1 Introduction

1.1 Central Asia and Russia

In December 1991, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) was dissolved, and the fifteen republics became independent nation states (Map 1). Russia replaced the Soviet flag with a historic Russian flag and reclaimed a long pre-Soviet history, as well as assuming powers, assets, and liabilities as the successor state to the Soviet Union. Since 1991, some politicians have sought to reassert Russia's influence over the other new independent states, supporting secessionist governments in Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, and Moldova (the GUAM group) and referring to Central Asia as Russia's near abroad. This Element assesses the claim that Central Asian countries have a special relationship with Russia.[1]

Before the Russian conquest, clear borders between states were absent in many parts of Central Asia. The southern border of the Russian Empire was set in the late nineteenth century when Russia occupied Turkestan and Britain and China enforced the limits of this expansion, with Afghanistan established as a buffer to the south. The borders between the Soviet republics in Central Asia were drawn in the 1920s and 1930s, approximating ethnic divisions but also suspected of being part of a divide-and-rule policy by Moscow. These borders became national borders with the dissolution of the Soviet Union in December 1991.

The region was at the centre of Eurasian history through the two millennia of the Silk Roads, when Central Asian oases were important stopping points before or after crossing the deserts and mountains on the western margin of China. Merv (Mary in modern Turkmenistan) was perhaps the largest city in the world before it was razed by Chinggis Khan in 1221. The glories of Bukhara and Samarkand can still be admired by visitors. Bukhara was a major city, boasting the world's tallest building, the Kalyan minaret, built in 1127. Later, Emir Timur (Tamerlaine, 1336–1405) ruled a large empire based on Samarkand, which his successors turned into a centre of learning; Timur's descendant Babur created the Mogul Empire that would rule India from 1526 to 1761.

In 1500, Vasco da Gama discovered the sea route round the foot of Africa that sounded the death knell for overland trade between Asia and Europe. Trade continued with Russia, China, Persia, and India, but Central Asia left centre stage in Eurasian history. The political structure, divided among a series of

[1] The claim has been made by Vladimir Zhirinovsky, Leader of the Liberal Democratic Party in the 1996 Russian presidential election, and by Vladimir Putin, Russia's President for most years since 2000. It is often combined with the claim that the Central Asian countries had no history as independent countries (presumably, in the Westphalian sense of a state). The fact that the post-1991 Central Asian countries had never been 'countries' does not mean that they had no history.

Map 1 The Central Asian countries after independence

emirs and khans, never matched the post-1648 European concept of a nation state.[2] Nevertheless, Central Asia's cultural, religious, and linguistic identities remained distinct and strong.

For Russia the time-path to Eurasian importance was the reverse, beginning in the 1500s and reaching great power status in the 1800s. Under Ivan III (r.1462–1505), the principality of Moscow challenged the Mongols' domination. Ivan III's rule saw creation of a bureaucratic apparatus to manage diplomatic relations and to supervise military arrangements, land tenure, and other elements of a state; landholders had to render military service and peasants had to till the land, with payment of rent and taxes supporting the state bureaucracy as well as the military (Hellie, 1971).[3] During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the land controlled by Moscow was expanded. When Tsar Peter I assumed the title of Emperor of all Russia in 1721, his realm was modernizing into a European multicultural empire in which Russians accounted for only about 70 per cent of the population.[4] The expansion to the Pacific, largely in search of furs and with disregard for the indigenous peoples, had many similarities to the eighteenth-century history of western North America. After the defeat of Napoleon in 1815, Russia assumed its place with Britain, France, Prussia, and Austria as the five major powers maintaining the Concert of Europe; the Romanov empire was clearly more similar to the Hohenzollern and Habsburg empires than to France or Britain.

