

Central Asia – A House Built on Sand

The phrase “The Great Game” has become something of a lazy cliché when referencing anything to do with Central Asia. Regrettably, therefore, it has never been more apt than today. Much as it was during the days of empire, it is once again a hotbed of political and geopolitical struggle. Where aristocrats, warlords, tribesmen and men on the spot once went, businesses, political elites, and foreign strategic interests all now vie for primacy. And yet, the “Stans” are still mistakenly viewed in the West as a curious irrelevance – a disconnected and trapped-in-time patchwork of ex-Soviet republics known for little more than Borat, corrupt dictators, funny laws and sparsely populated steppe. Overexposed to the economic strength and political decisions of Russia and, by extension, Putin’s current war in Ukraine, the geopolitics of the former Soviet space, much like that of the South China Sea and mass migrations northwards, will be one of the defining issues of our time. Nothing should be viewed in isolation and, as Russia acquires the type of pariah status previously reserved for the likes of North Korea and Syria, the political and economic shockwaves felt through Central Asia will also be profoundly destabilising.

That many of these regimes, long before the events of the past few months, were already facing existential threats to their domestic authority should be cause for great concern and, perhaps, hope. Political unrest in Kazakhstan (2018-2020), Uzbekistan (2019-2020), Turkmenistan (2020), Kyrgyzstan (2020), Tajikistan (2021) failed to draw much comment from international media, even less so in the proper context of a pattern of discontent across the region. Only Kazakhstan’s most recent and violent outburst registered a degree of Western interest, and attention has since refocussed on Ukraine. However, these events should not be seen in isolation but as the beginning of a period of instability and upheaval. The political elites of all five countries will rightfully be looking to Russia’s activities in Ukraine, something which caught them completely off guard, and the domestic ramifications of events, with a great deal of trepidation. As Putin drives Russia into international isolation, the status quo in Central Asia looks very fragile indeed.

The Past

It is important to remember that these countries did not “win” or strive for their independence from Moscow in the late 1980s and early 1990s, but rather had it imposed upon them. There was no fledgling democratic campaign of the type that swept across Eastern Europe, save a three-day student protest in Kazakhstan in 1986. Instead, small bands of communist apparatchiks were cut off from Moscow overnight and had absolute power thrust into their hands. A new system of governance and nationhood was required to fill the void as proletarian internationalism evaporated. This is key to understanding the way in which Central Asia has developed in the three decades since.

Leaders quickly settled on developing a strong sense of national identity based on the majority ethnic group in their state. As an aside, it is interesting to note that significant Russian minorities were heavily discriminated against, with many leaving as a result – a narrative we now see at play in Russian media. These new national identities required corresponding historical narratives and common heroes from history – warriors, poets, writers etc. Whereas most counterparts in Eastern Europe had an established pool of pre-Soviet traditions and institutions to fall back on, whatever Putin claims, in Central Asian countries, the necessary focal points were less obvious. Very quickly, therefore, it suited those in power to crystalise these narratives around themselves as equivalent, present day defenders of the nation. For example, former President of Turkmenistan, Saparmurat Niyazov, bestowed the title *Türkmenbaşy*, or “*Great Leader of All Turkmen*,” as part of the fostering of his particular cult of personality. Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan created similar father/leader of the nation type honorifics for their own leaders. Domestically at least, all vestiges of Russian and Sovietness were diluted or removed altogether. Those adopted narratives served the elites well in replacing communism, for the most part, until now.

Although the troubled years of the 1990s eventually gave way to less arduous circumstances, the Central Asian regimes have remained steadfast in their despotic and arbitrary natures. Still, of the initial set of strongmen who came to power only one, President Rahmon of Tajikistan, has remained in power continuously since 1992. President Nazarbayev officially stepped back in Kazakhstan in 2018 but still retains nominal control. President Berdimuhamedow of Turkmenistan took over where his predecessor left off (and then some) in 2006 and has now passed power to his son Serdar, whilst President Karimov of Uzbekistan died in 2016. Kyrgyzstan, the only one of the five to have a colour revolution (the Tulip Revolution of 2005), is the outlier in being able to replace a steady stream of (corrupt) leaders. In that time, Russia has reasserted itself both economically and politically, thereby bringing the region back under its sphere of influence and shoring up that which would likely have otherwise collapsed in any post-strongman power vacuum. All countries in the region were classified as “*authoritarian regimes*” in the Economist Intelligence Unit’s 2020 Democracy Index with the exception of Kyrgyzstan, now classed as a “*hybrid regime*”. In fact, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan are amongst the ten least democratic states worldwide alongside the failed states of Libya and Syria. Without that “brotherly” oversight and economic support in Central Asia, these regimes will find it increasingly difficult to resist the growing demand for change for their own people.

