Major powers and regionalism in Central Asia
By Peter Krasnopolsky

Introduction
Post-Soviet Central Asian states, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan have emerged as separate units in the international system after the break-up of the Soviet Union. Their geographic proximity, close ethnicity and languages of their nationals, similar religion, shared history (both preceding and during Soviet period), common resources and Soviet era infrastructure (such as water and transport links) provide wide range of grounds for cooperation. However, in the decades after independence, regional cooperation between these young states has frequently been stagnant. Moreover, pre-existing Soviet ties have, in many instances, been severed. “The main economic interests of Central Asian states lay outside the region. In 1999, only 3.1% of Kazakhstan’s [the largest central Asian economy] trade turnover was with [other Central Asian states], and in 2009 – 2.7%.”

The movement of people within Central Asia has been increasingly restricted; there is little coordination and information exchange between Central Asian public organizations; the influence of common Soviet culture and Russia language is declining, yielding to new post-independence nation building rhetoric; there are fewer connections in culture, education, sports and youth exchanges. Relations between the Central Asian states are often complicated because of the issues in border security and management of shared water resources. Consequently, the level of interdependence between former Soviet republics has declined.

Despite of the relatively poor state of cooperation between the countries, Central Asia contains a number of regional groupings and initiatives. Some of these were promoted by international organizations or states from the neighboring regions. These include the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO), the Special Program for the Economies of Central Asia (SPECA) and the Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC) at Asian Development Bank. Other organizations reflect a common Soviet past or were initiated by Russia. Amongst these are the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the Eurasian Economic Community (EAEC). A distinct grouping is the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which was initiated by China and includes Russia and all the Central Asian states, except Turkmenistan. The EAEC and the SCO are the two main organizations, and China and Russia play key roles in developing and

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1 With the exception of Tajiks all the major nations are of Turkic origin
2 Kassenova, Nargis, “Kazakhstan and Eurasian Economic Integration: Quick Start, Mixed Results and Uncertain Future,” Centre Russie/Nei.Reports No14, November 2012, 9
4 Ibid
6 Nezihoglu, Halim, Fatih Mehmet Sayin, “Two Options Among Numerous Directions: Eurasianism on Moscow’s Terms or Regional Integration Between Sovereign Neighbors in Central Asia,” The Journal of International Social Research, 6, 26, (Spring 2013)
7 Current members of the EAEC are Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan
promoting them. Despite predisposition for evolutionary type of development, regional cooperation in Central Asia advanced in such a way as to include overlapping regional organizations with little to account for in bottom-up developments. It has been suggested that “whereas in other Asian areas there has been discussion of “regions without regionalism”, Central Asia had been closer to ‘regionalism without a region.’”\(^8\) The explanation for this lies partially in internal regional dynamics. However, exploring the positions of major powers engaged in Central Asia and their roles in the regional organizations may provide a more definite answer.

The paper suggests that Russia and China play a twofold, yet critical role in defining the nature of regional cooperation in Central Asia. More specifically, Russia’s more exclusive and deeper regionalism may be contributing to the fragmentation of Central Asia. As for China, its economic power has not been sufficient to foster regional cooperation in Central Asia. From the theoretical perspective the paper provides critical assessment of the main approaches used in studying regionalism in Central Asia and highlights a number of weaknesses of Neoliberal Institutionalism for explaining the nature of regional cooperation. It further suggests that a combination of Neorealism and Social Constructivism can provide a more feasible approach for explaining international relations in Central Asia.

The paper is structured in the following way. The first section identifies current approaches to studying international relations in Central Asia. The second section analyses the general nature and capacity of the dominant regional organizations, the EAEU and the SCO. The third section reviews the interests of the states in the region suggesting that cooperation based on common interests in Central Asia fits better into neorealism framework. The fourth section outlines the internal and external constraints to regionalism in Central Asia. A brief conclusion follows.

**Main actors and current approaches**

Russia and China have been the two main powers involved in Central Asia. The United States, India and the EU have all demonstrated interest\(^9\) in the area, but their engagement, arguably, cannot compare with that of Russia and China. The United States has been mainly interested in Central Asia as a platform for its engagement in Afghanistan.\(^10\) It has not invested sufficient amount of resources in promotion of its liberal-democratic norms, creation of sustainable multilateral institutions and development of economic ties with the region.\(^11\) India lacks economic weight and has limited capabilities to project either its military strength or normative power to the region, separated from the subcontinent both geographically and

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\(^8\) Kerr, David, “Central Asian and Russian perspective on China’s strategic emergence”, International Affairs, 86, 1, (2010), 143

\(^9\) Other actors engaged in Central Asia, such as Turkey, Iran, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Japan and South Korea, can be considered as secondary players.


\(^11\) Stoner, 174
The European Union’s economic and political engagement in Central Asia has been limited, and its focus on promoting the EU norms has had few noticeable effects on regional politics. Aside from few studies which address interactions between selected Central Asian states, much of the International Relations literature tends to view Central Asia mainly through two prisms. One approach focuses on regional organizations, their functions, internal developments and impacts they make on regional cooperation and international relations in the region. In the studies on Central Asia this approach often adopts either Neoliberal Institutionalism or Social Constructivism theories. Neoliberal Institutionalism focuses on how the institutional and legal basis of regional organizations can utilize common interests to facilitate multilateral cooperation. Under Social Constructivism cooperation is explained by analyzing how states transform their interests and self-perceptions. Norms and ideas play just as important a role in forging cooperation as material factors.

Another approach revolves around geopolitics and the major powers’ (China, Russia and the USA) engagement in the region and generally adopts a number of neorealism approaches, particularly state-centrism, self-help, balance of power and uncertainty of intentions. Subsequent interpretations of international relations in Central Asia are based on material factors. A small number of studies views major powers’ engagement in Central Asia using social constructivism approach under which major powers ability to use their norms and socialize Central Asian states into cooperation is seen to be more important than their economic, military and other tangible resources. Neither Neorealism, nor Social Constructivism disregards regional organizations altogether. Instead, organizations are generally viewed as mechanisms used by major powers to compete with each other and establish their positions in Central Asia and the international system.

