

The reluctant Soviet independents

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Twenty-five years ago this month, the five Central Asian states were cut off from the Soviet Union and forced to stand on their own. It was a shock to their systems. In the turmoil that saw the break-up of the Union and all 15 of the Soviet republics regain their independence, the five Central Asian states of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan were reluctant participants.

On a freezing night in December 1991, I stood on the tarmac of Ashkhabad airport in Turkmenistan as plane after plane carrying the CA heads of state and their delegations landed. The motley Turkmen band, their fingers frozen, struck up the new national anthems as scowling presidents shook hands with their hosts.

The big story was in [Moscow](#) but although this scene was no less fascinating and historic, it was the only international correspondent monitoring the events here, from the perspective of Central Asia.

A few days earlier, on December 8 1991, Russia's president, Boris Yeltsin, had signed a treaty with those of Belarus and Ukraine formally disbanding the Soviet Union and creating a new Commonwealth of Independent States. Nobody had asked the CA leaders if they wanted to join. They had been abandoned by their overlord, Russia.

That night in Turkmenistan I spoke to the leaders and other officials in the government dachas. They were furious, and depressed. The particular focus of their anger was Russia, whom CA officials accused of racial and ethnic discrimination and dictatorial behaviour. Moscow, however, had seen the CA states, despite their oil, gas and agricultural wealth, as an economic burden and was eager to be free of their dependency.

In previous weeks, as the break-up of the Union had loomed, the CA leaders had turned their Soviet socialist republics into [independent republics](#), abandoned their titles of communist party bosses of their respective states and held hasty elections that were heavily rigged in their favour.

But in truth they wanted nothing to do with independence. Their economies, infrastructure, financial aid, exports and media had all been governed by Moscow. Now, after so long under the thumb of Russia, they feared that they would not be able to run independent states and did not have the skills to manage their own affairs.

Once, the "hordes" of the Mongol, Kazak and Uzbek tribes and clans had ruled Russia, but now their leaders were begging the country not to desert them. They feared that independence would unleash the genies of democracy and nationalism and demands for freedom among their tightly repressed and controlled populations.

The day after the Turkmenistan gathering the leaders went cap in hand to Moscow and demanded to join the CIS on an equal basis with the other nations. On December 21 in Almaty, then the capital of [Kazakhstan](#), the CIS was formed with 11 out of 15 of the former Soviet republics as members.

The CA leaders promised at that time to work together to form an economic union to resolve their myriad problems. "A Central Asian community is the need of the hour," Askar Akayev, then Kyrgyz president told me in 1991. "All the CA states must get together to form a new confederation or our economic development will be stalled," said the Uzbek president, Islam Karimov, who died in September after 27 years in power.

Instead, they spent years bickering as their economies plummeted and living standards crashed. Today, many Central Asians remember the "glorious" period of communism when their basic needs were met and their health and educational systems flourished.

The CA republics' political systems never developed after 1991 and with the exception of Kyrgyzstan they each remain in the grip of a single party. Their moribund political systems and refusal to change have plunged their populations into despair and led to a mass exodus of people into other states looking for work. There have been [disputes](#) between the republics over borders and the control and flow of water, gas and electricity and political jealousies. And there are new threats on the horizon such as the rise of China on their borders, the dangers posed by Islamist extremists and continuing war in Afghanistan.

[Uzbekistan](#), the largest and most powerful state under a new leader, [Shavkat Mirziyoyev](#), is only now reaching out to its neighbors to try to resolve some of the bitter rivalries. After 25 years it is clear that the post-Soviet CA economies are not independently sustainable. They need reform, and they need each other.

The writer is author of several books about Afghanistan, Pakistan and Central Asia, most recently 'Pakistan on the Brink'