Russia's relations with the Trans-Caucasian and Central Asian region currently designated as "Near Abroad" in the lexicon of Russian diplomacy, have a history extending over a millenium. Beginning with the Kama Bulgars, the close interaction between the peoples of Russia and the great steppe region resulted by the end of the 12th century into the formation of what Russian orientalist Lev Gumilev described as a single ethnographic space. Russian historian Robert Landa characterises Russia's relationship with the peoples of the periphery who embraced Islam after of the Arab conquest of Central Asia in the 8th century A.D. as a complex one, of "proximity and divergence". 17% of the Russian nobility in the 18th century could trace back its ancestral lineage to the Golden Horde. In several Russian provinces most of the aristocratic families were of Turkic descent. In the Volga-Ural region the Russians, Tartars and Bashkirs developed a common culture and life style.

Thus, Russia's relations with Central Asia are older than the birth of the Soviet power in 1917. For more than one-and-a quarter century the Central Asian region and Russia formed part of a single state system. Of course, the economic and cultural links are much older. The Russian spearhead was already pushing from the north across the steppes and deserts into the heart of Central Asia during the first half of the 19th century and the defeat in the Crimean War (1853-56) only intensified Russia's Drang nach osten in the direction of Central Asia. The prolonged wars with Turkey from 16th to 18th centuries over Crimea, and the 47 year war with the Chechens stand apart in marked contrast with the more or less bloodless annexation of Kazakhstan and Central Asia (with the lone exception of
the battle of Geok-teppe against the Turkmens). The bloody war with the Chechens came in the wake of elation over victory against Napoleon. It was also motivated by Moscow's determination to gain access to the Black and Caspian Seas in order to eliminate the threat from Turkey and Iran in the south. By the end of the 19th century following the incorporation of Crimea, the Trans-Caucasus and the Central Asian region, Russia became a multi-ethnic and multi-religious country with a population of 18 million Muslims, equal to the number of Muslims in the Ottoman Empire.

From the above it is clear that Russia's links with Central Asia are stronger and more natural than the latter's ties with the neighbouring regions in the South and the West, i.e., with Iran and Turkey. Undoubtedly, the people of the Central Asian Republics of Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan have close cultural and linguistic affinities with Turkey as the people of Tajikistan have with Iran, and the historical ties of Iran with Central Asia are older than the latter's ties with Russia, but then there was no imperial state on the territory of present-day Russia in the pre-Christian Era and Central Asia has never been part of a single state formation with either Iran or Turkey in the modern times. The Russian settlers in Central Asia numbering 10 to 15 million far outnumber the Arab, Iranian or Turk settlers in the region.

From the viewpoint of geography and history Russia and Central Asia constitute a common Eurasian geo-strategic security and economic space. British geographer Halford Mackinder viewed the Russian Eurasian Empire as a unique institution in as much as it represented a remarkable "correlation between natural environment and political organization ... unlikely to be altered by any possible social revolution."
Central Asia is in fact a continuation of the Russian steppe. The Ural mountain chain which does not run all the way from north to south hardly represents a natural division as it is not an insurmountable physical barrier. The Vostochniki (philosopher V. S. Solovyoy, poets Andrei Belyi and Alexander Blok and historians V. V. Barthold and G. V. Vernadskey) viewed Russian Eurasia as a geopolitical entity brought about by a cultural process of "genetic mutation" and not by conquest and coercion. Russian historian G. V. Vernadskey wrote: "The Russian state is a Eurasian must state and all separate nationalities of Eurasia feel and recognize that it is their state."

Vernadskey pleaded for Russo-Muslim cultural cooperation, which was also suggested by Tartar educationist, leading Djadidist modernist reformer, Ismail Bey Gasprinsky. The process of cultural fusion between Central Asians and Russians has been further deepened by their incorporation in a single state that lasted for about one and a quarter century. The fact that Russian language is understood and spoken throughout the entire Central Asian region and the Central Asian elite feels more at home with it than with its native language, and millions of mixed marriages bear testimony to the Central Asian region being an integral part of a common Eurasian cultural and ethnic space together with Russia which has been marked apart from West and South-West Asia and China by a great knot of mountains joining Kopet Dagh, Hindukush, Pamirs and Tienshan. The continuance of this geographical and cultural societal factors thus puts a question mark over the end of the Cold War and the fall of the U.S.S.R. paving the way for the emergence of the Central Asian security complex.¹ Notwithstanding the advocacy by Z. Brzezinsky of throwing Russia out of Central Asia in cooperation with China, Pakistan, Iran and Turkey, "geopolitical realism" is seen even by some western analysts as a powerful factor preventing the rupture of Central Asia's traditional ties with Russia.²

