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A Premature Birth

This book is an effort to describe how the five subnational territories of what used to be known as Soviet Central Asia handled their transition to statehood. Within a span of weeks in late 1991, these republics went from being dependent appendages of the central Communist Party and state hierarchies in Moscow to being sovereign members of the international community. With their independence came the need to develop their own unique domestic and foreign policies, policies whose content had to reflect the "national interest," a concept that was not only alien but was also antithetical to the core values of the Soviet system.

The present study focuses on how the leaders of these newly independent states went about defining "national interest" in the formulation of foreign policy, and how their foreign policy priorities were in turn shaped by domestic policy concerns, as well as by the legacies of seventy years of Soviet rule. Finally, this study will consider whether the paths these various states have taken to advance their national interests are compatible with the interests of promoting regional as well as international peace and security.

Three states—Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan—are examined in particular detail; events in the rest of the region are discussed more generally. In none of these states were initial policy decisions easily taken, nor were the initial challenges of state-building ever fully resolved. In the case of Tajikistan, the challenges of independence have torn the country apart and overwhelmed the former Soviet republic's political elite.

Still, four of the region's five new states—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan—have managed to get through almost four years of independence with no bloodshed or profound economic and political dislocations. Indeed, judged by the criteria of other former Soviet and Yugoslav republics, this early period of independence could even be called uneventful, despite the fact that the leaders of the Central Asian states did not anticipate their independence and had little preparation for it.

Very few states in the world have had as little advance warning prior to independence as did the five new states of Central Asia, which were effectively chucked out of the USSR when the Soviet republics of Russia, Ukraine, and Byelorussia reconstituted themselves as the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) on December 8, 1991. Even so, when de jure independence came to their countries in December 1991, all of Central Asia's leaders accepted it as something that could be to their republics' benefit. This was even true of President Nursultan Nazarbaev of Kazakhstan, who had been leery of independence because of his republic's apparently unseverable links to Russia—so leery, in fact, that he did not allow his republic's legislature to debate and pass Kazakhstan's declaration of independence until December 16, 1991, after Nazarbaev had spent a week in a furious but ultimately fruitless effort to get the USSR reconstituted.

Nazarbaev's nervousness about independence was a product of his wealthy republic's unique demographic situation, which was the most multinational of the Soviet republics. The Kazakhs make up slightly more than 40 percent of Kazakhstan's population, while Russians make up about 35 percent; moreover, most of the Russians live close to the three-thousand-mile-long border that Kazakhstan shares with their mother country. Nazarbaev was the most dubious of all the Soviet republics' leaders about what independence could mean for his republic, but none of the region's leaders—even those who were publicly endorsing independence—believed that their respective republics were prepared to "go it alone."

All of the region's leaders recognized that their new states were beginning life with considerable disadvantages, not the least of which was the lack of an experienced elite capable of developing domestic or international policies independent of Moscow. There were no institutionalized political decision-making structures either, since throughout the Soviet period the executive responsibility of republics had been

limited for all intents and purposes to the enforcement of decisions. Rarely were republic-level executives able even to elaborate programs for specific local needs or to adapt policies to local conditions; responsibility for the formulation of policies that would be applied in the republics resided exclusively in Moscow. This began to change somewhat after the Gorbachev reforms of 1989 and 1990. However, the Central Asian republics had been the slowest in the union to begin to take effective advantage of the new rights that republics were being granted.

Still, Central Asia's five presidents all approached independence with a naive optimism. Though all had loyally served Moscow, each seems to have believed secretly all the while that Moscow had been systematically cheating his respective republic. Now, each president embraced the prospect of his republic's benefiting directly from the "real-world" value of the republic's natural resources, and that he and his personal associates would get the "cream" from the deals that Moscow used to skim off.

Now the outside world could be let in, and each of the leaders saw the arrival of the international community as his salvation. Foreigners would help generate the capital that economic development required, through the purchase of energy and other valuable raw materials, through international funding (in part through joint ventures) of Soviet-era plans for resource extraction as well as through the further expansion of these projects, and through the use of foreign aid, international credits, and joint ventures to reform agriculture and to modernize and expand the industrial base. This strategy was common to all of the Central Asian republics—even Tajikistan, where the leaders were distracted from the beginning by a still unresolved struggle for power.