The Present

Along with Russian oversight, the central pillars of cheap energy and low taxation (between five and ten percent for all five countries) have kept the populations largely placated, separate and indifferent to the distant machinations of state power – one of the more useful hangovers from the Soviet era. This is now coming to an end. Against a backdrop of major demographic shifts towards a younger (all five have

average ages well below the global median), increasingly urbanised, well-connected, services-orientated, and politically aware population, the state and politicians are outdated and the narrative stale. In recent years, all five Central Asian states recorded annual population growth well above 1% (the global average) with Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan registering even higher growth, of 2.1% and a 2.5% respectively. Whilst the older populations are broadly tolerant of authoritarianism, major declines in living standards are the spark for any regime change, most of all with the young. In recent months, fuel prices have shot up for the first time, as they have across the rest of the world. Sanctions on Russia and the looming food crisis will only compound the economic misery of the pandemic over the coming months. In a region where remittances from Russia account for substantial portions of the country's total GDP (in Tajikistan this is 30%, while in Kyrgyzstan it is 28%), the hit to living standards and household budgets is inescapable. In this regard, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan are better placed than the others thanks to their sovereign wealth funds, substantial reserves of oil and lower public debt. However, wider existentialist threats exist in other areas of the five's economies, including region-wide electricity outages, thanks to the decrepit system of old Soviet power stations which should have been replaced years ago – perhaps a fitting analogy of the elites themselves. Recent proposals for Russian-built nuclear reactors may also come under closer scrutiny and suffer significant delays. Elsewhere, experts point to a looming water crisis in Central Asia as the region warms faster than the global average. Vast swathes of the (growing) populations are still agrarian (water-intensive rice, wheat and cotton being the key crops) and tensions between neighbours over water access are already becoming a major political issue. A cross-border dispute over water in April 2021 left 37 Kyrgyz and 19 Tajiks dead. Even one of these issues in isolation is capable of bringing a country to its knees. In concert, they will be lethal.

Kazakhstan is the most mature in its state of civic disdain. Protests have rumbled on, in one form or another, for at least a decade now. The most recent, and most ferocious, of these street protests and violence followed a government announcement that the price of fuel would double but quickly morphed into a more general protest, as they so often do, against the elites. It is also the first to have now made an impression in the global consciousness, given the nature of the violence and the appeal for Russian troops to help the new leadership in what seems a call-back to the heavy-handedness of the Soviet era. Faltering living standards are undoubtably at the core of the issue, however, it is the lack of political plurality that means there is little way to express discontent at the ballot box or on the streets (without threat of violence). Those in power can only hide behind state media and manipulated narratives for so long. It seems that their regimes are increasingly running short of time and being able to control the domestic narrative. We are clearly coming up to an existential fork in the road.

The regimes are not blind to these issues, however disconnected from their people they may be. It is telling, for example, that all five abstained from the UN vote condemning Russia's invasion. Despite being

grateful for the help and subsequent departure of Russian troops used to crush dissent in Nur-Sultan (as part of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation, or CSTO), even politicians in the Kazakh capital are now looking with apprehension at the events in Ukraine. It puts them in a very difficult quandary. After all, two thirds of Kazakh oil exports (57% of the country's total exports) move abroad through Russian-owned pipelines – they are now looking to shift this supply south through Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey. And yet, such is the perceived threat that they have already begun to quietly distance themselves from events and called for an end to hostilities. Kazakhstan is now providing aid to Ukraine and, along with Uzbekistan, will not recognise the breakaway republics of Donetsk and Luhansk, nor send troops to Ukraine. Turkmenistan's policy of self-imposed isolationism remains unchanged, while Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan remain quiet and most fearful of the budgetary shortfalls and unemployment coming down the track. Despite being the regional guarantors of security, victory for Russia (at least to a domestic Russian audience), will embolden the Kremlin to re-examine the independence of the other former Soviet republics. If they can expand onto the doorstep of Europe, then who can stop them from subjugating these comparatively isolated minnows? What runs parallel to this fear is a groundswell of pro-Ukrainian sentiment in their own populations and awareness for their own sovereignty. The elites are already, therefore, treading a very fine line between being removed from beneath by those who view them as weak, Moscow-backed stooges, or being undermined by the very same power that helps keeps them in place. Other foreign interests are also at play and further complicate the landscape.