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The term "Near Abroad" currently in vogue in the Russian diplomatic lexicon embraces the other 14 erstwhile Soviet republics including the five republics of Central Asia. This curious term "Near Abroad" implies that Russia has special interests in these republics which are based on the historical background (they were part of the Tsarist Empire and the Soviet Union), geographical factor of proximity and the presence of a multimillion ethnic Russian and Russian-speaking population in them. "Near Abroad" is not merely indicative of Moscow's imperial aspirations expressed in rhetoric terms, it is a grim reality of "propinquity and preponderance" of Russian power notwithstanding the traumatic event of dissolution of the Soviet Union in December, 1991. Central Asia, which adjoins Russia, is still ruled by Russified former Soviet elites. It is largely dependent on Russia not only for trade and energy supplies but also for arms, military training and security of the local regimes from threats both internal and external. From this it does not follow that in the post-Soviet period outside powers, the United States of America, Iran, Turkey, Japan, China, Israel, Saudi Arabia and international agencies, the United Nations, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) have not stepped up their presence in Central Asia and the region has made no progress towards diversification of its relations. True, a wider option has been opened up before the newly independent Central Asian states. But in the short and medium term "no other state has the combination of interests, power and ease of access to serve as a counterweight to Russia there".

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There is no need to dilate upon the universally accepted truth about permanence of state interests that last over a long period transcending diverse approaches and perceptions among establishments and groups in the government and the opposition. Any Russian government is bound to assert and maintain its pre-eminence in Central Asia as is the case with the government of the United States in Central and South America. This quest for Russian pre-eminence in Central Asia will continue irrespective of Russia's chances of success. Moscow may even fail or get sucked into prolonged debilitating conflicts but it cannot help trying.

One need not take a too pessimistic view of Russia as a military and economic power in view of the rapid decline of the G.N.P. and the falling morale of its ill-fate and ill-equipped military force. It would be a mistake to treat Russia as a "strategic paper tiger" with no capacity to influence developments in Central Asia. It very much remains a regional super power. No doubt there has been a steep decline of Russian economy since 1991, but Russia still has 26 times the G.N.P., four times as many soldiers, and a defence budget almost 40 times larger than the eight, Central Asian (5) and Trans-Caucasian states (3) combined. The Central Asian states do not possess the capacity to create their own military power. Despite agreements for military training in Turkey and the United States of America and joint exercises under the Partnership for Peace Programme of the NATO, the Central Asian states remain overwhelmingly dependent on Russia for training and equipment and for spare parts for a force of Soviet vintage. Russian border troops patrol Kazakhstan's and Kyrgyzstan's border with China and Turkmenistan's border with Iran. The entire southern border of Tajikistan with Afghanistan is guarded by 201st Motorised Infantry Division of Russia.

Ibid., p.105.
The Central Asian Republics are still overwhelmingly dependent on Russia for markets and supplies of consumer goods and energy. This holds good even though in the post-Soviet period they have opened up to trade and investment from the United States, Western Europe, Japan, South Korea, Israel, Turkey and the West Asian Arab countries. The share of Central Asian Republics exports to and imports from Russia remains preponderantly large in spite of continued erosion of Russia economic position in Central Asia. It was 83.6% (exports) and 99.0% (imports) for Krygyzstan for the year 1994. The figures for Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan were also quite high – 45.7% (export) and 47.5% (imports) for Uzbekistan and 67.6% (exports) and 59.4% (imports) for Kazakhstan. For Tajikistan and Turkmenistan the corresponding figures were 26.4% (exports), 57.5% (imports) and 10.1% (exports), 16.1% (imports) respectively. This asymmetric dependence of Central Asia on Russia in trade might change in the long run as the share of Russia is continually declining.

The Treaty on Collective Security concluded on May 15, 1992 at Tashkent with Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Armenia as signatories owed its genesis to the threat posed by Islamist opposition to the lawfully elected Parliament and the authority of President Nabiev in Tajikistan. Demonstrations had been going on in Dushanbe demanding new elections of the Parliament and ouster of President Nabiev. This treaty was followed by agreements of July 6, in Moscow and July 16, 1992 in Tashkent leading respectively the creation of the C.I.S. Rapid Deployment Force and the Joint Peace Keeping force to protect the border of Tajikistan with Afghanistan.