However, none of the republic leaders understood that the end of the USSR and the old order meant the end of the old economic ties, including the Soviet-era interrepublican linkages that had benefited their particular republics by supplying, among other things, cheap grain and energy. Now each republic, and most prominently Russia, would attempt to redefine these links to maximize its own national interests. Furthermore, the Central Asian leaders did not understand that the arrival of the international community would further imperil these ties, for the projects foreign investors wanted to help develop involved precisely those resources that had previously made the region of value to economic decision makers in Moscow.

In general, these first four years of independence have been very disappointing for the leaders of these new states, and extremely difficult for

the majority of people living within Central Asia. Optimism has yielded to pessimism, as the Central Asian leaders no longer assume that independence will create easy solutions to their economic development problems. No longer do these regimes expect that the attentions of their brother Turks, Persians, or Muslims generally will begin to turn the magic wheel of folktales that can spin their straw into gold. Nor do they expect any more that unconditional international financial credits will rain down upon them in the manna-like way that the unused rations from the Persian Gulf War and the European Community's "butter mountain" and other agricultural surpluses had so magically appeared on their streets as "humanitarian assistance" at the end of the Gorbachev era.

These lessons are all the more bitter since another part of the leaders' newfound wisdom includes the realization that there is no going back to the past. Everyone now knows that the old USSR is unrevivable, yet Moscow remains the center of the geopolitical universe that the Central Asian leaders inhabit. In many ways, though, Moscow's new rulers treat the Central Asians more harshly than did Soviet rulers of the recent past. Any hopes that these states might rely on Russian generosity to help alleviate their current economic crises were dashed during the failed "ruble zone" negotiations of autumn 1993, when the terms that Russia offered other former Soviet republics for continuing to use the ruble were tantamount to surrendering all economic autonomy to Moscow. Since then, Moscow has defined relations with the Central Asian states in ways designed almost exclusively to Russia's own advantage.

This has left the Central Asian leaders with very few options, fewer even than they seem to have realized at first. New states entering into the international community rarely are able to reshape the existing rules of the game. Despite their enormous potential natural resource wealth, none of the Central Asian states has entered the community of nations from any sort of commanding position. This is true even of Kazakhstan, whose Soviet legacy of nuclear weapons gained President Nazarbaev an invitation to the White House, but the Americans still seated Russian negotiators alongside the Kazakhs at the president's table.[1]

Though certainly they have been a useful bargaining chip in international negotiations, Kazakhstan's nuclear weapons seem to have remained under exclusive Russian control. As Western firms bidding for exploitation rights are discovering, even Kazakhstan's oil, gas, and mineral wealth cannot be exported without Russia's cooperation. This

cooperation does not come cheaply, and the transit costs of shipping through Russia may be so expensive as to bring the financial viability of the development of these resources into question.

Kazakhstan's problems are not unique. Although it has more transit options than does Kazakhstan, fossil fuel-rich Turkmenistan also is discovering that development projects take longer to realize than originally assumed, and—worse yet—that as a small country, it lacks the clout to collect payment for the gas it has already delivered. Kyrgyzstan has learned that democratic inclinations alone cannot turn a remote former Soviet republic into an "Asian Switzerland," and that no matter how enthusiastic Western countries are to aid a new nation, foreign assistance is governed by annual budget cycles and is allocated in accordance with strict procedures for project authorization and development.

Uzbekistan, too, is finding that there are subtle subtexts in international relations, and that not all states are accorded the same stature by the international community. President Islam Karimov is learning that some states can commit human rights violations with impunity while others cannot, and that neither Uzbekistan's wealth nor its market potential is large enough for the international community to be willing to bend the rules of the game to Uzbekistan's benefit. At the same time, Karimov has gotten lessons in Russia's fickleness and has seen how strategic alliances do not always transform themselves into economic partnerships.

Tajikistan's learning experience has of course been the most painful of all. The civil war in this republic is a frightening reminder to all the region's leaders of the cost of independence. Moreover, as armed populations have begun to spill over existing boundaries, the leaders have seen that the interconnectedness of independent states is not significantly less than that of dependent republics. However, the threats posed by Tajikistan, as well as by various failures within each of these republics, are far greater than they previously were. Central Asia's presidents are now held directly responsible for the well-being of their respective nations. Ouster by an angry mob is no longer merely a nightmare for Central Asia's rulers; it is also a real possibility. It has occurred once, in Tajikistan, and could occur again.

