
*Uncovering the “New” Central Asia:
The Dynamics of External Agency
in a Turbulent Region*

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In Central Asia the position of affairs changes not every hour, but every minute. Therefore, I say, Vigilance, vigilance, vigilance... It [Central Asia] is the blank leaf between the pages of an old and a new dispensation; the brief interval separating a compact and immemorial tradition from the rude shock and unfeeling Philistinism of nineteenth-century civilization. The era of the Thousand and One Nights, with its strange mixture of savagery and splendor, of coma and excitement, is fast fading away, and will soon have yielded up all its secrets to science. Here in the cities of Alp Arslan, and Timur, and Abdullah Khan, may be seen the sole remaining stage upon which is yet being enacted that expiring drama of realistic romance.

Lord Curzon (1889: x–xii)

Introduction

As the epigraph above suggests, at least since Lord Curzon’s time, thinking about Central Asia (encompassing the countries of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan) easily borders on the realm of fantasy and hyperbole. That being so, an ungainly but important task is to distinguish between the phantoms and substance in the external involvement in Central Asia. This

seems to be particularly the case when grappling with the nascent regional agency of a multiple set of diverse (and often contending) international actors — both international organizations and states. The presumed *raison d'être* of their interactions seems to have rekindled stereotypes of a “new great game” in Central Asia. Even when one seeks to debunk the clichéd imagery of the “land of discord”, “pulpit of the world”, “geographical pivot of history”, “global chessboard”, etc., it is still legitimate to study historical and institutional legacies, cross-regional patterns, and lasting socio-economic structures that shaped political phenomena across Central Asia. An important task, therefore, is to separate the phantoms from the substance in the reflections on the Central Asian experience(s) during the over two decades following the *annus mirabilis* of 1991 — marking the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

During the 1990s, the region became an idiom symbolizing the uncertainty of the post-Cold War climate of global life. Still, the state-building and democratization paradigms have highlighted issues of borders, minorities, and violent conflicts. Thus, rather than a transitory stage, the resilient and pervasive randomness of Central Asian trends has challenged the dominant frameworks for the study of both global and regional patterns. Such a claim necessitates the qualification that the analysis of the regional agency of external actors points to one of the central problems of International Relations theory — its engagement with difference. As Inayatullah and Blaney (2004, p. 123) demonstrate “difference is almost pre-consciously treated as simultaneous with disorder, fear, suspicion, and condescension”. Thus, the contemporary positioning of Central Asia in the analysis of world politics confirms the observation that there is still “no non-Western International Relations theory” (Acharya and Buzan, 2007). This has led the study of world politics to present “crude and caricatured understanding of [...] the varying forms of life of ‘non-Western’ peoples” (Inayatullah and Blaney, 2004, p. 2).

Having an awareness of this shortcoming within the epistemological, ontological, and methodological purview of the discipline of International Relations, this volume’s focus on the international involvement in Central Asia helps develop nuanced contexts for the

“more flexible, more dynamic, and more evolutionary” understanding of “a new world” marked by “ambiguities, ambivalence, and uncertainty” as well as simultaneous “transformations at the local, national, regional, international, and global levels” (Chen, 1998, p. xiv). In this respect, the dynamic changes in Central Asia associated with the end of communism, the “revival” of ethno-political, religious, and clan mobilization, and the gradual involvement of various international actors have inspired extensive scholarly and policy engagement with the region. However, while many of the debates on the political developments in the area have been primarily conducted at the level of empirical consideration, the contributors to this volume make a critical reflection on their observations, findings, and research experience by relating their particular cases to broader themes in their fields of study.

The following chapters included in this collection are underpinned by the *uncovery* of the international agency in the “new” Central Asia — i.e., the investigations included in this volume not only *discover* previously untouched perspectives on the complexity of regional affairs, but they also *excavate* insights from underneath layers of ossified or never-problematized knowledge (Bially-Mattern, 2005, p. 5). The contention is that observers of world affairs “need to be cognizant of the powerful cultural forces” shaping the agency of international actors without “reify[ing] these forces,” because “cultures — even ‘security cultures’ — are ambiguous, complex, and dynamic, and they can and do change over time” (Latham, 1998, pp. 133–134). The uncovery of the international agency of different international actors in Central Asia traces the trajectories and logics of such changes and adaptations in making their foreign policy. The investigations included in this volume problematize prevailing notions of the external agency of the dominant international actors engaged in Central Asia.

In this respect, the following chapters are about the intertwining of Central Asia with world politics and the way international affairs affect Central Asia. At the same time, it is also about the place of Central Asia — both actual and appropriate — in the *study* and *practice* of world politics. Therefore, the contributors to this volume

have simultaneously *generalized* and *contextualized* the “Central Asian experience” (as well as have reconsidered and reevaluated its comparative relevance). The claim is that such an approach is relevant to understanding the context in which Central Asian issues have reflected and affected the patterns and theories of international affairs. In addition, the volume investigates the construction and individualization of Central Asian affairs as a distinct field of observation in the wake of the Cold War.