Regionalism and key regional organizations

Regionalism and regionalization

Neoliberal Institutionalism accepts that states are rational actors which are uncertain of each other intentions and act based in their self-interests. According to Robert Keohane “institutions are necessary […] in order to achieve state purposes.” The main advantage of institutions lies in their ability to reduce uncertainty between the states which decreases the possibility of the zero-sum game. Despite the presence of common interests, cooperation “as compared to harmony, requires active attempts to adjust policies to meet the demand of others” and is best achieved with the help of institutions. Consequently, the capacity of regional

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18 Keohane, 13
organization is an important factor of evaluating the degree of multilateral cooperation. However, even though the institutionalism approach considers states to be the key actors in the international system, regional cooperation is not measured solely by interstate relationships.

The term ‘regionalism’ has a more encompassing meaning than ‘regional cooperation’. Regionalism can be defined as a “purposive interaction, formal and informal, among state and non-state actors of a given area in pursuit of shared external, domestic and transnational goals.” Regionalization, in turn, is seen as “the process that leads to patterns of cooperation, integration, complementarity and convergence within a particular cross-national geographic space.” It can also be characterized as a project aimed at enhancing regional cooperation, as well as the process different actors go through. The term “regionness” is used as a measure of the degree of regionalization. The inclusion of non-state actors in defining regionalism suggests that it is not supposed to be just about inter-state cooperation. Despite general agreement in the neoliberal institutionalism theoretical literature on the important role of cooperation between the non-state actors, the institutionalism approach to study Central Asia suggests that it is not the case in Central Asian regionalism. Stephen Aris states that

[...], in Central Asia, regionalization is often considered to be an elite driven process. SCO is strongly interstate in design, with very limited elements of supranationalism [...]. It is also largely elite-focused, with the national leadership controlling agenda. As a result, the organs of the SCO are limited in their capacity to impact on national affairs and in their ability to ensure that their programmes are implemented nationally. In the case of the EAEC, there is a much stronger presence of supranational structures and institutional capacity. However the process of the integration is still very much state-driven, with little involvement from the non-sate actors, even though, in contrast to the SCO, the EAEC can rely on pre-existing post-soviet ties. Since the international organizations lie at the center of Central Asian regionalism, the analysis of their distinct characteristics and their capacities is essential.

Assessing regional organizations

According to Hettne and one of the institutionalism schools of thought known as “new regionalism”, the “regionness”, i.e. the level of regionalization, can be viewed through five dimensions: geographic proximity, transnational social relations, formal institutional cooperation,
convergence of values through integration and, finally, evolution into a supranational entity. The more dimensions that are present or developed – the higher is the level of regionness. The first two are clearly visible in Central Asia. Geographic proximity between the Central Asian states is evident. Also, despite recent decline in intraregional connections, Central Asia still demonstrates a range of transnational relations. Considering the remaining post-Soviet ties and sizeable minorities of nationalities from neighboring states living in most of the countries, informal regional networks are well developed. They allow cross border movements of people, informal trade and illegal activities, such as drug trafficking. Additionally, there has been certain progress and much potential for formal bilateral cooperation between some of the “friendlier” Central Asian states, for instance Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan.

However, the last three dimensions of Hettne’s “new regionalism” framework (i.e. formal institutional cooperation, convergence of values and, evolution into a supranational entity) are supposedly only possible with functional regional organizations, which are seen as essential to achieve higher levels of regional cooperation. They are even more important on ‘mature’ stages of regionalization which is meant to involve more advanced integration. However, according to Amitav Acharya, socially constructed norms are at least as important in facilitating regional cooperation as formal institutions.

Norms vs. Legalization

The importance of common norms and the decreasing role allocated to formal institutionalization and legalization of regional structures, so called “soft institutionalism”, are seen as constituting a more appropriate format for regionalism in Asia partially because of the common perception of the success of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) framework in contributing towards regional peace and stability. However, the concept of “soft institutionalism” does not relate the same way to the Central Asian regional organizations. The two main organizations, the EAEC and the SCO, have different levels of institutional capacity. The EAEC was ‘re-booted’ in 2010 with a greater legal foundation to become a more institutionalized organization. The SCO focuses on interstate cooperation, and its functionality depends, to a certain extent, on the weakness of its institutional arrangements.

Originally, the EAEC started out lacking sufficient legal framework and adequate implementation mechanisms, experienced a stagnation in the 90’s and early 2000’s, and emerged with an increased institutional capacity, aiming for a high level of regional integration. Increase in institutional legalization of the EAEC in recent years comes in contrast to the “soft

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26 Ndayi, Zoleka V., “Theorasing the rise of Regionness” by Bjorn Hettne and Frederic Soderbaum. Review Article, Politikon, 33, 1, (April 2006), 115
27 Vivid examples include an approximate $15 billion worth of unrecorded trade between China and Central Asian countries and an estimated 60%-70% of Tajikistan’s GDP being attributed to drug trafficking. Cooley, Alexander, Great Games, Local Rules. The New Great Power Contest in Central Asia, New York: Oxford University Press, 2012, 156
28 Nezihoglu, Halim, Fatih Mehmet Sayin, “Two Options Among Numerous Directions: Eurasianism on Moscow’s Terms or Regional Integration Between Sovereign Neighbors in Central Asia,” The Journal of International Social Research, 6, 26, (Spring 2013), 375-382
29 Fawcett, 442
30 Acharya, (2012), 12
institutionalism” of the CIS, the EAEC’s at its own earlier stages\textsuperscript{32} and the only regional grouping in Central Asia which consisted of only Central Asian states, the Central Asia Cooperation Organization (CACO).\textsuperscript{33}