The Central Asians' new geopolitical world is not so different from their old one. Russia remains in the neighborhood, which it claims as its own "near abroad." Russia remains committed to the preservation of order in the region to keep trouble from spilling over into Russia and to

ensure that Central Asia's twelve million Russians should have no cause to flee "home." Though Russia remains poised to intervene in the region, the cost of any Russian "international" assistance would be quite high. Unable to finance a social welfare safety net for their own population, Russia's rulers are unlikely to offer many carrots to the Central Asians, nor will they be shy about deploying their arsenal of sticks if the behavior of their new neighbors is not to their liking.

Forestalling Independence

For all these problems—and in spite of the fact that the Central Asian republics obtained their independence not only abruptly, but also with virtually no direct public or even elite involvement in their "liberation"—the Central Asian states still began their "sovereign" lives under more auspicious conditions than do most new members of the international community. The boundaries of the Soviet republics had not been drawn with an eye to possible future independence, but rather to impede secession by any of the USSR's various national communities, yet seven decades of living with roughly the same borders had nevertheless given each of the five republics a certain internal cohesion.

While local, Russian, and Western scholars may debate ad infinitum the "naturalness" of any of Central Asia's five peoples, the Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, Tajiks, Turkmens, and Uzbeks of the 1990s are no longer the loose ethnic formulations which Stalin-era social engineers transformed into nationalities. These are now five sovereign states, each of which—save Kazakhstan—is dominated demographically by the titular ethnic group.

Equally important is the Soviet bureaucratic legacy. The Soviet Union was divided into republics, and each of these was further subdivided into provinces (*oblasts*) and districts (*rayons*). These divisions have provided the former Soviet republics with a bureaucratic structure that has needed only some modification since independence. Moreover, although the current office-holders may lack extensive executive decision-making experience, Soviet rule led to the development of an extensive bureaucratic elite in each of these republics, almost all of whom have had specialized post-secondary or advanced education. Each republic also began independence with a complete education and social service network. It was no doubt for these reasons that the republics were able to act so quickly after independence to set up the basic appurtenances of statehood.

The Central Asian leaders did not, however, regard these advantages as sufficient, and rather than encouraging independence they became the most stalwart supporters of the Soviet Union's perpetuation. In fact, in the March 1991 Soviet referendum, it was only in the Central Asian republics that the population was turned out en masse to vote for the continuation of the USSR. This was not simply because all the leaders (save Kyrgyzstan's Askar Akaev) were Moscow appointees who had come to power with briefs that included the containment of separatist sentiment in their respective republics; there was no shortage of communists-turned-nationalists in the other republics either. The Central Asian leaders, however, seem to have been genuinely fearful of what independence would mean for their republics.

In Central Asia the collapse of the Soviet Union was more than just a blow to their part of an interdependent, all-USSR economy. All five republics faced serious economic problems well before the Soviet Union's economic crises of the late 1980s. But independence also brought an abrupt end to subsidies from Moscow, including cash sent as compensation for the costs of the region's economy based on cotton monoculture and mineral extraction, as well as the direct grants-in-aid that were paid to individual citizens to ease the burdens of the region's high birth rates. These two sources of financing allowed the Central Asian republics to provide a minimum standard of living for a fast-growing and largely unskilled rural-based population for whom unemployment and underemployment was a growing problem.[2] Even before the Soviet collapse, the regional leaders knew that independence was also likely to mean the exodus of hundreds of thousands of technologically skilled Russians, since they were already unhappy over the growing nationalism in these republics.[3] Unfortunately, it was precisely during independence that these skilled workers would be most sorely needed, since independence would mean that the Central Asian countries would now be on their own to deal not only with their immediate economic problems, but also with the neglected long-term ones, such as an acute water shortage[4] and the more pervasive ecological crises that fifty years of Soviet economic planning had created.