Before moving to the substantive chapters included in this volume, the introductory chapter proceeds by framing the scope, connotations, and frameworks of the Central Asian label. The following section, in particular, expounds upon the notion of the “new Central Asia”, whose content has been substantially redefined after the region’s rediscovery in 2001 (Lewis, 2008, p. 1). Such a study provides a background for the engagement with the Central Asian agency of international actors. This assessment details the perception of a regional power vacuum and the emergence of awkward statehood as key contributing factors to the construction of Central Asia as a permissive environment for external agency. Consequently, the confrontation with the proliferation of “actorness” in Central Asia accounts for the dynamics of the “new great game” and the patterns of “hegemonic fragmentation” in the region. The chapter concludes with an outline of the analytical framework for the contributions to this volume.

Framing the New Central Asia

As suggested, the region of Central Asia has become one of the emblematic features of the post-Cold War geography of international relations. The region’s appellation is one of those labels whose ramifications are open to contestation. In this respect, thinking about Central Asia (i.e., defining and mapping its designations) has never been an easy enterprise. The outline of its symbolic geography exposes the particular strategic connotations that the region has acquired. The reference to the “new Central Asia” therefore becomes shorthand for the complex challenges confronting the making of

foreign policy in the globalized context of world politics. The tension between perception and substance during the 1990s resulted in further definitional complications which reflect the fuzziness of the functional and analytical approaches to regional patterns. The region has been defined either by its common — usually backward, violent, and fatalistic — culture or the legacy of imperial rule. This tortuous legacy appears embedded in the very fabric of the newly independent states that emerged in the wake of Soviet dissolution.

The claim here is that the analytical fickleness of the notion of Central Asia reflects the “fragmentedness” of designations — that is, such notions neither command what is spoken through them, nor can they simply be commanded. Instead:

they slip and slide, evade our grasp and convey both more and less than we intended. They do this both because they have a history and because when we use them we set them off again on their historical way, in the unpredictable ways in which anything which lives in the way that it is received through time remains intractable to the designs that might be made upon it. Despite the art of the spin-doctor, then, you can never determine the outcome of that reception... To take a word, then, is to hold a fragment of life and its mystery in your hand.

(Dillon, 1996, pp. 114–115)

The point of departure in understanding the malleability of the Central Asian label is Neumann’s assertion that “regions are spoken into existence” (Neumann, 2001, p. 60), which indicates that the immediate issues for exploration are (i) who does the articulation, and (ii) how does it matter (i.e., create outcomes). Thus, it is still a daunting task to define Central Asia by looking solely at the discourses and mental mappings of regional complexity, without intrincating them with the external agency of various international actors. The claim of this volume is that it is external agency that *speaks* the Central Asian region into existence — to the extent that it is international actors that are involved in articulating the boundaries of the region and positioning Central Asian countries into a category of states that share

similar characteristics (Kassimeris, 2009, p. 93). In this setting, the suggestion is that a multiplicity of international actors has been involved in packaging and repackaging the geographical and geopolitical ramifications of Central Asia. The concern underpinning such endeavors seem to reflect the experience that no major empire of the 20th century has dissolved without its successor states undergoing protracted and bloody civil wars (Banuazizi and Weiner, 1994). At the same time, the desire of (some) international actors to influence the direction of Central Asian affairs is not necessarily matched by a willingness to take positions of leadership in the region. The pervasive simultaneity of these twin dynamics constructs a confusing picture which not only underwrites the terminological and analytical vagueness of regional patterns, but also suggests that the label of Central Asia, *per se*, has become a notion of little explanatory value.

In this respect, the notion of a “new Central Asia” has been propagated as a fresh analytical platform for engaging with regional patterns. The *newness* of the region was initially associated primarily with the novelty of independent national statehood. The emergence of the sovereign post-Soviet “stans” was a development which — unlike the experience of other post-communist countries — did not spell a return to or a revival of earlier forms and symbols of independent statehood (Anderson, 1997; Ferdinand, 1994; Garnett *et al.*, 2000; Roy, 2000). It has been argued that Central Asians — both publics and state-elites — had less of a say in their independence than they had in their absorption into the realm of the Russian empire during the 19th century. The region thereby “owed its new separateness to the dissolution of a metropolitan power, the USSR: a process over which Central Asian leaders had little control and to which they contributed little” (Allison, 2004, p. 463). As a result, independence appeared to be *thrust upon* the hesitant regional states with little warning. The tenuous experience as Soviet republics did not seem to offer the Central Asian countries the required “political, economic, and psychological” preparedness for independent participation in and interactions with the global society of states (Lloyd, 1997, p. 97). As one commentator put it, “the Central Asian republics were nonplussed;” they did not know “whether to celebrate their liberation

from the century-old Russian yoke or to grieve the passing away of their protector and benefactor” (Shams-ud-Din, 1997, p. 329).