Without dismissing the gaps in the institutional framework of the EAEC, certain authors are more optimistic about its prospects, institutional capacity, cooperation-enhancing ability and overall regional and global influence.\textsuperscript{34} Others agree that the EAEC has more potential than previous integration initiatives in the post-Soviet space, but question its utility to improve regional cooperation, highlighting remaining flaws in its institutional structure, fast pace of integration and inequality in decision making among participating states.\textsuperscript{35}

Libman suggests that more focused and less bureaucratic administrative structures, a weighted voting mechanism for the decision making process and an increased number of binding agreements are the factors enabling greater capacity for the EAEC.\textsuperscript{36} Arguably, the most significant integration step of the EAEC has been the creation of the Eurasian Customs Union between Russia, Kazakhstan and Belarus, which went into effect in 2010. First, the EAEC framework aims “to ensure that [international agreements between members] bind all member states through the practice of ‘block’ adaptation of agreements and their simultaneous entry into force. Second, the decisions of the Customs Union regulatory body became legally binding and effective as domestic laws of participating members.\textsuperscript{37} Third, the EAEC has established an EAEC Court designed to act as a legal dispute resolution mechanism.\textsuperscript{38}

As for the SCO, its flexible institutional structure is sometimes cited as its strength.\textsuperscript{39} Akiner suggest that “One of the most interesting features is the combination of precision and

\textsuperscript{32} Dragneva, Rilka, Kataryna Wolczuk, “Russia, the Eurasian Customs Union and the EU: Cooperation, Stagnation or Rivalry?” Chatham House, Russia and Eurasia Programme, www.chathamhouse.org, (Aug., 2012)

\textsuperscript{33} Central Asian Union (CAU) consisting of Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan was established in 1994. Tajikistan was admitted in 1998. Turkmenistan had declined to join. Organization war renamed Central Asian Economic Union (CAEU) in 1998 and Central Asian Cooperation Organization (CACO) in 2001. Initial positive moves towards joint management of resources, investment projects and military cooperation showed insignificant progress. In 2005 CACO was absorbed by the Eurasian Economic Community. CACO’s ineffectiveness is attributed to its weak structure and lack of binding force of its resolutions.

Bohr, Annette, “Regionalism in Central Asia: New Geopolitics, Old Regional Order,” International Affairs, 80, 3 (2004), 486-487


\textsuperscript{34} Wang Li Jiu, “Russia’s Eurasian Union Strategy and Its Impact on Sino-Russian Relations and SCO”, CIR, 22, 2, (2012), 86-96

\textsuperscript{35} Dragneva, Rilka, Kataryna Wolczuk, “Russia, the Eurasian Customs Union and the EU: Cooperation, Stagnation or Rivalry?” Chatham House, Russia and Eurasia Programme, www.chathamhouse.org, (Aug., 2012)


\textsuperscript{37} Kassenova, Nargis, “Kazakhstan and Eurasian Economic Integration: Quick Start, Mixed Results and Uncertain Future,” Centre Russie/Nei. Reports No14, November 2012

\textsuperscript{38} Li, Xin, “Putin’s Dream of a Eurasian Union. Background, Objectives and Possibilities,” CIR, 21, 6, (2011), 42-54

\textsuperscript{39} Aris, Stephen, Eurasian Regionalism. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011
elasticity: detailed regulations for concrete issues are set alongside sketchy, generic guidelines for matters that might arise in the future.\textsuperscript{40} The SCO charter outlines general areas of cooperation, instead of specific goals; this enables the organization to demonstrate progress when direct steps are taken by the participating members towards cooperation.\textsuperscript{41} Aris states: “To overcome a lack of codified power, the SCO presents an agenda that appeals to what its members’ leaderships perceive as their primary concerns. […] Due to its member states’ perceptions of the SCO’s agenda as relevant to their primary aims, the SCO has been able, to some degree, to embed itself into the mindsets and regional outlook of the regional elites.”\textsuperscript{42}

Furthermore, regional cooperation does not necessarily imply integration.\textsuperscript{43} Regionalism does not have to reduce the sovereignty of the participating states to enable them to cooperate effectively.\textsuperscript{44} The ‘sovereignty enhancing’ integration, which runs contradictory to the framework of ‘new regionalism’, is one of the distinct characteristics of Central Asian regional organizations.

Integration vs. Sovereignty vs. Both

In the EAEC the main rhetoric has revolved around economic integration in order to emphasize that the project does not present a threat to the sovereignty of the smaller participating states. However, despite resistance to political integration, the rhetoric of common values is present between Russia and Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Political reasons reflect Kazakhstan’s ruling elites’ desire for regime stability, which could be achieved by means of economic security as well as Russia’s support for legitimacy of the present leadership.\textsuperscript{45} Arguably, for Kazakhstan, geopolitical reasons behind Eurasian integration “underline the necessity of making a choice among great powers and defining what “civilization” Kazakhstan belongs to.”\textsuperscript{46} According to one view, the multi-vectoring policy pursued by the country in the post-independence period has outlived itself and Kazakhstan has made a choice to move towards integration under Russian leadership.\textsuperscript{47}

Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan reasons appear to be similar in nature to those of Kazakhstan, except that these two countries’ relatively undeveloped economies provide less flexibility for maneuvering. Additionally, the two states have similar geopolitical considerations, realizing

\textsuperscript{40} Akiner, Shirin, The Shanghai Cooperation Organization: A Networking Organization for a Networking World, www.globalstrategyforum.org, June 2010
\textsuperscript{42} Zhao, Huasheng, “China’s View of and Expectation from the Shanghai Cooperation Organization,” Asian Survey, 53, 3 (May / June 2013), 436-460
\textsuperscript{43} Akiner, 7
\textsuperscript{44} Akiner, 13
\textsuperscript{45} Aris (2011), 53
\textsuperscript{46} Acharya, (2012)
\textsuperscript{47} Kassenova, 14
\textsuperscript{48} Kassenova, 14
\textsuperscript{49} Ibid
Russia’s dominant security role in the region. Politically, both Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan leaderships rely on Russia for support of their regimes.  