The Future

China's economic expansion, not least through its One Belt One Road initiative, will bring enormous change and, by many economic metrics, has already displaced much of the Turkish and Russian competition – both looking to project power and maintain spheres of influence. Furthermore, Iran sees the region as integral to its revitalised Look East policy to counter the effects of Western sanctions. All are looking to establish a greater degree of primacy. The strong ethnic links to Turkey, the historic political and military links to Russia, and the burgeoning economic might of China in their own unique ways exercise a strong pull on many of these nations, waxing and waning over time. To complicate matters further, the US/NATO is largely exiting the region, and the Taliban to the south are considered a major threat to stability over the long, porous borders Afghanistan shares with Tajikistan and Turkmenistan. As a result, it is fair to say that Central Asia will see a great deal of international interest, pressure, scrutiny and investment in the coming years.

As we have discussed, Kazakh President, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, asked for CSTO assistance to crush the mass protests against the government in early January. With bodies like these - The Eurasian Economic Union, The Commonwealth of Independent States, The Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the Commonwealth of Independent States Free Trade Area (CISFTA) – all dominated by

Russia, it is easy to see this type of request becoming the default option from Russia as regimes seek to rapidly quash any hint of organised dissent. Although Russia will always be willing to marshal its own perceived backyard back into line, current events prove that this will become an increasingly untenable position. For Central Asian governments themselves, it is a quick and guaranteed tool of suppression. There may come a day and breaking point when a movement that they cannot quell, like those in Ukraine or Belarus, spirals into something more significant i.e., a further wave of Colour Revolutions. This is the primary fear where Russia is concerned and Putin reiterated, in the immediate aftermath of the Kazakh protests that, the “*measures taken by the CSTO have clearly shown we will not allow the situation to be rocked at home and will not allow so-called 'colour revolutions' to take place.*”

We may already be seeing, however, a recalibration of partners. Against the backdrop of a shift towards Chinese economic hegemony, in 2016, China conducted its first bilateral military exercises with Tajikistan and reportedly maintains troops in-country. Strategically placed between Afghanistan and Xinjiang, China sees it as integral to the security (not least since the fall of the Western-backed government in Kabul) of its far western provinces and the Wakhan corridor – the narrow strip of land connecting Afghanistan and China directly. Fears of Islamic extremism are shared in Dushanbe and China, culminating in a mutually beneficial security arrangement that alters the power structure of the region. Relations between Russia and China have become vital by their mutual distrust of the West. Although this relationship has become a little awkward in light of recent developments, in the short term, there will be no major rift even as China’s looks to secure strategic space, resources and political alliances.

As the tentacles of China’s One Belt One Road (OBOR) spread west towards Europe, the balance will undoubtedly be upset. The Central Asia Data-Gathering and Analysis Team has identified at least 261 One Belt One Road planned projects across the five countries, a truly vast number that will bind the region to Beijing both economically and politically¹. Furthermore, the corresponding Chinese loans connected to these projects, and the sanctions imposed on Moscow, will undoubtedly push many of these countries into Beijing’s embrace. China already holds around 40% of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan’s national debts. Undoubtedly, this will lead to major political, economic, and military concessions to Beijing. Business interests will need to be aware of this growing issue as their repayments start to bite over the coming decades. At risk of generalising, Russian and Chinese competitors with deeper historic and developed ties in industry, are often more comfortable with acting less scrupulously when engaging with officials who themselves are cut from the same cloth. Companies will have to navigate this multifaceted set of issues – the inevitable involvement of local elites, corrupt government elites, oligarchs, and international patrons with competing geopolitical interests.

¹ https://osce-academy.net/upload/file/20_BRI_in_Central_Asia.pdf pp.1

No corner of the five Central Asia economies will be exempt from the issue of competing geopolitical interests, thereby creating an incredibly challenging and complex landscape that needs to be carefully managed and navigated. Whether this comes against a backdrop of protest and disruption, coups or a more gradual patchwork of ageing politicians dying or being replaced, has yet to be seen. The possibility of regional cooperation, in which the five band together and seek to play external powers off against one another in a competitive multi-polar system, would likely be the most ideal outcome for a domestic audience, business interests and regional stability alike. Whether this can be achieved in a timely and uniform manner, is unlikely. What is not in doubt, however, is that domestic anger and disillusionment felt against national institutions and elites runs deep and is in dire need of redress. The potential for disruption, therefore, must effectively be guarded against. There must be a strong appreciation for all manner of internal and external threats and interferences, none of which should be viewed in isolation. Whether it be a greater degree of Russian interference or a simple act of God, long and short-term ramifications will all culminate in a more challenging and unstable geopolitical environment. They represent a soft underbelly to Moscow's sphere of influence - one beset by internal and external threats to the status quo. At a time when Moscow's attention and, more importantly, resources, are bogged down in the west, it would take little to topple the old order and shatter, once and for all, Russia's centuries-old grip on the region.

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