Incorporation of Central Asia into the Russian Empire was primarily a nineteenth-century process. Russia had been involved since the seventeenth century in the territory of modern Kazakhstan, where various groups would call on Russia for help against rival groups, but the thinly populated steppes were not a great prize. Attempts to invade the more fertile areas of Central Asia based on the two rivers flowing into the Aral Sea had failed in 1717 and 1838, largely due to distance and severe climate. Russian control over the steppes tightened and its technical edge widened. In 1865, Russian forces conquered Tashkent. The rest of Central Asia soon followed as Russian engineers built a railway

[2] Scott Levi (2020) documents the ongoing trade and the economic crisis of the eighteenth century. Adeeb Khalid (2021, 52–62) summarizes political developments up to the nineteenth century, when Central Asia was divided among at least eight rulers 'with varying degrees of authority and sovereignty' of which those in Bukhara, Kokand and Khorezm (Khiva) were the most powerful.

[3] Richard Hellie (1982) also documented the role of slavery, that accounted for some 10–15 per cent of the population, and the social and economic structure of Russia in the decades preceding Peter the Great (Hellie, 1999).

[4] Moving the capital to the Baltic port of Saint Petersburg signalled the intention of being a European country. However, because peasants had no attachment to the land and could be bought and sold, Russia's agrarian structure would differ from post-feudal arrangements in western Europe. Russia had also missed the Renaissance and lacked a meaningfully independent gentry or urban society.

from the Caspian to Tashkent to support first the military advance and then economic exploitation. The southern boundary of the empire was established by agreement with the British who were advancing from India; Afghanistan, with territory stretching from Persia to China, was recognized as the buffer between the two empires. Russian governors-general were installed, and Central Asia was established as part of the Russian Empire.

The above picture is clear in outline, although specifics are disputed. How backward was Central Asia before the Russian conquest? The three madrasahs of Samarkand's Registan – one of the world's most magnificent squares – were built in 1417–20, 1619–36, and 1646–60; prosperity clearly did not end in 1500. The local rulers were despotic and did not treat Europeans well (military agents were executed and captured Russians were enslaved), but the economy was not moribund. Russian military actions against the territories of Khiva or Bukhara were unsuccessful and the military breakthrough came with the capture of Tashkent, a commercial but not a political centre. Why did Russian conquest occur when it did? Central Asia was known to be well-suited to growing cotton: did the timing of conquest, coinciding with the American civil war, reflect a response to potential shortage of imported cotton for Russia's textile mills, or was it part of colonial expansion that for western European countries was centred on Africa?

Russia's treatment of Central Asians over the fifty years after 1865 was quite different from the harsh treatment of the inhabitants of Siberia or the Far East. During the half-century of Tsarist rule, Russia's principal economic interest in the governate of Turkestan lay in securing cotton for textile mills in Russia, and this was supported by transport, financial, and administrative infrastructure. The traditional society was largely untouched as Europeans lived in separate areas and religious law continued to operate in Muslim communities. Although some Central Asians were included in administration and business, the Central Asian and European areas retained their separate appearances, religion, and language. Russia linked Central Asia by rail to the Caspian and to Moscow and used those links to promote economic integration, especially through cotton, but there was little explicit attempt to change the culture or the local administration of the native population.[5] This would change after the Bolshevik revolution and creation of the Soviet Union as a multicultural society with a universal ideology.

[5] Communication links were established slowly. The telegraph reached Tashkent in 1873. The railway from the Caspian reached Tashkent in 1898 and was extended into the Ferghana Valley. The direct line to Orenburg in Russia was completed in 1910. Apart from expansion of cotton, agriculture was transformed by the introduction of new crops such as potatoes, tomatoes, and beets.

The connection with Russia became stronger after the creation of the USSR when the Central Asian countries became integrated into the centrally planned economy, with railways, roads and pipelines all leading north to Russia. The degree of economic dependence was greater for Kazakhstan, due to proximity to Russia and the large non-Kazakh population in the northern farms and in mining communities, than for the southern Central Asian countries. Soviet commitment to modernization led to major advances in education, healthcare, housing, pensions, and other social support. The Great Patriotic War of 1941–5 contributed to a sense of Soviet citizenship, but in this multicultural society simultaneous identities were possible. Central Asian identities were reinforced by the creation of five ethnically defined republics in which the titular language had status alongside Russian and where the political leader was normally from the titular ethnic group.

