



Central Asia: The Long Road to Statehood

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Abstract

Nations in Central Asia have started a long journey to statehood and they are facing risks and challenges. Despite all the odds, if global geopolitics gives it a chance, the region may become a constructive partner for both the West, Russia and China.

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Analysis

All along the XIX century Central Asia had been, in the words of Peter Hopkirk, the stage of the “Great Game”, the struggle for mastery in the region between Victorian Britain and Tsarist Russia. After the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, Central Asia fell under the authority of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union to continue its long political hibernation.

The fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union changed the global political landscape. The five countries included in Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, the Kyrgyz Republic, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan) had now an opportunity to wake up and take their future into their own hands. They were now independent and free nations for the first time in their history. Freedom at last, that was a very welcome development, but it also entailed risks and challenges. These five nations had to learn to govern themselves and start their own nation-building processes. Once the USSR was gone, instructions were not coming any longer from Moscow and the rulers of the former Soviet Socialist republics had to reinvent themselves and adapt to the new situation of independence. This political and transition process was full of tensions and difficulties.

In the 90s the five countries were trying to become full-fledged independent nations at a time when there was growing instability in Afghanistan, when China was taking off as a rising global power, when painful and difficult adjustments were taking place in the Russian Federation itself after the collapse of the Soviet Empire, and when for the first time in history the USA was setting up a significant military footprint in the region to support “Enduring Freedom” and ISAF operations in Afghanistan.

The newly born Central Asian countries were still burdened with old problems stemming from inefficient and corrupt bureaucracy, ethnic rivalries, lack of clear border demarcation, and an uneven distribution of natural resources. Countries, such as Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, with no energy resources, were in a position to control the flow of the two main rivers in the region (Amur Darya and Sir Darya). That water is absolutely crucial to irrigate the cotton fields in downstream countries, basically Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, which do not have enough water but are rich in energy resources. In Soviet times, Moscow had imposed some sort of “barter” mechanism among Central Asian republics whereby oil was exchanged for water, but the demise of the USSR put an end to this arrangement and water became and remains today a bone of contention in the area, creating the potential for conflict and instability.

National governments also had to pay attention to other serious issues such as illegal traffics of drugs, weapons and human beings across the region. Drugs coming out of Afghanistan travel to Russia and Europe through Central Asian countries, corrupting officials and bringing misery to thousands of innocent families.

2014 has brought some additional elements of uncertainty. The Ukrainian crisis has sent shock waves throughout the region. Governments in Central Asia are aware of the Russian military power and of the political influence Moscow still has in the region. That is why they observe with attention and alarm the events which have taken place in and around Crimea and Eastern Ukraine. There are nations in Central Asia, such as Kazakhstan, where 24% of the population is ethnically Russian, located primarily in the country’s northern regions along the 7,000 km long border with Russia. This Russian minority (four millions) is reasonably well integrated in Kazakhstan, but it has lost the political, social and economic power it enjoyed under Soviet rule. It would not be difficult to stir the nationalist feeling of that Russian minority to create a Maidan scenario.



Turning risks into opportunities: The Eurasian Economic Union

Side by side to all these challenges and uncertainties, the XXI century will also bring new opportunities for Central Asia. The establishment of the Eurasian Economic Union as from January 1, 2015 could be a game changer for the dynamics of regional integration. Since 1995 Moscow has been trying to launch different cooperation mechanisms within the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), but those initiatives have been largely unsuccessful. Very often they had been perceived across the former Soviet space just as an attempt to revive the former USSR and to rebuild structures which may help Moscow maintain a dominant position in its backyard.

This time, the Eurasian Economic Union could be different. The Russians have studied the European Union model carefully and have found some inspiration in it. It is clear, however, that the starting point is completely different because of the huge political and economic asymmetry of the Members of the new Union (Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Armenia and, soon, Kyrgyzstan). Tajikistan is still sitting on the fence and resisting Russian pressure to join the bloc, while it is not at all clear whether Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan will ever become Members of this Union. Some Member countries, like Kazakhstan, eager to maintain their own independence and sovereignty, have emphasized that the new Union is just economic and commercial, with no political strings attached. Whatever its future may be, the fact remains that the Eurasian Economic Union is already up and running.

It will be impossible in the Eurasian Economic Union to avoid a Russian leadership in real terms, but its institutions and bodies have been designed to guarantee, at least formally, an equal footing for all the Members. The Union will bring with it a single market with more than 170 millions consumers where labor, capital, goods and services will enjoy free movement.

Common policies will be developed and implemented in energy, industry, agriculture and transport. The success or failure of this integration process will be, first and foremost, the responsibility of its participants, but there is no denying that part of its fortunes will also be determined by the degree of support and acceptance it may find by and within the European Union and its Members States.

In principle, the European Union should welcome regional integration in Central Asia as a positive development and have a realistic approach to the new situation. In the global economy, Central Asia can play a crucial role as a bridge connecting Europe and China. The Eurasian Economic Union, led by Russia, is here to stay and that is something the EU should take into account when updating its own Central Asia Strategy launched in 2007. The EU financial perspectives 2014-2020 have earmarked more than 1 billion euro for cooperation with Central Asia, which is a clear signal that the region matters and is perceived in Brussels as an promising partner full of opportunities, but still in need of support.

