the three countries to find common purpose. Heydar Aliyev, Eduard Shevardnadze and Süleyman Demirel were colorful politicians of the same generation, who grasped the historic opportunity in front of them; they also found external support from the United States and Great Britain in furthering these projects. The logic of cooperation continued, nevertheless, and has survived changes of government in all three countries. In spite of early

differences, Mikheil Saakashvili and Ilham Aliyev developed a strong rapport, and found a willing partner in Tayyip Erdogan's government in Turkey. The trilateral cooperation has further branched out into new areas. In transport, the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railroad project was successfully concluded in spite of a lack of Western support. At the behest of pro-Armenian organization, Western government considered the project as designed to exclude Armenia, which already had a railroad connection with Turkey. Still, the three countries succeeded in supporting the project without recourse to external financing.

From this basis, the countries created a formalized trilateral cooperation format with periodic meetings at the foreign minister and defense minister level. From 2012 onward, the three states launched a cooperation in the military sector that led to the development of defense industrial cooperation, as well as joint military exercises to increase interoperability.⁸

The institutionalization of this cooperative format has led to a strengthening of ties between the three states that has remained functional, in spite of occasional hiccups in relations between the states, such as a controversy between Azerbaijan and Georgia over an ancient monastery complex straddling the border between the two countries,⁹ or occasional tensions between Turkey and Georgia caused by religious incidents. As such the format has contributed to the development of stable relations between the three countries, and thus formed an important centripetal force in the South Caucasus.

⁸ Azad Garibov, "Azerbaijan, Georgia, Turkey: Advancing the Military Dimension of the Trilateral Partnership," *L'Europe en Formation*, no. 1, 2018. 37-44. (<https://www.cairn.info/revue-l-europe-en-formation-2018-1-page-37.htm>)

⁹ Svante E. Cornell, "Are Georgia-Azerbaijan Relations at Risk?" *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, July 30, 2019. (<https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13583>)

Central Asia

In Central Asia, regional cooperation has been a rollercoaster of sorts. The five countries early on agreed on many things, including renaming the region “Central Asia” instead of the Soviet-era term “Middle Asia,” and to forge a nuclear weapons-free zone in their region. By the late 1990s, they were actively seeking to forge regional institutions, called first the Central Asian Union and later the Central Asia Cooperation Organization. But this format was weakened by several factors. First, the absence of Turkmenistan, which cited its neutrality to abstain from participation. Second, and more ominously, the prospect of Central Asian cooperation attracted Russian interest, particularly after the growth of American presence in the region following the September 11, 2001 attacks and the start of Operation Enduring Freedom. Under Vladimir Putin, Russia at first asked to obtain observer status and then full membership in the CACO, a request that regional leaders were not in a position to reject. Putin then folded CACO into the developing Eurasian-wide cooperative institutions he was building.

Indeed, the tensions between Central Asian cooperation and Eurasian integration has been prominent throughout independence. Central Asians have generally speaking shown a preference for Central Asian cooperation that respects the sovereignty of participating nations. Pragmatically, however, they have found it difficult to reject participation in Russian-led, Eurasian integrative schemes such as EurAsEc and the Eurasian Economic Union. Kazakhstan, in particular, was unable to reject joining the EUAU at its inception in 2015, not least because its president, Nursultan Nazarbayev, was credited with originating the idea in a 1994 speech in Moscow. Nazarbayev’s idea was nevertheless distinct from the model implemented by Vladimir Putin, which sought to strengthen supernational character of the Union, something both Kazakhstan and Belarus actively resisted.

The arrival of President Mirziyoyev to power in Tashkent once again gave impetus to the development of Central Asian cooperation. The Presidents of the five Central Asian states began meeting on a yearly basis, and launching ad hoc instruments of cooperation. Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have been seeking to institutionalize this cooperation, based on international examples like ASEAN and the Nordic Council.