After independence in December 1991, the republic leaders transformed themselves into national presidents, emphasizing the status of the national language and the role of Islam. Specifics varied from country to country, with the religious connection stronger in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. In Uzbekistan, Islam Karimov took the oath of office as national president on the Koran. Tajikistan was the only one of the five countries in which the transition to nation state was not peaceful, and religion played a part in the civil war. Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, and Turkmen had a more nomadic history with weaker religious identification, but new national mosques were approved by the Kazakh and Turkmen governments.

Economic independence was more difficult than assertion of cultural identity. Transport and other economic links to Russia were strong in the Soviet economy. Some links were easier to change, and some were changed by new infrastructure, but many physical links remain important. Russia's demand for unskilled labour during the 1999–2014 oil boom created a new economic dependency for Tajikistan and the Kyrgyz Republic, as remittances became a significant part of national income. In sum, political independence could not be accompanied by economic independence after 1991.

Over the next three decades, economic dependency on Russia was reduced, and the Central Asian countries have felt increasingly able to adopt political positions independent of Russia. In 2008, none of the countries recognized the independence of Abkhazia or South Ossetia, despite Russian pressure to do so, and none recognized Russia's claim to Crimea in 2014 or to five provinces in eastern Ukraine in 2022. Since 2018, the five Central Asian presidents have held annual summits (apart from 2020 when COVID prevented in-person meeting). They have also established a practice of convening as a group, christened the C5 +1 format, to meet leaders from India, the European Union, China, and the United States, as well as Russia.

1.2 A Roadmap

The central purpose of this Element is to assess the degree to which their shared experience with Russia in the Tsarist Empire and Soviet Union has shaped the economic and foreign policies of the five Central Asian countries and their relations with post-Soviet Russia. The argument in Section 2 is that incorporation into the Russian Empire in the fifty years after 1865 led to exploitation of Central Asia for its cotton and to immigration of settlers from elsewhere in the Empire, without significantly changing Central Asian society. By contrast, the Soviet experience substantially changed Central Asia, raising material living standards and providing universal education, healthcare, and other social services. It also created economic dependence as physical infrastructure of railways, roads, pipelines, and other networks all led north from Central Asia to Russia, and as Central Asian production was incorporated into supply chains reliant on other Soviet republics (primarily Russia) for inputs and for markets.

The economic ties to Russia would make it difficult for the Central Asian governments to create independent economies after 1991. The decade of the 1990s saw serious economic disruption and widespread hardship, while a few people became rich, and the presidents consolidated and expanded their power. The economic situation changed dramatically after the turn of the century as the price of oil and gas and of gold, copper, and other minerals produced in Central Asia soared. New pipelines and other infrastructure were constructed to service the export boom and the value of output rose rapidly, especially in the energy exporters Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan. For the poorer countries, Tajikistan and the Kyrgyz Republic, the demand for migrant workers provided a new connection to Russia. After the resource boom ended in 2015, the Central Asian countries searched for ways to diversify their economies away from dependence on resource exports and remittances. Creating non-resource exports was seen to be the most promising strategy and this required improved infrastructure oriented towards new markets and regional cooperation among the landlocked countries. Section 3 describes these three episodes in Central Asia's post-independence economic history.

The search for economic and political independence dominated the three decades after 1991, albeit as autocratic leaders raised in the Soviet Union had some ambivalence about market mechanisms and globalization. After 2016, a new generation of Central Asian leaders came to power, for whom the centrally planned economy was a more distant memory and other neighbours and partners were as important as Russia. Section 4 connects the economic developments to the desire for more diversified foreign relations, referred to in the region as multi-vector foreign policies. The United States became an