Very quickly, however, the notion of the “new Central Asia” was promulgated as an indication of the fluidity of regional politics, which has demanded more comprehensive conceptualizations of their dynamic patterns. To start with, the Central Asian states seemed bent on “reestablishing pre-Soviet trade and transport routes” (Lloyd, 1997, p. 99). Rather than isolated in their landlocked location, the Central Asian “stans” have gradually become entangled in interactions stretching from Mongolia and China’s Xinjiang autonomous region, through Kashmir, Pakistan’s Northwestern Frontier Province, and Afghanistan, to Iran, Turkey, and the states of the Caucasus. Thus, although the *regional* character of these communications more often than not is evidenced by different forms of criminal and illegal transnational networks (Bohr, 2004, p. 500), it has nevertheless shifted international perceptions of the region toward broader conceptualizations. The notion of a new Central Asia appears to indicate the enhanced awareness of international actors that regional issues require a broader analytical and policy framework within which they can be addressed. In other words, the *regionness* of the new Central Asia derives from the shared socio-economic, political, and environmental vulnerabilities whose interaction drives (if not plagues) the workings of regional polities.

This proposition should not, however, be understood as a suggestion that Central Asian populations do not constitute imagined communities, even if “the development of a pan-Central Asian regional identity will remain a chimera” (Bohr, 2004, p. 502). On the contrary, they do, but not necessarily ones that fit neatly the conventional Westphalian schemata of “nation states”. Consequently, the established modes for analytical and policy adaptation aimed at grasping and addressing changing realities become obsolete and new ones are required (Kavalski, 2007a). This is probably one of the most important qualitative alterations of our perceptions demanded by the dynamics framed within the label of a “new Central Asia”. The contention is that external involvement — especially, external involvement intent on the introduction of a framework of

appropriateness — shapes the social space and developmental possibilities for the awkward states of the region (Hall, 2006, p. 102).

Thus, to facilitate the uncovering of the new Central Asian experience — past, present, and prospective — this volume advances a novel contextualization of regional patterns by looking at two relationally interconnected processes: (i) the role of international organizations — inclusive of the EU, NATO, the OSCE, and the UN; and (ii) the agency of individual states — Russia, the United States, China, India, Iran, Japan, and Turkey. The new Central Asia, therefore, is treated here as a prism for teasing out the regional agency of these actors as well as the strategies through which they are articulated. It provides a crucial context for engaging with the agency underpinning international efforts. The volume contends that the region is not merely a geographic location on the map of world politics, but an embodiment of ongoing dilemmas of international relations. In other words, the new Central Asia becomes an idiom, an intervening variable, and a context (i.e., an enabling environment) for the confrontation, on the one hand, with the modalities and the emergent complexity of global life, and, on the other hand, the patterns of external agency in the region.

Engaging International Agency

This volume surveys Central Asian dynamics against the backdrop of a wide and variegated international involvement in regional trends. The evaluation of such a proliferation of agency has taken into account the patterns, contexts, and analytical frameworks informing the formulations of the strategy of international actors toward Central Asia. In this respect, the contributors to this volume engage in a parallel comparative assessment of the dominant international actors engaged in Central Asia. The interlocutors of such a conversation reflect on the dynamics, logics, and policies underpinning this international involvement. It would appear that the dominant theme underpinning the agency of international actors in the region is the goal of introducing a framework of predictability that would allow them to make feasible calculations about future intentions.

Although concurrent, such externally promoted frameworks of order are not necessarily internally compatible — a dynamic captured by the label of the “new great game”. In other words, Central Asia has become a “zone of intense, complex interaction between local conditions and the larger world system” (Hall, 2006, p. 104). Therefore, the uncovering of the agency of international organizations and actors in Central Asia does not impute, nor endow with coherence the story it tells. Instead, its account facilitates an encounter with the nuances and complexity characterizing seemingly straightforward propositions. To facilitate the engagement with the international involvement in Central Asia, the following sections detail the conditions that have permitted the proliferation of agency in the region as well as the main features of the interactions between international actors.

Central Asia as a permissive environment for international actors

The recent rash of attention to the proliferation of agency in international life is underpinned by the recognition that the end of Cold War bipolarity has allowed a number of actors to extend their international roles and outreach. In Central Asia, the propagation of such multiplicity of distinct attitudes and attempts at framing regional patterns has been made possible by two interrelated processes: (i) the perception of a power vacuum in the region after the dissolution of the Soviet Union; and (ii) the awkwardness of Central Asian statehood. Analytically, these dynamics implicate the conditions of an “immature anarchy” in the region, which — in contrast to the “mature anarchy” setting — identify competitive and fragmented patterns of relations, which do not appear to be constrained by the normative framework of international affairs (Buzan, 1991, p. 175). At the same time, it is the interplay between both of these dynamics that have made the region permeable (and permeated) by external agency.