Political considerations for cooperation are sometimes referred to as ‘protective integration’. The main aspect of protective integration “directly links the survival of the autocratic regimes in individual [post-Soviet] countries with existence and replication of the (at least imitation of) cooperation within the framework of the international institutions [such as EAEC].” First, the countries which face the threat of opposition may directly cooperate with each other; plus the international organizations can provide legitimacy to ruling regimes. The second method is more relevant to the convergence of norms, and, requires neither integration nor cooperation. “The very existence of the cooperation rhetoric can be used by the national autocrats as an argument against the opposition, and to provide legitimacy resources to the existing regimes.”

At the same time, the SCO implies a certain convergence of values, often referred to in the context of common norms and defined as “Shanghai spirit” which includes “‘mutual trust, mutual benefit, equality, consultation, respect for multi-civilizations, and striving for common development.’” However, this convergence of values does not take place through political integration. According to Zhao Huasheng, cited by Aris, “the Shanghai spirit is designed to allow states and people with different ideologies, political systems and states of mind to cooperate, rather than attempting to create a common ideology.”

Under Social Constructivism, transformation processes are driven “by the institution of sovereignty, by an evolution of cooperation, and by intentional efforts to transform egoistic identities into collective identities.” Mutual respect for sovereignty and its role in the regionalization of Central Asia is demonstrated in the discussion above. The ‘evolution of cooperation’ implies “reconstructing [states] interests in terms of shared commitments to social norms” and is consistent with the way state actors interact in Central Asia, but it does not present a strong case for social constructivism. ‘Reconstruction of social norms’ on the elite level by China or Russia in Central Asia is not evident because of a strong convergence of these norms in the first place.

**Supranational entities**

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48 Russia played a crucial role in ending the Tajik civil war and assisting current president, Emamoli Rakhmon, in ascending to power. In Kyrgyzstan, after the 2009 renewal of the Manas lease agreement between Kyrgyzstan and the US, the Russian government allegedly “mobilized its instruments of soft power in a concerted effort to weaken the Kyrgyz ruler [President Kurmanbek Bakiyev]” The subsequent anti-government demonstrations led to the collapse of Bakiyev’s regime.

Cooley, 2012, p. 128

49 Libman, 2011

50 For example through participation in election monitoring

Ibid

51 Ibid


53 Aris, (2011), 38

54 Wendt, 395

55 Wendt’s third driver of transformation process, i.e. “intentional efforts to transform egoistic identities into collective identities” is too challenging to assess at this stage considering the personalist nature of the regimes in Central Asia, and is not addressed in the context of this paper.
The remaining defining dimension of regionalism is the existence of the supranational entities. The body which is supposed to fulfill this role in the EAEC is the Eurasian Economic Commission. However, despite a more carefully designed legal framework for creating and implementing agreements, Russia still holds a dominant position in the decision making process. At initial glance the new supranational body allocates equal votes to the participating states as opposed to its predecessor the Customs Union Commission which assigned 57% of votes to Russia and 21.5% of votes to Kazakhstan and Belarus each. However, it has been suggested that the distribution of quotas for staff and the system of financing of the Commission is skewed in Russia’s favor which may allow it to have more control over the decisions.

Russia’s dominance of the EAEC highlights the unequal nature of this regional initiative and suggests that regionalism in Central Asia cannot be addressed by a purely institutional approach. Moreover, the EAEC includes only three of the five Central Asian states: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan with their degree of participation differing significantly. According to both the authors who use institutionalism approach and those whose approach is closer to Neorealism, this difference in the degree of integration may potentially contribute to the “fragmentation” of Central Asia as a region. Exclusion of other Central Asian countries (Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan) is likely to lead to the deteriorating ties between those states which are ‘in’ and those which are ‘out’.

As for the SCO, its main decision making body, the Council of Heads of State, meets once a year, and is used mainly for the heads of states to sign the agreements prepared ahead of time by the technocrats from the participating states and SCO permanent staff members. The meeting of the heads of states also “provides the SCO with tangible regional and international credibility.” The Secretariat, based in Beijing, has little decision making power and provides administration for the organizations; however, the General Secretary does represent the organization internationally.

Different levels of importance attributed to the roles of norms vs. legalization mechanisms, integration vs. sovereignty and the supranational entities suggests that the regional institutions alone do not have sufficient capacity to foster multilateral cooperation in Central Asia. Formal institutional frameworks are complemented and often superseded by common norms, accepted by the states elites. Because regional organizations are driven by the major powers Russia and China, the interests of these powers, and those of the smaller states, are essential for understanding the nature of regional cooperation in Central Asia both from the neoliberal institutionalism and from the neorealism approaches.

State’s Interests

56 Kassenova, 25
57 Ibid, “84% for Russian citizens, 10% of Kazakhstan citizens, and 6% for Belarus citizens. [...] financing of the EEC was decided as follows: Russia – 87.97%, Kazakhstan – 7.33%, and Belarus – 4.7%”
58 Kazakhstan is a member of the Customs Union. Kyrgyzstan’s and Tajikistan’s accession to the Customs Union has been under consideration for a period of time.
59 Kassenova, 2012
61 Aris (2011) 22
62 Aris, 23
63 Akiner, 13
The role of Central Asia in Sino-Russian relations ranges from acting as a “unifying element” between the two competitors, to an area for selective cooperation and selective competition, to a field of direct competition in an otherwise rather harmonious relationship between the two powers elsewhere. Consequently, although the interests of the powers involved in Central Asia are generally agreed on, the attitudes towards these interests and the policies used by Russia and China to achieve their objectives are viewed differently, ranging from common values and vast areas of cooperation to ambivalence, to competition and potential discord. The potential areas of cooperation include infrastructural development, energy access, economic cooperation (specifically trade), non-traditional security, regime stability and political strength to counter influence of other powers (particularly the US) in the vicinity.