Up until the very last minute, almost all of Central Asia's leaders maintained hope that the union could be saved. To that end they were willing to compromise continually with Moscow, and so they watched with particular dismay as events seemed to slip from Gorbachev's control in 1991. Several of the leaders were so frightened over Gorbachev's

apparent failures and the Communist Party's own growing loss of power that they even saw the abortive August 1991 coup as a possible solution to their problem.[5] Tajikistan's Makhkamov even publicly supported the coup attempt, while Karimov's pronouncements in Uzbekistan fell just short of endorsement. When the coup failed, and it was clear that the "union" would have to be redefined if it were to survive, each of the Central Asian republics except Kazakhstan declared independence. But even then, the region's leaders were all willing to accept a form of statehood which was more symbolic than real and to share control of their republic's natural resources with a smaller and more benevolent Soviet central authority structure.[6]

President Nursultan Nazarbaev of Kazakhstan was the most enthusiastic defender of a revitalization of the USSR; it was his plea for a redefined union that was endorsed by the emergency session of the Supreme Soviet following the failed coup. Nazarbaev also spearheaded the unsuccessful effort to get a new Union Treaty drafted and fully ratified.[7] All of the Central Asian leaders strongly supported the idea of a coordinated economic reform program complete with a currency union and tariff-free trade zone to encompass all of the republics.[8] Even as late as 1995, several of the region's leaders still remain committed to some version of this idea.

On the other hand, by 1991 the Central Asian leaders were no longer content to be mere puppets of Moscow. Public shows of independence grew after the August coup attempt. Within days, Karimov went from tacitly supporting the return of an iron hand in Moscow to ardently endorsing full independence, while the Tajiks ousted their party leader and toppled the statue of Lenin that had long presided over their capital's main square.

Throughout the region, Central Asia's rulers sensed Moscow's growing weariness with the "burdens of empire," and all recognized that the responsibility for feeding their region's growing Muslim population would be among the first responsibilities that Moscow would shuck.[9] These leaders also recognized that if they were to meet these obligations, more money would have to remain within the republics than had been the case under Soviet economic practice. Until 1990, the republic administrations functioned as little more than clearinghouses for Moscow, which allocated to republic enterprises the funds it deemed necessary for them to operate, while viewing whatever was produced in the republics to be part of the all-Union profit. Because of this, although

republics had limited rights of taxation, it had traditionally been considered Moscow's responsibility to supplement public funds to ensure that each republic could meet its social service needs.

However, even in Central Asia a pro-autonomy stance had been slowly developing, even though such a posture was really antithetical to the background and training of the region's leaders. Saparmurad Niyazov of Turkmenistan, Kakhar Makhkamov of Tajikistan, and Absamat Masaliev of Kyrgyzstan (who was deposed by his legislature in October 1990) all came to power as part of Gorbachev's 1985 campaign to reassert more control over the republics. These three men had all been chosen and prepared for office by Egor Ligachev, a staunch proponent of the idea that republics had to be subordinated to the center. Even Nursultan Nazarbaev and Islam Karimov (who were appointed as republic party heads in June 1989, when Moscow had already recognized that republic interests had to be responded to somehow) were advocates of the Gorbachev formulation of "a strong center and strong republics." By contrast, their colleagues in the Baltic republics were by this time already demanding complete autonomy.

By June 1990, however, all five Central Asian leaders recognized that it was inevitable that power would be devolved to the republics. All participated in the drafting of the new, and ultimately ill-fated, Union Treaty, part of Gorbachev's fruitless efforts to forestall the dismemberment of his country. For the first time, some of the hard currency earnings from the sale of energy and precious metals began to be credited to republic budgets, making clear that the tendency toward economic reform was irreversible. Greater autonomy at the enterprise level would mean greater autonomy for the republic as well; this was advocated by a succession of economists who in turn rose to prominence in Gorbachev's court, each arguing that this would increase economic efficiency and improve economic performance. In fact, by mid-1990, Gorbachev was no longer resisting the premise that the republics were sovereign; the battle now was to delineate the respective authority of center and periphery.

This situation made the Central Asian leaders profoundly nervous, because until fall 1991, none of Central Asia's presidents—not even those who previously had worked in the ministerial side of their republic's government—had ever had responsibility for managing his republic's entire economy; neither had anyone on their staffs had much direct experience in this area. USSR ministries and their Moscow-appointed representatives in the republics controlled all of the nation's key industries

and natural resources without regard for the republic in which these industries and resources were located. Republic ministries had partial decision-making authority only for those sectors of the economy that were both nonstrategic and confined to a specific region.