Power vacuum in Central Asia

The perception of a power vacuum in Central Asia derives from (i) the relative inability of Russia — the traditional “big brother” of the

region — to assert its centrality in the region during the 1990s; and (ii) the failure of Central Asian regionalization. For the purposes of brevity (as this issue is addressed at length in Chapter Seven), it has to be acknowledged that Moscow's engagement in Central Asia reflects not only the thorny history of its interactions with the region, but also the complexity of Russia's geography and demography — that is, while “eighty-five percent of the Russian Federation can be said to live in the East, eighty-five percent of its population lives in the West” (Black, 2004, p. 275). On the one hand, the weakening of the Kremlin's position in Central Asia reflects the broader pattern of Moscow's foreign policy inconsistencies during the tenure of President Boris Yeltsin. Thus, Russia's preoccupation with the Caucasus (mainly the conflict in Chechnya) has led to the attenuation of its position in Central Asia. On the other hand, Moscow's foreign policy attention toward integration with the West and away from the former Soviet republics in the early 1990s, made its Central Asian policy “uncertain, with different agencies and institutions holding conflicting points of view with regard to local issues” (Mullojanov, 2008, pp. 121–128).

At the same time, these twin dynamics have evinced Russia's status as a “declining hegemon” in Central Asia — i.e., it was “dominant in the region but only because of a variable combination of acceptance and even greater weakness on the part of most of the other states [which] meant that its government was powerless to prevent the incursion into what it perceived as its sphere of influence” (Deyermond, 2009, p. 160; Jonson, 2001, pp. 95–126). The declining hegemony of Russia has been underpinned by the resource-extraction nature of Soviet rule in Central Asia. During Soviet times, Moscow found itself perpetuating the Tsarist economic policy, which — in the words of Lenin — treated the region as a mere “cotton appendix of Russia” (cited in Rywkin, 1963, p. 65). Thus, a number of commentators have labeled the Central Asian republics “colonies of the Soviet Union”, whose economies were deliberately structured to keep them as “primarily agricultural, produced raw materials (e.g., cotton and wheat) to be processed elsewhere, and exhausted their nonrenewable resources (e.g., oil, gas, and minerals), and thus were wholly dependent on other Soviet republics” (Luong, 2004, p. 8).

Furthermore, this experience of dependency coupled with the withdrawal of Moscow's attention from the region appeared to encourage the newly independent states of Central Asia to engage more proactively in diversifying their strategic partnerships. Their geopolitical location, historical relations with a number of neighboring countries, and access to hydro-carbon (and other mineral) resources assisted the compilation of long lists of international suitors. Such patterns, however, did not seem to assist the appearance of a Central Asian integrative process. Instead, tensions and divisions between regional states — especially, between their leaders — appear to have turned this option into a chimera. It was early in their experience of independence, despite expectations to the contrary, when it became conspicuous that Central Asian states are growing increasingly “hesitant and inconsistent in formulating regional agendas or structures for security cooperation” (Allison, 2004, p. 463). Some trace the origins of this trend in their shared Soviet experience, when the Central Asian republics were “parts of a centralized administration that often deliberately strove to keep them from being able to play complementary roles for each other” (Blank, 2004b, p. 139). Commentators have even ascertained that the deep divisions characterizing intra-regional relations are “effectively laying to rest for the foreseeable future prospects for the development of an inclusive Central Asian regional identity” (Bohr, 2004, p. 492). But then the question arises: How can the mushrooming of various *regional* organizations bringing together different Central Asian countries be explained?

According to Allison (2008), such frameworks for institutional relations in the region are instances of the “bandwagoning” of Central Asian leaders with external actors to weather different (perceived and real) pressures and challenges. This contextualization explains regional organizations such as the Eurasian Economic Community (EAEC), the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), etc. as alliances of convenience or, what Allison calls, forms of “virtual regionalism”. The contention is that these organizations do not strengthen Central Asian regionalization, not merely because of “the

absence of any deeper regionalist impulse behind them”, but because of their specific political function — the “reinforcement of regime security and legitimacy and it has priority over other security, economic, or trade goals”. Allison argues that what emerges from these virtual regionalisms of convenience is a process of “protective integration” — in other words, such institutional cooperation between regional states and some international actors offers protection against the perceived interventionist strategies of other actors (Allison, 2008, pp. 185–202).

The growing need to buttress their stability has urged Central Asian leaders into a growing number of (simultaneous) collaborative arrangements with diverse sets of external actors. This development indicates an interesting twist on the conventional “patron-client” relationship between external (hegemonically minded) actors and Central Asian states — namely, international “patrons” do offer their Central Asian “clients” assurances about the maintenance and protection of their sovereignty and territorial integrity; yet, external actors do not seem to enjoy more bargaining power (see Kassimeris, 2009, p. 94). Such a pattern, therefore, befuddles the prospects and processes of regionalization in Central Asia which further strengthens the perception of a regional power vacuum. Yet, apart from the observation of a power vacuum in the region — because of Russia’s perceived withdrawal from the region and the failure of Central Asian region-building — external agency has also greatly been abetted by the awkwardness of Central Asian statehood.