**Infrastructure**

Infrastructure development seems to be the least controversial area of cooperation. Akiner suggests that “[…] different interests come together in the construction of a transcontinental system of trade and transport,” and that “SCO has been instrumental in laying the foundation for this project.” In the framework of the EAEC, the Eurasian Development Bank has been cited as one of the most successful organizations in the region because of its focus on financing specific infrastructural projects.

**Energy**

Cooperation in the field of energy development and access is more controversial. In consistence with Institutionalism, the energy is seen as providing substantial grounds for multilateral cooperation. Certain authors suggest that the Central Asian states prefer to deal with China in the context of the SCO rather than bilaterally. Others maintain that in most areas bilateral agreements are favored both by Central Asian states and by major powers and bilateral arrangements between regional actors have been more productive than multilateral ones. From the neorealism view, the countries’ positions on energy differ greatly and therefore energy may,

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65 Cooley, 2012


67 Akiner, 25

68 Libman (2011), 12


Zhao, Huasheng, “China’s View of and Expectation from the Shanghai Cooperation Organization,” Asian Survey, 53, 3 (May / June 2013), 436-460


71 Akiner (2010)

72 Kerr, David, “Central Asian and Russian perspective on China’s strategic emergence”, International Affairs, 86, 1, (2010), 127-152
in turn, be a potential for discord.\textsuperscript{73} The three energy producers, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan are interested in diversifying the routes for gas and oil exports. Both Russia and China are eager to gain increased access to the Central Asian energy market, but for different reasons. Russia has traditionally been the major beneficiary of Central Asian oil and gas; however the two newly built pipelines\textsuperscript{74} bypass Russia and provide alternative sale routes for Central Asian states.\textsuperscript{75} For Russia, Central Asian oil and gas serve as an export product and a significant source of revenue, while for China they constitute relatively minor components\textsuperscript{76} in China’s portfolio of energy resources. A proposed multilateral project for the creation of an ‘energy club’ in the framework of the SCO has so far remained in the discussion stage.\textsuperscript{77}

**Economic cooperation and trade**

Similarly to the twofold role of energy, there is a strong divide on the state actors’ perception and potential for economic cooperation, particularly trade. From the institutionalism perspective, free trade should be beneficial to all parties involved, and Russia, China and the Central Asian states have many motives and much potential for cooperation in the economic sphere.\textsuperscript{78} However, in the framework of the SCO the “potentially divisive issue of free economic trade has been sidelined”\textsuperscript{79} and Russia has played critical role in preventing a free trade agreement which would include China in Central Asia.\textsuperscript{80} Elimination of trade barriers is impeded by regional apprehension of China’s unprecedented growth and it increasing economic reach in the region. Having become the major partner, or at least one of the key trading partners of each of the Central Asian state,\textsuperscript{81} China is the largest trading partner with the whole region.\textsuperscript{82} Hence, China’s role is being viewed with increased suspicion of different range. Naarajarvi suggests that while China is eager to develop economic dimension of the SCO, Central Asian states are reluctant to do so, and Russia actually prevents such developments.\textsuperscript{83} According to Cooley, “Moscow is particularly hesitant to support any broad SCO economic initiative, while the Central Asian states are also nervous that their economies will be overrun by Chinese plans for more trade, greater investment, and even the possible internationalization of the renminbi.”\textsuperscript{84} Kerr suggests that “the Central Asian reluctance to merge economic space with China is grounded in economic

\textsuperscript{73} Marketos, Thrassy N., China’s Energy Geopolitics. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization and Central Asia, London: Routledge, 2009
\textsuperscript{74} The Central Asia-China Gas pipelines running from Turkmenistan, through Kazakhstan to China and Atyrau-Alashankou oil pipeline from western Kazakhstan to China.
\textsuperscript{75} Cooley, (2012), 94
\textsuperscript{76} Cabestan, Jean-Pierre in Laruelle, Marlene, Jean-Francois Hutchet, Sebastien Peyrose and Bayram Balci (Eds.), China and India in Central Asia. A New “Great Game”? New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, p. 38
\textsuperscript{77} Akiner, 15
\textsuperscript{78} Guang, Pan (2009), Zhao, Huasheng (2013), Li Xin (2011)
\textsuperscript{79} Aris, Stephen, Eurasian Regionalism. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, p. 86
\textsuperscript{80} Facon, Isabelle, “Moscow’s Global Foreign and Security Strategy. Does the Shanghai Cooperation Organization Meet Russian Interests?” Asian Survey, 53, 3 (May / June 2013), 472
\textsuperscript{81} Peyrose, Sebastien in Laruelle, Marlene, Jean-Francois Hutchet, Sebastien Peyrose and Bayram Balci (Eds.), China and India in Central Asia. A New “Great Game”? New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, p. 156
\textsuperscript{82} Cooley (2012), 86
\textsuperscript{83} Naarajarvi, Teemu, “China, Russia and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization: Blessing or Curse for New Regionalism in Central Asia?” Asia Europe Journal, 10, (2012), 115
\textsuperscript{84} Cooley, (2012), 166
and sovereign interest – but also in awareness than the [EAEC] may be a more promising mechanism.”

While the EAEC is intended to facilitate trade and aims to eventually create common economic space, it does not include China. A number of authors have an optimistic outlook for economic cooperation, or even partnership between SCO and EAEC. However, their predictions are based on a positive rhetoric on China-Russia relations rather than any substantial economic forecasts. Others suggest “that [EAEC] has helped Russia limit the extent of China’s economic penetration of Central Asian countries through the SCO.” Since deeper integration initiatives of the EAEC are relatively young, it is challenging to evaluate its long-term effects of regional cooperation and on the economic position of China in Central Asia. However, the development of the EAEC indicates that despite China’s superior economic might, Central Asian states prefer Russia-driven economic cooperation, which has potential for greater regionalization. This, in turn, may imply that despite dominant economic power, Chine faces challenge in facilitating regionalization of Central Asia.