However, Central Asia's leaders understood that if economic reform were to have any possibility of success in their republics, they had to gain control of precisely those sectors of the republic economies that had always been exclusively Moscow's responsibility. Central Asia's sole chance of achieving economic solvency was to profit directly from the development of its natural resources. In contrast to the Baltic republics, Central Asia produced very few finished goods for either all-Union use or foreign export, so without at least partial control over the sale of their natural resources they were doomed to remain Moscow's dependents.

The leadership in Moscow was also eyeing these same resources. As part of his economic reform program, Soviet president Mikhail Gorbachev was making a major effort to bring foreign investment and technology to the USSR, and the Central Asian republics contained a number of very attractive investment possibilities, especially in the energy sector and, more generally, in the mineral-extraction sector. It was on this issue that Gorbachev and the republic leaders did clash, albeit quietly. As Moscow began to sell off rights to Central Asia's resources, the republic leaders began to hatch their own plans. From mid-1990 on, the republic leaders tried to take advantage of their status as leaders of sovereign—not independent—entities to carve out some sort of international posture of their own. When the three Baltic republics created the Baltic Council and began to develop some of their plans in concert, formal efforts at regional cooperation were begun in Central Asia as well.

Gorbachev showed no signs of displeasure with this situation, and at points may well have encouraged it. The Central Asian leaders were merely demanding a "piece of the action" at a time when many other republic leaders were trying to exclude Moscow entirely. The various foreign investment schemes that were being discussed were all in their early stages, so Moscow's priority was to get the investments in place and start the revenue flowing, and then the republics and Moscow, through which payment would be directed, could come to terms.

Moreover, Gorbachev accurately sensed the real advantages that would accrue from encouraging the Central Asian leaders to make their own way in the international community. For one thing, the prospects for foreign investment were increased through these new emissaries

who could go forth seeking support from Turkish, Iranian, or Asian "brothers." The threat to Gorbachev or to the security of the USSR that any of these efforts posed was virtually nonexistent. Ten-year-old fears of an Islamic revolution in Central Asia paled in comparison to the realities of Baltic secession. Moreover, it was clear that an international community that was reluctant to encourage or endorse Baltic separatism after forty years of refusing to recognize Soviet rule over these republics was hardly likely to greet Central Asian independence with enthusiasm. Thus Gorbachev was able to point to his treatment of the leaders of these republics as evidence of his sensitivity to the "national needs" of non-Russians.

First International Moves

Central Asia's leaders were very enthusiastic about the prospect of developing direct foreign economic relations with potential trade partners, although they had even less experience in international relations than they had in managing the economies of their republics. As substate entities, these republics were initially restricted from forming direct diplomatic relations with foreign countries. Thus the various republics concentrated on developing or expanding ministries for foreign economic relations. Long confined to traveling as part of larger, official Soviet delegations on trips planned by the USSR's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Central Asia's presidents seemed particularly eager to take advantage of the new opportunities to propose and execute their own international travel.

Initially, the transition to international actor was easiest for Kazakhstan's Nursultan Nazarbaev. Alone among the Central Asian leaders, Nazarbaev had attained the stature of a major political figure for the general Soviet populace, and he was regularly rumored to be on the verge of becoming Gorbachev's "number two" in Moscow. Kazakhstan's vast natural reserves figured prominently in Moscow's plans even before Nazarbaev was named to head his republic, as the output from the republic's Tengiz oil field (in western Kazakhstan) was to provide enough profit to interest a consortium of eight major U.S. investors, headed by Chevron. Plans for this project were developed in 1987 and 1988, but representatives from the Kazakh government were not brought into the negotiations until May 1991, a year after the principle of republic sovereignty was recognized, and well after the main terms of the contract

were already worked out between Chevron and Gorbachev's representatives in the USSR's Ministry of Oil and Ministry of Foreign Economic Relations. The project, which initially called for a sixty-forty split between the Soviet side and Chevron, immediately became a hot political issue within Kazakhstan.[10] Environmentalists in Moscow and Nazarbaev's critics in Kazakhstan all argued that the Kazakhs had been "taken" in the deal, even before the terms of the profit-sharing relationship between Kazakhstan and Chevron had been made public.