Five years into this new period of cooperation, Central Asian leaders are meeting more frequently than ever, and coordinating policy on various issues in a novel way. This newfound coordination and cooperation is based on several factors. First, a greater sense of confidence in their sovereignty and statehood compared to the 1990s, certainly in the case of the two leading states, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. Second, a greater sense of political and economic urgency. On the economic front, the downturn from 2015 onward has made it clear that Central Asian states cannot forever create wealth on the basis of raw materials. Diversifying their economies became a necessity, requiring the dismantling of economic monopolies and barriers to trade that had existed as a result of the peculiar post-Soviet political economy, in which political access and influence remains central to economic success. On the political front, the greater pressure from Russia and China, in particular, made the prospect of regional cooperation a necessity to avoid great powers dividing and ruling among Central Asian states.

That said, Central Asian regional cooperation has much underutilized potential. Fear of Russian opposition, the recalcitrance of several of the smaller states of the region, and continued resistance from some well-connected business elites have ensured that a renewed Central Asian cooperative organization has yet to see the day.

Trans-Caspian

If cooperation within Central Asia and the South Caucasus, respectively, has progressed considerably, the same cannot be said for cooperation across the Caspian. In the 1990s, much was made of the Trans-Caspian connection, and the U.S. for some time actively pursued the building of a Trans-Caspian pipeline. But this never came to pass, and in spite of considerable links between Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan – such as oil transport using barges across the Caspian – the potential for cooperation across the Caspian remained underutilized. Many, this author included, advocated for the strategic value of an east-west corridor connecting Europe with Asia across Central Asia and the Caucasus. This route would complement the air and sea transport routes connecting some of the largest economies in the world, and would form an important prospect for the diversification and development of regional economies. Still, relations between states across the Caspian remained limited, each region seeming stuck in its own specific dynamic. This began to change following the 2015 oil price crash, for reasons already mentioned: diversification of economies now required greater attention to trade and transport, not just within regions but between them.

Events in 2021-22 intensified the perceived need for greater cooperation across the Caspian. The U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021 meant that prospects for the expansion of north-south transportation linking Central Asia to the Indian ocean now looked ever more remote. The Russian invasion of Ukraine further led to Central Asia's isolation, as it complicated the use of the transport corridor linking the region through Russia and Belarus to Europe. It also led Central Asians to seek a reduction of their dependence on Moscow. Both developments, thus, increased the impetus for the development of the Trans-Caspian corridor.

Leaders in Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan had already worked to resolve their disagreements over the ownership of oil and gas fields in the Caspian

Sea, agreeing in January 2021 to jointly develop a large field they now renamed *Dostluq*, meaning “friendship” in both languages. Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan worked rapidly to intensify their cooperation at all levels. Tokayev visited Baku in August 2022, and Aliyev Astana in April 2023, at which point they agreed to create a Supreme Interstate Council. Uzbekistan and Azerbaijan also expanded relations, Aliyev visiting Tashkent in July 2022 and Mirziyoyev reciprocating the visit in March 2023. This flurry of relations across the Caspian is unprecedented.

True, the prospect of larger volumes of trade across the Caspian is rather unlikely, given the large infrastructure investments needed for greater volumes to transit across the sea. The point, here, is that the centripetal tendencies have been increasing rapidly, with four countries around the Caspian – Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan – finding agreement and common purpose in ways they have not done in the past.

Growing Disparities and the Rise of Middle Powers

The preceding pages have made clear that considerable disparities have emerged between the countries in Central Asia and the South Caucasus. In fact, two groups of countries have crystalized. The first is states where centrifugal tendencies remain dominant, making countries weak and vulnerable to a combination of internal and external upheavals, thus undermining the sovereignty of these states. The second consists of emerging middle powers: states where centripetal tendencies have come to dominate, and which have developed an ability to secure their sovereignty and act to preserve it.

Over the past decade, this disparity has grown clearer. Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have all established themselves as middle powers in the region. They have done so in part through their internal development, seeking to balance the demand for change from their societies with the imperative of maintaining stability in dangerous times. Embarking on agendas of gradual reform, they provide the best chance for sustainable political development in the region. Even more, their actions on the regional scene has indicated their growing agency: by cooperating with one another and establishing relations with an assortment of foreign powers, they are strengthening their external sovereignty while also helping some of their weaker neighbors falling into dependence on neighboring great powers.