Awkward statehood in Central Asia

The notion of “awkward states” (Field, 2001; Kavalski, 2006) is used as a designation of the condition of international existence of Central Asian polities. It reflects the assertion that the countries of the region were “hardly prepared for an unexpected adventure in state building” (Lewis, 2008, p. 123). Thus, although the post-Soviet transition has marked a sharp (if uncertain) break with the past, the subsequent trajectories of Central Asian states exhibit “puzzling” ongoing dynamics “between the formal and the informal elements of politics,

and a surprising re-emergence of informal organizations embedded in both the Soviet and the pre-Soviet political order of this region” (Collins, 2006, p. 5).

Unlike its treatment as another synonym for “weak”, “failed”, or “quasi” states, the use of the term “awkward states” here expands its meaning beyond a mere indication of the Weberian dysfunctionality of Central Asian statehood. The notion of “awkwardness” problematizes simultaneously the concepts, images, and process of domestic rule and international behavior. On the one hand, awkward states are characterized not only by their volatility, but by a mode of government whose methods and practices contradict accepted norms and rules (Nincic, 2005, p. 13; Kavalski, 2008a, p. 74). The process of state-building, in this context implies a process of establishing authority over a given territory — i.e., “state-building in the literal sense of the word” (Grzymala-Busse and Luong, 2002, p. 2; Krastev, 2003, p. 1). On the other hand, awkward states engage in occasionally erratic and often unpredictable international behavior (to the extent that they are willing to interact with the outside world at all, as the case of Turkmenistan illustrates).

Thus, the awkwardness of Central Asian statehood becomes an idiom for the topsyturvydom of the post-Cold War climate of world politics where more often than not inter-state relations are characterized by a modicum of order, while intra-state affairs elicit patterns of anarchy. As Blank has suggested, the Central Asian states exhibit the exigencies faced by decision making without the sufficient means and resources for meaningful action. In this respect, “their primary concern is internal security [...] Consequently, foreign policy’s purpose is to protect the internal regime from domestic anarchy that lies inside of it and that can be stimulated by the pressures of the outside world” (Blank, 2004b, pp. 139–140). Such prioritization of the value of domestic stability by Central Asian regimes is a function of the “privatization of decision-making” (Krastev, 2003, p. 8) by regional rulers. The awkwardness of Central Asian statehood reflects the emergence of practices, which are “designed to ensure that the leader remains untainted by the failure of the state to deliver on its promises” (Lewis, 2008, p. 163). The contention is that unlike

integrated states (which tend to be characterized by deliberative peace within and between societies), awkward states belie a spectrum of enmity and insecurity (Kavalski, 2008a, p. 76). Thus, the international involvement in awkward states demonstrates their treatment by external actors as far as possible as states, while guarding against the undesirable effects of their awkwardness (Navari, 2003, p. 106).

In this respect, rather than a transitory stage, the resilient and pervasive uncertainty of Central Asian trends attests to the entrenchment of the region's awkwardness in global life. Consequently, this situation presents international actors with the demands of "‘complex socialization’ in a complex situation" (Flockhart, 2005, p. 62). The dynamism of complexity in Central Asia instances regional awkward states with relatively vast endowments but low institutional capacities, challenged by "strongly networked and semi-modern societies" (Collins, 2006, p. 48). The lack of "effective" and "neutral" state institutions has urged Central Asian populations to withdraw in "an essentially private world, revolving around family, friends, and work, with as little engagement as possible with the repressive state" (Lewis, 2008, p. 47). Awkward states, thereby, have the tendency to make their citizens "demobilized and disunited" as well as "quite cynical" about the political process (Bunce and Wolchik, 2009, p. 72). In this context, international agency is often coopted by Central Asian rulers to bolster the appearance of legitimacy — both domestically and internationally — for their authoritarian regimes (Lewis, 2008). In other words, the demand for recognition underpins the willingness of the awkward states of the region to engage with a wide range of international actors.

Confronting the proliferation of actorness in Central Asia

The confrontation with the proliferation of external agency in Central Asia requires an understanding of the "actorness" of the international organizations and states active in the region. Actorness defines the capacity of an international actor, to speak, influence, and act cohesively in different international environments. In other words, it encompasses an actor's ability both to achieve its goals and to transmit

institutions, practices, and norms that would construct an environment congruent with and conducive to its agency. A central feature of actorness is *cohesion* since without it an agent merely has a *presence* but no capacity to act (Allen and Smith, 1990). Actorness, thereby, identifies an "ability to behave in ways that have consequences in international politics" (Hopkins and Mansbach, 1973, pp. 36–37). Actorness, however, is not a static condition. An actor can display "varying degrees of 'actorhood' across issues and time" (Caporaso and Jupille, 1998, p. 244).