In the end, Kazakhstan extracted more favorable terms from Chevron than the USSR had achieved. After Kazakhstan attained independence, the deal was renegotiated to provide the republic with a substantial signing bonus and some 80 percent of the profits. The Tengiz deal, which is discussed at greater length in chapter 4, was an early learning experience for Nazarbaev, who quickly became convinced that as head of a large and wealthy republic he had need for independent advice and expertise.

However, in the period just prior to independence, Nazarbaev seems to have had little idea of where to turn to get such advice. Eventually (in 1992) the J.P. Morgan firm was brought in to consult with Kazakhstan in some of these negotiations, and in 1993 and 1994, a host of Western firms opened offices in Almaty.

All of Central Asia's leaders have faced this dilemma; and as demonstrated by the scolding that Kyrgyzstan's legislature gave President Akaev in 1993 for having temporarily turned over the management of Kyrgyzstan's gold reserves and mines to Boris Birshtein, few of the leaders have resolved the dilemma easily or well. Birshtein was a former communist functionary from Lithuania who emigrated first to Israel and then to Canada, along the way setting up an international trading company (Seabeco) in Switzerland that relied heavily on his former communist connections to identify lucrative investment opportunities for Western businessmen. After Birshtein was named a presidential adviser in Kyrgyzstan, Seabeco (and its local partner, Seabeco-Kyrgyzstan) collected "finder's fees" for the sale of exploitation rights to Kyrgyzstan's gold and was compensated for helping the republic arrange its first international transfers of gold reserves. Perhaps not surprisingly, several of the country's prominent politicians were directly tied to the Seabeco-Kyrgyzstan embezzlement scandal.

Nazarbaev's early mistakes proved to be less embarrassing. In early 1991, Nazarbaev turned for help to Chan Young Bang, a Korean-American

professor from the University of San Francisco who is rumored to have close ties to South Korea's major industrial families. Professor Bang was made vice chairman of Kazakhstan's Council of Economic Experts for the salary of $1 per year. Nazarbaev is reported to have been introduced to Professor Bang in a Gold Star factory in Seoul, where Nazarbaev was traveling as part of a fact-finding trip to East Asia. The Kazakh president was already attracted to the "Four Tigers" of East Asia because of the speed with which they had achieved economic development, as well as the fact that they had done so without also ceding too much control from the state to the private sector. Nazarbaev saw this chance encounter as a stroke of fortune. Nazarbaev also sought counsel from Singapore's former prime minister Lee Kuan Yew, who was also named a special advisor.[11] Lee did not take up residence in Kazakhstan, but he is said to have made suggestions for some of its first independently produced economic planning documents.

Bang wound up staying in Kazakhstan for more than two years, but was quickly shunted out of the political decision-making loop and assigned instead to develop Kazakhstan's first institute of management, which took over the republic's Higher Party School (probably the best-equipped educational facility and dormitory complex in the Kazakh capital of Almaty). Much of Bang's time, however, was said to have been spent scouting for business prospects for Korean investors, while Lee's interest in the republic is said to have overlapped heavily with those of Singapore's major industrialists.

The East Asians were not the only ones to come scouting in Central Asia. Turkey's late president, Turgut Ozal, was probably the one international actor most involved in marketing himself and his country in the region. He made a state visit to Kazakhstan (as well as to Azerbaijan) in March 1991, during which he signed some preliminary agreements on economic, cultural, and scientific cooperation.[12] In fall 1991, Ozal hosted a return state visit by Nazarbaev, during which a number of bilateral "memoranda of intent" on economic and scientific cooperation between Turkey and Kazakhstan were signed.[13]

Turkish leaders also laid the foundations for direct state-to-state relations with the heads of the other Turkic republics, and visits were exchanged between Ozal or then-prime minister Suleiman Demirel and the Central Asian leaders. In the end, though, the Central Asian leaders overestimated the importance of these early visits and the resulting bilateral agreements, which they understood as precursors of major

investment or assistance programs rather than as the diplomatic fishing trips they really were.