In May 1992, following rival demonstrations President Nabiev was compelled to include the Islamist and 'Democratic' opposition in a Coalition. This agreement was, however, unacceptable to the elites of the Leninabad (Khojent) region where 90% of the Uzbek population of Uzbekistan is concentrated. The Khojendis controlled the political power in Tajikistan during the Soviet period. To preserve their power they joined hands with the southern region of the Kulob. When the opposition forced President Nabiev to resign in September 1992, a civil war erupted. The threat of intervention from Afghanistan lurked in the background. President Islam Karimov of Uzbekistan skillfully managed intervention by Russia by playing on Moscow's fear about instability and safety of the local Russian community and the rising tide of Islamic fundamentalism.

After the victory of Kulobi representative Imomali Rakhmanov in the Presidential election held in 1994 against the Khojenti candidate Abdullojonov, the Khojent faction was out of power in the Tajik state. This led to the erosion of the Uzbek influence in Tajikistan and a corresponding increase in Russia's clout. Under the changed condition Islam Karimov adopted a new strategy by opening a dialogue with the Tajik opposition. Through a well-orchestrated campaign Karimov tried to convince Washington about Uzbekistan's concern for democracy and human rights, projecting Tashkent as a partner against Russian neoimperialism. Tashkent's new strategy which marked an about turn in respect of the Collective Security Treaty signed in Tashkent in May 1992 was further manifested during the seizure of Kabul by the Taliban in 1996 and the final occupation of Mazar-e-Sharif by the Taliban in 1998. In 1996 President Karimov arrived late at the Alm-Aty summit and in 1998 no reference to the Collective Security Treaty was made at the various meets to consider measures against the growing Taliban threat. For all practical purposes this treaty was already dead.
when President Karimov gave formal notice for withdrawal of Uzbekistan from it in early 1999. The arrangement for stationing of a battalion each of Uzbek and Kyrgyz soldiers on the Tajik border with Afghanistan as part of the Joint Peace Keeping force together with Russia also came to an end with the withdrawal by Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan of their token participation. Uzbekistan's efforts to outmanoeuvre Russia for influence in Tajikistan have come to naught.

During his Moscow visit on April 16, 1999, President Emomali Rakhmanov signed a treaty "on joint cooperation between the Russian Federation and the Republic of Tajikistan oriented to the 21st century". The treaty, which provides a military base to Russia in Tajikistan, signifies the establishment of a long-term strategic partnership between the two countries. The Russian Defence Minister Igor Sergeyev emphasized the importance of progress towards Collective Security in view of economic difficulties and paucity of finances. At a press conference in Dushanbe held on April 5, 1999, he called a functioning collective system of air defences which now embraces Russia, Belorus, Armenia, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan and will soon be joined by Tajikistan as "the key to CIS security".7 The Declaration on CIS Guidelines of Development adopted on April 2, 1999, by the Moscow meeting of Heads of States mentioned among others the "confirmation of our resolution to settle arm conflicts in Commonwealth member countries as soon as possible by peaceful means and with the use of UN and OSCE mechanisms and resources on the basis of undeviating compliance with territorial integrity, inviolability of state frontiers, and other universally recognised international legal norms and principles".8

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8 Ibid., p.19.
A recognition of the present Russian dominated common Eurasian security system including Central Asia does not mean total absence of desire among some Central Asian and other non-Russian CIS states to reduce their dependence on Russia in security and defence matters. There are signs that some states such as Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova would like to see the Russian influence reduced. Geographic barriers in uniting south Caucasus and Central Asia and division on the basis of religion as well as the economic and military dependence on Russia rule out, at least in the foreseeable future, the forging of an anti-Russian security block.

Efforts to associate the United Nations and the OSCE with the regional Collective Security System are obviously motivated by a desire to weaken Russian dominance. Such efforts may have the indirect support of the western powers but it would be difficult for them to justify before their public the conclusion of a military alliance with the Central Asian States. Western leaders still tend to view Central Asia as an area where Russia has special interest and can be entrusted the task of peace-keeping under broad international supervision. The United Nations and the OSCE did play an important role in the Tajik peace process but it was not designed to supplant Moscow.

The question of continuation of Russian preponderance in the security system of Central Asia in the long term, however, admits of no easy answer. There are several imponderables such as departure from the political scene of the present-day Soviet-era elite, the overwhelming domination of youth in the demographic composition of the Central Asian population, the economic recovery of Russia and the rising influence of Islam. All these factors are likely to pose a serious challenge to the geopolitical realities in Central Asia.