In other words, the assessment of the Central Asian agency of the actors included in this volume offers insights only into their regional policies and not their foreign policy strategies, per se. Although the two are related, the (particular) Central Asian and the (general) international relations of external actors reflect distinct conceptualizations of identity, interests, utility, and effort that are contingent both on contextual and ideational interpretations. For instance, the Central Asian agency of the international actors included in this volume suggests the modes in which each of them conceives their agency in the region, not in global life (although the two aspects influence and impact on one another). Actorness, thereby is "conditioned by circumstances as well as by formal grants of authority" (Laffan *et al.*, 1999, p. 169). Furthermore, it is framed by the ability of external actors to adjust to the dynamic processes at work both within regional states and between the state and society (Kavalski, 2007b, p. 851). The increase in the international involvement in the region is characterized by the twin-dynamics of the "new great game" and "hegemonic fragmentation", which are detailed in the following sections.

"New great game" in Central Asia

The origins of the notion and practices of the "new great game" in Central Asia are traditionally traced to the permissive environment — especially, the perception of a power vacuum in the region — that emerged in the wake of Soviet dissolution (Ahrari and Beal, 1996; Ehteshami, 1995; Kleveman, 2003; Menon, 2003). In other words, the break-up of the Soviet Union did not alter the geographic location

of the region, but its meaning (Bhattacharjea, 2008, p. 11). Thus, the growing use of the notion of a “new great game” seems to simultaneously coincide with and be caused by the revival of interest in geopolitics as a viable framework for describing, explaining, and understanding the international affairs of Central Asia (Edwards, 2003, p. 83). In this respect, what appears to be “new” about this “great game” (in comparison with its 19th century variant) is the simultaneous proliferation of external (i.e., from outside the region) and internal (i.e., regional) agency. Likewise, one commentator has ascertained that “this new ‘great game’ in the heart of Asia is unfolding not so much among the old colonial powers as among their former minions, many of whom are themselves just emerging from colonial domination and seeking to define their roles in their regions and the world” (Rumer, 1993, p. 89).

Such an understanding has provoked the drafting of extensive lists of actors with vested interests in Central Asian resources. Usually, such lists include (but are not limited to) China, the European Union, Iran, Pakistan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, the United States, etc. The chapters included in this volume detail the Central Asian agency of the most prominent among those actors. It has to be acknowledged that what distinguishes such involvement of international actors in regional affairs is that they do not appear to be interested in imperial expansion for the control of territory, but in gaining access to the strategic resources of Central Asia (Muni, 2003, pp. 97–98). In other words, the “new great game” is about the creation of “niches of influence” (Shams-ud-Din, 1997, p. 340). Such an influence does not rely on or derive from the territorial effects of external actors (as conventional geopolitics would suggest), but on their distinct *regimes of governance* (Goetze and Guzina, 2008, p. 334). Central Asia, thereby, emerges as the contested site of competing “nodes of governance” — externally promoted strategies aimed at the transmission of rules, produced elsewhere (Bliesemann de Guevara, 2008, p. 348; Kavalski, 2007c). Consequently, the notion of the new great game comes to characterize the dynamics of processing, selection, and internalization of some rules and not others.

At the same time, and more significantly, the Central Asian states do not appear to be the “pawns of great powers” any longer — i.e., the proliferation of external agency has intensified the contest between international actors vying for the attention of regional countries. This context has provided a facilitating environment for “pick-and-choose” strategies and bandwagoning for profit policies (Kavalski, 2007b, p. 856). In fact, all five of the Central Asian states have indicated their propensity and panache for this kind of engagement with international actors. The space for such independent agency by Central Asian states reveals the qualitative distinction of the new great game from its 19th century version. In other words, regional states might be compelled to indicate their preferred model of external agency, but they are not constrained to comply with its injunctions for long and often swing their preferences to another external pole of attraction. As a result, the assertions of political solidarity with different international actors do not diminish the competitive nature of Central Asian affairs, not only because such closeness of relations is temporary, but also because they are in no way intended to diminish the regional divisions between different actors (Allison, 2008, p. 186).

In this respect, the proclamations of a new great game appear to demonstrate the transformation of the pattern of Central Asian affairs into one which is dominated by a complex network of overlapping interregional relations (Katzenstein, 2005; Lake and Morgan, 1998; Solingen, 1998). The various international actors engaged in Central Asia are also promoting their own and distinct regionalizing strategies. The discourses of the new great game, thereby, acknowledge the extant potent symbolic resources that simultaneously reflect and create social processes through which meanings are exchanged (Kinnvall, 2006). This inference confirms that the foreign policy of Central Asian states is unlikely to be formed independently of their external environment because of expectations that their relations are “to be of a certain context” and “owing to restraints such as [their] economic, political, military, and cultural ties with other states” (Kassimeris, 2009, p. 94). In this respect, the foreign policy engagement of various international actors in Central Asia indicates the

particular political, socio-economic, and (geo) historical conditions within which their agency is framed.