Though slightly slower than the Turks to become involved in these early days, the Iranians also made repeated efforts to assess the potential advantage that could be gained from the increasing sovereignty of Central Asia's republics. Iranian foreign minister Ali Akbar Velayati spent a substantial part of his November 1991 trip to the USSR in this region, traveling to the Turkic republics as well as to Tajikistan, the region's sole Persian-speaking republic. While Iran showed more interest in resource-poor Tajikistan than did any other foreign power—bruiting plans well before independence for direct air links, telephone and television service, as well as banking assistance, and opening the first embassy in Dushanbe in January 1992, when the local Iranian consulate became an embassy—Iran did not pursue a Tajik-centered policy in the region.[14]

By December 1991 it was already clear that Turkmenistan would be a republic of equal, and possibly even greater, interest to Iran. Iran and Turkmenistan share a common border, and there is an irredentist Turkmen population in Iran. Moreover, close ties with Turkmenistan are imperative in any Iranian plan to become an international transport center for the Central Asian region. During Velayati's winter 1991 trip, Iran pledged funds for the completion of the railroad line between Turkmenistan and Meshed, the last spur in a rail system designed to provide direct service from Urumqi in western China, across all of Central Asia, through Iran, and on to Istanbul.[15] Set to open in mid-1994, this railroad line was completed one year behind schedule.

Already by this early date, Iran was offering Turkmenistan assistance in developing its oil industry and was promising to both purchase and help develop Turkmenistan's natural gas resources.[16] Iran further hoped that involvement in the development of Turkmenistan's fossil-fuel industries would help open up a path toward Kazakhstan, since Teheran believed that the logical pipeline route for fuel originating in western Kazakhstan was through Iran via Turkmenistan. However, at this point, both Iran and Turkmenistan were more concerned about preserving good relations with Moscow than with each other. Although discussions over foreign development of Turkmenistan's fossil-fuel industry preceded independence, Niyazov's policies in this sector were still set in close coordination with the old Soviet energy ministries in Moscow. Nevertheless, the Turkmen president already understood the importance of maintaining close ties with Iran; he too had an ambitious travel

schedule for December 1991—even before the USSR collapsed—with trips to Pakistan and Turkey on his itinerary.[17]

Pakistan was even slower to respond to the possibilities offered in Central Asia than was either Turkey or Iran, but it was also interested in involving itself in the region. All three states recognized that regional security relations would be changed as a result of events in Central Asia, and within days of gaining international recognition as independent states, all five republics were invited to join the Economic Cooperation Organization—run by Turkey, Iran, and Pakistan—which, up to that point, had been largely moribund. Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan accepted this invitation immediately, while Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan joined later on. Pakistani interest in Central Asia also further stimulated India's interest in the region. Ties between Uzbekistan and India had begun to develop in the 1970s, when Tashkent was made the Asian hub for the Soviet airline Aeroflot.

However, sharing borders as it did with three Central Asian republics (Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan), Chinese leaders understood better than any others how events in Central Asia had potential consequences for their own country's security concerns. Throughout the late 1980s, trade between western China and Central Asia (particularly Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan) was increasing and was expected to grow faster following the opening of direct rail links between China and Kazakhstan in 1991, which broadened the access of these republics to Chinese factories and new sources of raw materials.[18] At the same time, as the USSR was coming apart, officials in Beijing were concerned about the prospect of these five republics' bypassing Beijing and developing direct economic ties with Chinese border provinces. It is rumored that Nursultan Nazarbaev was even given a firm scolding on this score by his Chinese hosts when, on his first trip to the People's Republic, the Kazakh leader visited Urumqi prior to traveling to Beijing for an official welcome.[19] Uzbekistan's Islam Karimov also traveled to China, a month after Nazarbaev, and came away very impressed by what the Chinese had achieved. Indeed, his admiration resulted in a considerable public relations disaster soon after his return, when he announced at a press conference held days after the August 1991 coup attempt that the Uzbeks should emulate the "Chinese model" of development.[20]