It may be argued that that deeper integration with Russia as opposed to China still makes the case for Neoliberal Institutionalism because cooperation under Russia’s initiative happens to be a better option for Central Asian states, particularly under stronger legal institutional background. However, the results of economic integration in the framework of the EAEC are not definite. In the case of Kazakhstan, the size of the EAEC Customs Union market with its 170 million people compared to Kazakhstan’s 16 million, is supposed to attract investors, considering Kazakhstan’s more favorable investment climate compared to Russia and Belarus. However, as of 2012 a detailed study by Kassenova states that “the range of opinions regarding the gains, losses and implications of Kazakhstan’s participation in the [Customs Union] remains broad and polarized.” For the aspiring members on the Customs Union the results of increased integration are twofold. On the one hand, deeper regional integration is supposed to benefit hundreds of thousands of Kyrgyz and Tajik migrant laborers working in Russia and in Kazakhstan. On the other hand, joining the Customs Union would reduce the benefits Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan derive from trade with China and Chinese infrastructural projects. Kyrgyzstan, especially, is likely to suffer the loss of revenues from re-exporting Chinese goods to other Central Asian countries.

According to neo-liberal institutionalism view, economic interest, particularly trade, is supposed to provide the most plausible point for cooperation. Arguably the subjectivity of economic interests among Central Asian states suggests that their political and geopolitical considerations may be playing a more significant role in their participation in Russia-driven initiative. Consequently, divergence or inconsistency of economic interests highlights the weakness of neoliberal institutionalism approach for explaining regional cooperation in Central Asia. Moreover, it points to unequal abilities of Russia and China to foster multilateral cooperation through economic engagement, particularly China’s weakness in doing it.

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85 Kerr, 147  
87 Facon, 472  
88 Kassenova, Nargis, “Kazakhstan and Eurasian Economic Integration: Quick Start, Mixed Results and Uncertain Future,” Centre Russie/Nei.Reports No 14, November 2012, 12  
89 Kassenova, 18  
90 Muzalevsky, Roman, “Customs Union Doubts Remain,” Asia Times Online, August 3, 2011; Keene, Eli, “Kyrgyzstan and the Customs Union,” carnegieendowment.org, May 1, 2012
Security

The perception of non-traditional security threats, particularly terrorism, is generally seen as a solid ground for cooperation between Russia, China and Central Asian countries. China is concerned with stability in its western region of Xinjiang, which borders three of the Central Asian states. The Chinese government has generally been wary of nationalistic activities among ethnic Uyghur residing in Central Asia. Russia, which has security concerns in Northern Caucasus, is sympathetic and supportive of China’s call to tackle “terrorism, extremism and separatism”. Additionally, drug trafficking through Central Asia from Afghanistan is seen as a serious issue. The EAEC, being a largely economic organization does not relate to this common interest. The views on the security dimension of the SCO are diverging. A number of authors suggest the SCO, from its nascent stage, has been functional forum for cooperation on the issues of non-traditional security. Others argue that the SCO is incapable of fulfilling the function of “policing” the region and multilateral exercises under its auspices fail to demonstrate the organization’s security agenda clearly. Different styles of exercises could be interpreted as anti-terrorism operations, demonstration of power or practice of quelling anti-regime uprisings. Moreover, because of its non-interference rhetoric, the SCO’s ability to get involved in the internal conflicts of its members is firmly constrained. Arguably, the SCO’s security dimension’s most important achievement is that it acts as a base for enhancing cooperation in other areas through the so called “spill over” effect.

While the “spill over” effect is a commonly expected result of nascent regional cooperation, the order of the events was unusual in the case of the SCO. Wang Jianwei suggests that, “the evolution of SCO turned functionalism upside down. [...] It was the function of highly successful cooperation in security areas that eventually spilled-over to other, non-security areas, such as foreign-policy coordination, economic cooperation, and cultural exchanges.” The reverse direction of the “spillover” may partially explain why bottom-up regional exchanges cannot keep up with the pace of institutional developments in Central Asia. Security, which according to the neo-liberal institutionalism view is the most challenging field for cooperation, provides less controversial ground for the Central Asian actors to work together. This demonstrates another weakness in neo-liberal institutionalism’s explanatory power for Central Asian regionalism. Cooley offers an explanation to this phenomenon from the neorealist perspective.

Common defense or security policies are viewed as the most difficult and final stages in the integration sequence. The Central Asian region follows a quite different pattern: rulers have proven willing to support regional security initiatives that guard their regimes from transnational threats and political opposition, but have proven reluctant to take

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92 Cabestan, Jean-Pierre in Laruelle, Marlene, Jean-Francois Hutchet, Sebastien Peyrose and Bayram Balci (Eds.), China and India in Central Asia. A New “Great Game”? New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, p. 38
94 Kerr, 148
95 Wang, 106
96 Keohane (2005)
greater steps to institutionalize the movement of goods, capital, and people that might undermine their control over resources and private revenue streams.\textsuperscript{97}

This view is consistent with a theoretical approach within neorealism which is termed “omnibalancing”. The concept of omnibalancing was put forward by Steven David\textsuperscript{98} with the aim to explain the balancing behavior in the “Third World”. The “Third World” is not the most politically-correct term, but the approach can be useful for explaining the behavior of Central Asian states from the neorealism perspective. While the definitions of the “Third World” used by David in 1991 are outdated \textsuperscript{99} most of the attributes of the countries included in his analysis match the characteristics of the Central Asian states.