Meanwhile, the smaller states all to some degree exhibit significant vulnerabilities. Their political systems are fraught with unpredictability – some have gone through sometimes repeated episodes of upheaval that

have failed to lead to sustainable progress; others exhibit far-reaching stagnation and backtracking. Several states have experienced both these phenomena.

This does not mean that the weaker states totally lack resilience or that there are no vulnerabilities in the stronger ones. In fact, an argument could be made that the drive for reform in the emerging middle powers is fundamentally reactive, a result of fear of social upheavals. Kazakhstan's January 2022 crisis – which escalated largely as a result of elite conflicts – nevertheless started off as popular protests against price hikes, and in recent years both the country and the broader region have seen an uptick in public protests. Still, the difference is that the emerging middle powers have taken coherent and sustained action to address the deficiencies in the provision of public services, and their leaders have spoken honestly and forcefully about the problems plaguing government and bureaucracy. They have announced many reforms, but the hard work lies in the implementation of these initiatives, a work that is decidedly one in progress. And going forward, the risk that anti-reform forces will succeed in slowing down implementation is considerable.

Overall, however, one of the unsung developments in this region over the past decade is the emergence of middle powers. This is of crucial importance for the region's future, and for the approaches taken by foreign forces that wish the region well. In short, it means that the notion of this region as a "Grand Chessboard" or "Great Game" is no longer valid. Those notions suggest that local states and peoples are mere pawns moved around by great powers – a notion that has animated Western policy to some degree, as the U.S., in particular, has had a tendency to seek dialogue *on* the state of Central Asia and the Caucasus with other powers. Conversely, the U.S. has rarely appreciated the knowledge and experience of these smaller states about the great powers that surround them, and

sought to consult with them about events in the region – in spite of the fact that these leaders, by sheer necessity, are among the most knowledgeable about ongoing events in Iran, Russia and China, powers that are keenly relevant to U.S. national interests.

As the middle powers have sought to devise strategies to prevent the domination of one or another regional power over them, they have also reached out beyond the confines of the region for partners. Seeking to engage East Asian, Middle Eastern and Western powers, the middle powers of Central Asia and the Caucasus are by default partners to the West, sharing a common interest of maintaining what amounts to geopolitical pluralism in the region. As recent years have shown, they are also capable of delivering on initiatives of their own – developing regional cooperation that would have been difficult to imagine a decade ago.

This has implications for U.S. and EU policy. While the West should continue to focus on providing development assistance to the smaller countries, the implication is that on security and geopolitical issues they should focus on anchoring policies toward the region with the three middle powers, building long-term relationships of trust with the bureaucracies and societies of these three states. Over the long term, this will provide the West with the best possible conditions for maintaining a presence in Central Asia and the Caucasus and being able to positively influence developments there. While this means acting cautiously and deftly, the U.S. and EU must step up to enlist the middle powers in preventing Russian and Chinese domination over Eurasia.

This will not mean neglecting the smaller states, whose fate is crucial to the region. But it does mean that Western policy must focus on different priorities in different countries. In the weaker and smaller states in Central Asia, Western powers should focus on development assistance, seeking to gradually win over these states to an agenda of gradual reform. In Georgia, the West must work to restore the country's Euro-Atlantic

orientation, focusing on strengthening the resilience of Georgian society against efforts to derail the country from the orientation Georgian society has clearly shown it supports.

This will also mean altering Western rhetoric towards the region. In the past, Western powers have had a strongly normative approach to the region's states, very often treating them as less than equals and hectoring states on their records in human rights and democracy. The point here is not that the West should bury concerns over these issues. The point is that addressing those concerns in the way Western powers have done has not proven constructive, and has had as its main effect to alienate regional governments rather than obtaining results. Because the governments of the three middle powers have now embraced strategies of gradual reform, it makes sense for Western powers to adopt a more constructive approach to support these processes, and act as partners in reform initiatives. Western leaders will have to accept that in the short term this may not lead to the liberalization of political systems, but that the processes under way – if implemented – will provide the conditions for future democratic development. Because implementation of reforms is likely to be difficult and time-consuming, Western powers could play key roles in supporting these processes in cooperation with the pro-reform forces in regional governments.

Author Bio

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