By comparison, perhaps because he had lived more than two decades in an academic milieu in Leningrad, Askar Akaev (who came to power in Kyrgyzstan in October 1990) seems to have had more awareness of

what diplomacy entails, just as he appears to have appreciated that Kyrgyzstan's economic recovery would inevitably depend upon foreign investment in his republic's mineral extraction industries, especially gold. Moreover, Akaev seems to have been more attuned to the imminent breakup of the USSR than were his fellow leaders; in September 1991, he banned the shipment of Kyrgyzstan's gold to Russia for refinement.[21]

Akaev was also the first of Central Asia's leaders to understand the West's agenda in the former Soviet Union, grasping the preoccupation of Western leaders with the linkage between political and economic reform. Akaev also took great pains to familiarize himself with Western political thinking, going so far as to hire a well-read local university professor, Leonid Levitan, as his paid advisor and part-time speech writer. Akaev used his newfound knowledge of Jefferson and John Stuart Mill to make a strong impression on both U.S. President George Bush and Secretary of State James Baker during his fall 1991 trip to Washington.[22] This positive impression, further strengthened during Baker's December 1991 "fact-finding" trip to Bishkek, led to Kyrgyzstan's inclusion on the list of six ex-Soviet republics that gained immediate and full U.S. diplomatic recognition after the collapse of the USSR.[23] Even then, Akaev was laying the foundations for developing a "balanced" foreign policy, and tried to pursue ties to the West as well as investment from Asia and trade with China in equal measures.[24]

This does not mean that the other Central Asian leaders created a bad impression when they traveled abroad. Some, especially Nursultan Nazarbaev, made strong favorable impressions. However, all were said to have traveled without any sort of briefing as to what they might expect to find at their destinations, since none of these republics had any sort of diplomatic representation and few of their citizens had even served in the Soviet diplomatic corps.

Generally speaking, during the period prior to independence, the Central Asian republics were more acted upon than active in their international relations, and only a few leaders seem to have had an inkling of how international relations might be used to advance their domestic purposes. Each of Central Asia's leaders understood the importance of developing good ties with both neighboring states and the world's leading economic powers, but few had much idea of how to go about it, or of how to define their republics' priorities in the process. In the months just prior to independence, the concept of "national interest" was alien to the republics' leaders. Those who headed the Central Asian republics

were now called presidents, but their states were not independent, and it was wholly unclear how much discretionary authority Moscow might cede—or the republics might grab.

Further, it was even more unclear by what criteria a republic was to define its national interests. During the Soviet period, a republic leader who claimed a distinct identity for his republic, to say nothing of a national interest, was considered politically deviant, and to err in this way was considered grounds for dismissal. Ethnic groups were recognized to have cultural, but not political, rights. In spite of the fact that every Soviet republic bore the name of its principal ethnic group, Soviet leaders steadfastly maintained that the republics were political entities but not *national* political entities. For the leaders of the Central Asian republics, the question of whose interests they were to advance was undoubtedly a troubling one, which grew no less complex after independence. The USSR disintegrated in large part because the various national communities it comprised demanded recognition as sovereign peoples, yet independence was awarded to republics without any recognition of the right to national self-determination for the peoples who lived in these republics.

Of course, all of the Soviet successor states faced the same fundamental problem. The collapse of the USSR and its interrepublic economic links dramatically exacerbated the economic crisis in each individual republic, simply adding the new burden of political institution-building to the burdens of economic restructuring that had driven the USSR towards reform in the first place. Previously, republic leaders had fought with Moscow to gain the right to structure economic reform in ways that would benefit their own republics rather than the USSR as a whole. Independence granted all the republics this right, which some had struggled so hard to obtain.

However, as we will see in subsequent chapters, it soon became clear that for all the volumes of advice that legions of people came forward to offer (most of it conflicting), deciding how to reform a republic is not a simple task. It was not long before Central Asia's leaders realized that defining a republic's interest was really no easier than the old problem of deciding what the USSR's interest was. Different constituencies within each republic, only some of which coincided with ethnic divisions, had very different ideas about whom reform should benefit, and frequently a decision to benefit one group was a de facto decision to punish another.

As we will see in the next chapter, in the first months after independence, the republic leaders looked to the international community to provide them with easy answers. However, within a year they realized that such answers were not to be had. The remainder of this book is devoted to their individual efforts to define the separate identities of their various states, and the impact this is likely to have on regional as well as broader international security concerns.