First, as ex-colonies, a great majority of the Third World states were artificially constructed and this “artificiality […] has created a situation in which groups owe allegiance to and act for interests other than national interest. Instead of identifying with the state, individuals identify with ethnic, religious, or regional grouping [which prevents] the formation of a national consciousness.”\textsuperscript{100} Second, “legitimacy is likely to be weaker for the Third World leaders than for leaders elsewhere. […] Because they lack legitimacy, they face continual threats to their rule.”\textsuperscript{101} Third, “the state in the Third World is distinctive in that it controls a much greater degree of wealth and power than any other group in the society.”\textsuperscript{102} Forth, “Third World states have authoritarian governments. […] Public opinion often carries little influence, and institutional structures play only a minor role in foreign policy.”\textsuperscript{103} Fifth, in many Third World states, culture dictates that power is concentrated in the hands of one man.\textsuperscript{104} Sixth, “The Third World is […] characterized by an interrelationship between foreign and domestic factors in creating and suppressing threats. Internal threats against leaders often have outside support.”\textsuperscript{105} Finally, Third World states tend to identify themselves as such and “act in at least some ways in terms of their self-identification.”\textsuperscript{106} Overall, the attributes of Central Asian states match most of these characteristics.\textsuperscript{107} These features, in turn, explain high frequency of internal threats faced by these states’ leaders and their motivations to seek help elsewhere. According to David, “the most powerful determinant of Third World alignment behavior is the rational calculation of Third World leaders as to which outside power is most likely to do what is necessary to keep them in power.”\textsuperscript{108} Under omnibalancing, “the leaders of the states will appease secondary adversaries to focus their resources on primary adversaries” which will often include domestic actors.\textsuperscript{109} Omnibalancing offers an insight into behaviors of Central Asian states and, more

\textsuperscript{97} Cooley, (2012), 161  
\textsuperscript{99} David uses UN categorization of the Third World, which includes “all countries except the United States, the Soviet Union, Canada, Japan, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, the European States and the People’s Republic of China.” p. 11  
\textsuperscript{100} David, 12  
\textsuperscript{101} Ibid  
\textsuperscript{102} Ibid, 13  
\textsuperscript{103} Ibid  
\textsuperscript{104} Ibid  
\textsuperscript{105} Ibid, 14  
\textsuperscript{106} Ibid, 15  
\textsuperscript{107} In-depth analysis can be performed to support this claim  
\textsuperscript{108} David, 6  
\textsuperscript{109} Ibid
importantly, contributes to the understanding of the decision-making process among Central Asia leaders.¹¹⁰

Omnibalancing falls in-line with the in-depth study of the region in Alexander Cooley’s “Great Game, Local Rules”¹¹¹, which views Central Asian states not as passive subjects of major power rivalry in the region, but as capable agents that act in their own interests. According to Cooley, “three important rules have come to characterize Central Asian regimes: the promotion of regime survival; the use of state resources for private gain; and the brokering between external actors and local constituencies.”¹¹² Hence, Central Asian states and internal factors are as important as major powers for understanding international relations and regionalism in Central Asia.

**Preservation of ruling regimes**

Preservation of ruling regimes is a common interest of Russia, China and Central Asian states. There is general consensus about the mutually beneficial nature of this interest, despite the fact that it has been termed differently. On one end of the spectrum is the rhetoric of the autocratic regimes which use regional institutions to protect their interests.¹¹³ On the other end is the emphasis on political cooperation necessary to avoid the destabilizing threat of “colored revolutions” and to limit outside powers’ engagement in the region.¹¹⁴ Regardless of the terminology, sustaining regime stability appears to provide concrete ground for cooperation between the states in the region. However, regime preservation may contradict one of the most important regional norms – sovereignty. As a result of strong position on non-interference into internal affairs, the regime preservation rhetoric becomes just that – the rhetoric. Moreover, preservation of local regimes does not fit well into the neoliberal institutionalism concept of the convergence of interests as a basis for institutional cooperation. Instead, it provides a better case for Neorealism. Balancing behavior of Central Asian states against internal (opposition) and external (“the West”) threats fits well with the omnibalancing framework discussed above. The perception of the West as a threat can also be discussed in the context of another interest of the regional actors, i.e. their attitude towards the USA engagement in Central Asia.

**Attitude towards the USA**

There is little agreement among the authors concerning the regional actors attitude towards the American involvement in the region other than these attitudes are inconsistent. Uzbekistan has gone from cooperation with the US to discord, culminating in eviction of US troops from K2 base, to rapprochement and logistical support for the Northern Distribution

¹¹⁰ To test the utility of omnibalancing in Central Asia, would require further research, but the number of cases should be readily available. On the one hand, examples of alignment to serve the survival of the regimes would include Tajikistan’s reliance on Russia’s military to guarantee security after the civil war, Uzbekistan’s president’s Karimov rapprochement with Russia and China after Andijan unrest and violent reprisals in 2005, and Kazakhstan’s president increased reliance on political support from Russia after government crackdown and major disturbance in western Kazakhstan in 2011. On the other hand, Kyrgyzstan, which saw two violent regime changes in its post-independence history, may demonstrate, by contradiction, the necessity of alignment to guarantee regimes survival.


¹¹² Cooley (2012), 16


¹¹⁴ Guang, Pan (2009), Zhao, Huasheng (2013)
Network and resumed talks for hosting American facilities. Kazakhstan has been pursuing its multi-vector policy refraining from any confrontations with the United States. Kyrgyzstan has had a long-lasting patchy relationship with the US revolving around the base at Manas. Although, both Russia and China are wary of the NATO troops’ presence in their neighborhood, neither is ready to take full responsibility for the security in the wider region. While Russia is periodically the most vocal critic of the US engagement in the region, “China and other SCO members have not necessarily been willing to fully endorse Russia’s confrontational attitude toward the West.”