Governments in the region tend to give priority to national agendas and bilateral relations over regional cooperation and integration, and they have not quite understood yet the value of regional cooperation. To illustrate their attitude, suffice to say that the only regional Organization in which all the five Central Asian republics participate is the "International Fund to Save the Aral Sea".



One region, diverse nations

In order to properly assess the current situation and perspectives in Central Asia, it is necessary to take into account that the five nations of the region are very different from each other and, therefore, require different approaches.

A first glance at Central Asia shows that Kazakhstan, by itself, is bigger and richer than the combination of all the other four countries of the region. Kazakhstan maintains excellent relations with Moscow but it is also in good terms with China, the United States, the European Union and India in an effort to develop a multivector and balanced foreign policy.

Due to its rising regional profile, Kazakhstan has the duty and responsibility to lead. Kazakhstan (2.7 million square kilometers) has roughly the size of Western Europe and produces daily 1.7 million barrels of oil. It is the first world producer and exporter of uranium and has huge stocks of coal, iron, copper, rare minerals and gas.

It has the potential to become a beacon of stability for the whole region. It has multiplied by 15 times its GDP in the last 10 years. It has been the first – and so far the only – country of Central Asia to have had the Chair-in-Office of the OSCE (2010), it is now pushing its candidature for a non-permanent seat at the UN Security Council for the period 2017-2018, and in 2017 its capital Astana will host an International Specialized Exhibition (EXPO 2017) on “Energy of the future”.

Moreover, Kazakhstan has just concluded an Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA +) with the European Union to expand cooperation which has been going on for years under a previous Agreement concluded in the mid-nineties.

For all the five countries of the region transition to independence was not easy. They inherited leaders who had been brought up, politically speaking, in the Soviet culture and have managed to establish, with more or less fortune, authoritarian regimes which are often criticized abroad, not so much at home. We are talking about societies which were for centuries dominated by remote centralized authoritarian powers and, as a result, they have developed respect for strong leadership. When confronted with the dilemma freedom vs. security, societies in Central Asia tend to lean toward the latter as freedom is something relatively new which, in their eyes, may bring instability. All these facts, together with aging leaders, impose serious constraints to the process of modernization and openness of the political systems in the region.

The spectrum of Islamism and the Afghan shadow

Throughout history, Central Asia has never been a region where religion was a dominant force. The religious feeling was more deeply rooted among the sedentary communities, such as the Tajik or the Uzbek, but not so much among the nomadic Kazakh or Kyrgyz tribes.

Whatever the differences may be, there is no denying that today we witness a revival of the religious Islamic feelings all across the board in Central Asia. Confronted with this fact, the governments in the region, secular in nature, try to favor those more modern and moderate interpretations of Islam, as the Hanafi orientation.



But they have been unable to prevent more militant jihadist visions from taking hold within some social groups, particularly the youngest population. And that is a worrying trend for Central Asian governments which are concerned on future developments in Afghanistan.

The NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan has been going on since 2001 and its end will imply a substantial reduction of western military presence in that country. There will be a follow-on NATO mission, "Resolute Support", but much more limited in scope and of a different nature. Basically the new mission will focus on coaching and advising the Afghan National Army (ANA), as opposed to ISAF which had a clear combat component. The new Afghan government has already signed the Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA) with the United States and a new Statute of Forces Agreement (SOFA) with NATO.

Even so, Central Asian governments feel uneasy on how the situation might evolve in Afghanistan, and Russia uses that widespread feeling to strengthen its military presence in the Central Asian region. In fact, Moscow presents itself as the ultimate security guarantee for Central Asia if things go wrong in Afghanistan and has further secured and expanded its military footprint in Tajikistan and in Kyrgyzstan. It is also developing and enhancing joint capabilities in the framework of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO).

Conclusion

The Central Asian republics are countries in transition, but they have not quite developed yet the model they wish to adopt. In Kazakhstan, for example, the leadership has decided that the economy comes first, then political development and full democracy. In Kyrgyzstan, in contrast, we see the opposite approach, with political developments taking the lead over economic improvements.

Regimes in the region, in general, are not fully democratic, they tend to adopt a paternalistic approach to society, they tolerate corruption and power is the result of delicate balances between tribal and clan loyalties. It is also fair to say that they have made steady economic progress since independence and that Central Asian societies enjoy today higher standards of living than those prevailing in Soviet times.

The region has been for centuries under the influence of external forces. It will not be easy for Central Asian countries to take responsibility and play an independent role. Looking at the map of the region provides interesting clues: Kazakhstan shares a 7,000 km long border with Russia, more than 1,500 km long border with China. These two giants cast a very long political and economic shadow on Central Asia. European and American interests in the region are also important. But Central Asia has a historic chance to engage with all those actors and become a reliable and valuable partner. What we witness today is a new subcontinent, Central Asia, trying to emerge, in political and economic terms, as an important player in the new global scenario of the XXI century.

Remarks: Opinions expressed in this presentation are those of the author.



About the Author of this Issue

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Ambassador Larrotcha Parada graduated in Law at the University of Granada in 1978. He gained his Diploma of International Studies at the Spanish Diplomatic School in Madrid in 1981 and has been serving in the Spanish Diplomatic Service since 1983.



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