Hegemonic fragmentation in Central Asia

The discourses of the new great game in Central Asia have provoked a concerted effort at the positioning of regional patterns within the frameworks for understanding and explanation available to the study of international relations. Such interest reveals that even if local (and localized), Central Asian affairs are nevertheless enmeshed in global networks of relations. In other words, “‘things’ do occur locally but not necessarily solely as a result of local influences. Similarly, local changes can alter the nature of wider networks” (Gills and Thompson, 2006, p. 2).

International agency, thereby, has a significant impact on the pattern, flow, and character of regional interactions. In the instance of Central Asia, it reveals the (uneasy) merger of the region into the currents of world politics. The incorporation of Central Asia confirms the historical observation that the effects of even very mild forms of incorporation into the global system of international relations can be quite dramatic (Hall, 2006, p. 99) — especially, in awkward states. The pattern of relations in Central Asia, thus, points to the pervasive “fragmentation” of global life — the simultaneity between fragmenting and integrating processes in international affairs, which “serves as a constant reminder that the world has moved beyond the condition of being ‘post’ its predecessor to an era in which the foundations of daily life have settled into new and unique rhythms of their own” (Rosenau, 2003, p. 11). In this setting, the ensuing increased awareness of vulnerability to distant causes conveys a sense of chaotic uncertainty prompted by the catalytic effects of small events, whose consequences are felt later, elsewhere, and by others (Kavalski, 2008b, p. 426).

This awareness has provoked nuanced engagement with the Central Asian agency of international actors. Deyermond (2009) has provided one of the most erudite accounts of the “multilevelled hegemonic encounter” between different international actors in the

region. Her analysis acknowledges that external actors bent on influencing Central Asian patterns can simultaneously coexist, cooperate, and compete at the different levels of their interactions in the region. Deyermond captures this condition through her “matrioshka model of hegemony” — that is, “in the same way that Russian matrioshka dolls, identical in appearance and function but varying in size, can be accommodated within one another, so hegemony — functionally similar but operating at global regional, and sub-regional levels — appear to coexist”. While accounting for the concurrence of competition and cooperation on the same issues, between the same set of actors, at the same time, and in the same region, Deyermond’s suggestion of multilevelled hegemony also indicates that “the global hegemon is not necessarily the hegemon in any given region” (Deyermond, 2009, pp. 151–173).

In this respect, the claim here is that the complexity of Central Asian interactions among various international actors reveals a pattern of *hegemonic fragmentation* — the simultaneous attempt by external actors to influence Central Asian patterns, which pushes them to continuously align and re-align themselves with various other actors to advance their own goals and thwart the advances of others — an objective, which also produces some paradoxical alliances between them. This dynamic of hegemonic fragmentation prevents the emergence of a single leading power dominating Central Asian affairs, but it also seems to make unlikely the outbreak of violent confrontation between them in the region.

Roadmap for the Volume

This section makes a brief tour of the volume by (i) outlining its analytical structure; and (ii) sketching the proposition of the individual chapters. It needs to be made clear from the outset that this volume does not intend a closure of the field by providing the final word on the international involvement in Central Asia. Instead, it attempts to offer suggestions for deepening and broadening the conversation on the effects of external agency in regional affairs.

Analytical framework

To ensure the coherence of the volume, the following chapters incorporate responses to the following research questions:

1. What is the nature of the international actor under discussion? Why it became involved in Central Asia? What is its scope? Whom does it affect?
2. What is the understanding of state-building and democratization that this international actor represents?
3. What theoretical and methodological approaches have been employed in understanding and explaining the state-building and democratization dynamics of this international actor?
4. What does the explanation and understanding of this international actor's agency tell us about the nature and concerns of contemporary Central Asian politics?
5. What critical perspectives, revisions, and developments does it suggest in regard to the theories it has been informed by?

The analytical setting provided by these queries assists with the *construction of the comparable* between the distinct contexts of the different international actors involved in Central Asia (Kavalski and Zolkos, 2008, p. 8). At the same time, the parallel assessment of the contributions framed through these research questions permits the use of a spectrum of approaches across the following chapters, which do not demand the recourse to a single epistemology or methodology in explaining the phenomenon and instances of external agency in Central Asia.

Outline of contributions

No volume, not even one as encompassing as this one, can be completely comprehensive in its coverage of the external actors involved in Central Asia. In fact, the provision of an exhaustive inventory of the international agency in the region — even if it was possible — is not the objective of this collection. Instead the intention is to provide a set of cases, perspectives, challenges, and priorities that offer

relevant approaches to the study of moving targets in a changing environment.

