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Imperial Temptations

By Richard Lourie

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Since 2011 marks the 20th anniversary of the Soviet collapse, there will inevitably be a spate of articles viewing those two decades from every possible vantage. In fact, they've already started. March 17 was the 20th anniversary of the only free referendum ever held in the Soviet Union.

Mikhail Gorbachev asked the populace whether they favored retaining the basic form of the U.S.S.R. as a union of sovereign republics. Some republics — the Baltic states and Georgia among them — refused to even take part. But of those that did, three-quarters favored retention of the union. The figures were highest in the Central Asian republics, whose support ranged from the high 80s (Kazakhstan 82 percent) to the high 90s (Turkmenistan 97.7 percent). The Baltic states knew they would be better off outside any version of the Soviet Union, whereas the Central Asian states seemed to anticipate misfortune if they were cut off from the Soviet economic grid.

And that exactly has been the case, according to the report "Central Asia: Decay and Decline" issued last month by the International Crisis Group. The report contends that in the past 20

years, the infrastructure built by the Soviets — the health, education, energy and transport systems — has decayed almost irrevocably. There are insufficient newly trained professionals to replace the older generation of engineers, doctors and teachers now passing from the scene. Almost all citizens are affected by these systems. As one Kyrgyz doctor put it, "The rich leave to get health care; the poor die here."

The infrastructure collapse will result in failed states and social chaos in four of the five "stans," Kazakhstan being the only possible exception.

Who would fill the power vacuum left by the failed Central Asian states? Competent local figures like interim Kyrgyz President Roza Otunbayeva might emerge, but if not, outside players will enter the picture to prevent Iranian proxies or Taliban-like movements from seizing power.

China, which is bordered on the west by three of these states (including the two most likely to implode, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan), wants no turmoil there that could inflame China's own Islamic western Sinjiang province. China receives much of its energy from or through Central Asia. It has significant investments there, trade having jumped from $527 million in 1992 to $25.9 billion in 2009.

China might be willing to intervene in social conflicts in Central Asia, but it might be just as happy to see Russia shoulder that burden.

If the people of failed Central Asian states had to choose between Chinese and Russian domination, they'd probably opt for the Russian. Many Russians still live in the stans, and much official business is still conducted in Russian.

The figures from the 1991 referendum indicate a sentiment that may not have eroded along with the infrastructure in the 20 years of independence.

If the Kremlin still dreams of regaining some of Russia's lost imperial grandeur, the collapse of Central Asia would present them that opportunity. Whether it would cost more than it's worth is another matter.

Alexander Maryasov, Russia's former ambassador to Iran, says that "as soon as our economy regains its strength, we will re-establish our old relations with Central Asia and the southern Caucasus and reassert our sphere of influence in that region."

The Crisis Group may, of course, be overly pessimistic about the fate of Central Asia, but if there's one thing we've learned between 9/11 and the Japanese quake, it's that it's almost impossible to worry too big.

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