The volume is divided into three parts. The first one details the agency of several international organizations in Central Asia. The section outlines the roles and agency of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the European Union and the United Nations. Such overview assists a comparative assessment of the actorness of these international bodies. The second part of the volume examines the Central Asian involvement of several states. Included in this section are China, Russia, the United States, Turkey, Iran, India, and Japan. Again the study of the Central Asian policies of these states assists the parallel assessment of the distinct international identities that they project in the region. It has to be acknowledged that the division between the agency of states and international organizations is somewhat artificial. For instance, the discussion of the Central Asian agency of NATO is closely intertwined with the regional involvement of the United States, which is discussed in the second part of the volume. At the same time, the discussion of the Central Asian agency of China can have equally be included in the first part of the volume as Beijing's regional engagement is largely framed by the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Finally, the third part of the volume discusses the possible trajectories for external agency in Central Asia and the dynamics that are likely to affect the prospective patterns of international involvement.

Conclusion

The phenomenon of the proliferation of international agency in Central Asia is part of the ongoing collapse of different geopolitical areas into a single globalized network of inter-regional interactions. Paradoxically, it was the establishment of the ancient Silk Road that set this process in motion, by bringing into contact — and eventually merging — the regional frameworks of Europe, Africa, West Asia with the one of East Asia via the Central Asian region (Cioffi-Revilla, 2006, p. 89). In this respect, the significance of Central Asia is likely

to increase in the context of broadening and deepening the dynamics of globalization.

In this respect, commentators have pointed out that the post-Cold War rediscovery of Central Asia by the world “was always going to be a traumatic and dangerous process” (Lewis, 2008, p. 3). Without negating, nor accepting the validity of the claim, this volume undertakes an investigation of the involvement of external actors in the region. Thus, “what seems at first glance as an artificial patchwork” of contingent post-Soviet states both gains facticity through the patterns of international relations and “makes new sense by adapting to the evolutive geostrategy of an area in the making” (Roy, 2000, p. 200).

The sense of trauma and danger arises from the failure to provide the overwhelming majority of the Central Asian populations with the opportunity for *independent* lives. This condition contrast the experience of the states in which those populations live in and whose independence from the Soviet Union appears to have been translated into a structural capacity for international promiscuity — the ability to engage with a range of external actors to ensure the survival of Central Asian regimes. The impact of international actors on Central Asian societies is deliberately skimmed over. The reason is that external efforts are targeted exclusively at state-elites and building state-level institutional arrangements (Kavalski, 2008a). The choice for leaving this lacuna open intends to draw attention to this disturbing feature of international agency. It is not least because of international disentanglement from social concerns that there is a growing detachment of regional populations from the states they inhabit.

In other words, international actors furnish the capacities of authoritarian and repressive regimes, whose appeal among local populations is tied to external assistance. Thus, there emerges a marked distinction between state and society (or informal social networks) in the region, which did not seem to exist at the time of the dissolution of the USSR. As commentators have asserted the “boundary between the state and society [in Central Asia] was purposefully blurred” by the Soviet system “in accordance with the vision of creating a heroic-Leninist state” and in an attempt to prevent the development of independent societal organizations that could

become alternative hubs of power and resistance (Luong, 2004, p. 24). Consequently, the withdrawal into the informal system of clan networking and structures of patronage provides alternative mechanisms for political mobilization (Collins, 2006, p. 11).

Bearing this in mind, Pickering (2007) has argued that international actors interested in the stability of Eurasia need to desist the temptations to dismiss such societal networks as “backward”. Instead, the existence of these informal structures reflects “a *practical* approach [for survival] that is born out of necessity and tied to experience”. The authoritarian framework of awkward statehood in Central Asia has compelled regional populations to develop indigenous structures for adaptation. Thus, the formal state structures — maintained and buttressed by international agency — fail to resonate with the citizens of Central Asian states “fomenting disillusionment and encouraging reliance on the informal ties that, as with prior generations, helped ordinary people cope with the political institutions that do not appear to offer them a better life” (Pickering, 2007, pp. 165–188).

International actors in this regard bolster the hold on power of regional state-elites. The understanding provided by this volume inscribes itself within the project of “lifting people as individuals and groups out of structural and contingent oppression” (Booth, 2007, p. 110). Such an endeavor entails not only holding regional leaders to account, but also the agency of external actors. It is hoped that this volume will contribute to this critical conversation. Returning to Lord Curzon’s words in the epigraph to this chapter, the dynamics of international agency in Central Asia seem to suggest that the “expiring drama of realistic romance” is still being enacted in the region and the stakes for all involved are as high as the principles to which they are held accountable.

Related Websites

On the region

Cambridge Central Asia Forum: <http://www.cambridge-centralasia.org>.

Central Asian Gateway: <http://www.cagateway.org>.