Kerr quotes a Russian author stating that “SCO does not intend to oppose the US globally or regionally, but it also does not want to have any relations with Washington, so that it operates not against America, but without it.”

Rumer points out that despite its non-confrontational nature, “SCO influence in Central Asia is considerable, and its biggest members – China and Russia – have the ability to undercut American initiatives there.” However, ambivalence towards American presence is seen as one of the main reasons why the SCO, despite its strong voice for multipolar international order, has refrained from framing itself as an instrument for balancing against the United States. If Russia and China perceive American influence as a threat, the participation in regional organizations may be viewed as alignment decisions aimed to increase their relative positions in the international system, consistent with Stephen Walt’s theory of alliances. The two can choose to either balance or bandwagon. “Balancing is alignment with the weaker side, bandwagoning with the stronger.”

However, aside from seldom political statements, Russia and China have made much effort to distance the SCO from its image as an anti-Western (or anti-US) alliance. In addition to “not-anti-western” rhetoric, the SCO has rejected Iranian membership in a move aimed to avoid complications in the relationships with the United States. As for the Russia-led EAEC, its aspirations for becoming a global player, and hence developing the capacity to counter the US influence in the region, are still at the very early stages to assign definite geopolitical role to it. Finally, neither Russia, nor China showed any visible signs of aligning with the US to balance each other.

The number of major powers (China, Russia and the USA) involved, and the complexity of the relationships among them, makes it challenging to clearly define the direction of balancing of the major actors and even more challenging to assess balancing behavior through the lens of alliances. According to Wohlforth, the balance of power theory does not work well to explain the dynamics in Central Asia.

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115 Facon, 482
116 Kerr, 148
119 Walt, 17
120 Walt, 21
121 In 2005 the SCO issued a resolution requesting the US to provide a timeline for final withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan and provided political support for Uzbekistan to counter Western calls for inquiries into the Andijan events.
122 Facon, 475, 479
123 Facon, 479
Ultimately, balance of power theory faces major problems when it is applied to restricted domains. [...] If the theory is specified such that it only deals with hegemonic threats [...], then it yields precise predictions only in the rare cases when hegemony is sufficiently probable that it overthrows other security (and non-security) concerns. For all the states in central Eurasia, either hegemony is not nearly the most important problem in the near to medium term, or, if it is, there is nothing materially that they can do about it.\textsuperscript{125}

The neo-realist approach, which may provide utility for understanding relations between Central Asian states and the major powers, is Buzan and Weaver’s Regional Security Complex (RSC) Theory.\textsuperscript{126} The theory suggests that interstate interactions are best understood in the regional, rather than global context, because security issues are generally contained within regions, even if they involve global powers.\textsuperscript{127} Thus, the international system is viewed as divided into distinct regional security complexes. Although RSC theory emphasizes military-political security dynamics, its strength lies in underlining specific characteristic of each region. According to the authors’ framework, Central Asia has been viewed as a sub-complex of post-Soviet RSC.\textsuperscript{128} Identifying it as a distinct RSC rather than a sub-complex of the post-Soviet RSC,\textsuperscript{129} would offer room for useful insights into the regional dynamics. However, while Russia can be clearly positioned as part of the Central Asian RSC, allocating a clear role for China in the same complex would be challenging.

Generally speaking, states’ interests only partially explain regionalization dynamics in Central Asia. Additionally, the above analysis demonstrates that the interests viewed by Neoliberal Institutionalism as more plausible to facilitate cooperation, such as energy and trade, do not seem to enhance regional cooperation in Central Asia. At the same time, the interests, such as security, regime survival and perception of common adversary, which fit better into the neorealism framework, tend to provide more substantial ground for institutional cooperation. The state-centric nature of these interests defines the nature of regional cooperation, which more commonly takes place on the elite or state level rather than between non-state actors in Central Asia. While the type regionalism in Central Asia can be evaluated through the interests of the regional state actors, the slow and bumpy regionalization process can be explained by a number of the constraints to regional cooperation.

Constraints to regionalism
The weakness of the regionalization process in Central Asia is generally attributed to either internal constrains, or major powers’ engagement (i.e. external constraints) or a combination of both. The internal constraints address the impediments to bottom up regional cooperation and explain lack of homegrown regional structures. The external constraints tend to partially explain the lack of local regional structures as well, but they also address the weaknesses of the existing regional organizations, the EAEC and the SCO.

\textsuperscript{125} Wohlforth, 235
\textsuperscript{127} Ibid, 40-89
\textsuperscript{128} Ibid, 423
\textsuperscript{129} Ibid, 423
**Internal constraints**

Arguably, the failure to foster regionalism in Central Asia follows a pattern similar to that of post-colonial states in other parts of the world. The reluctance of underdeveloped countries to invest in shared projects, wariness of each other’s intentions, continuous reforms in many sectors, preoccupation with sovereignty and opening links with the broader world partially account for the slow or stagnant regionalization process in Central Asia. Additionally, according to Bohr, the constraints include Uzbekistan’s regional hegemonic ambitions which are perceived as a threat by other states; the Central Asian countries’ focus on nation building while disregarding sizeable minorities; the non-complementary nature of the economies leading to protectionism policies; and the nature of regional politics “defined by interactions between highly personalist regimes and individual leaders, rather than between states or societies.” While the two sets of constraints include largely material factors, they also contain ideational factors, such as ‘perception’ of threat and attitudes of the regional leaders. This suggests that along with the Neorealism, the Social Constructivism may be useful for understanding internal constrains to regional cooperation. However, under the neorealism approach the ideational side of the constraints related to Central Asian leadership can be largely dismissed. According to Cooley, Central Asian rulers’ perception of integration and of each other matters less than the benefits they actually derive from the status quo. He argues that regional elites benefit both from closed and monopolized sectors of their respective economies and from trade barriers, under which borders act as “tollbooths” to collect revenues for those in power. Visibly, constrains emanating from Central Asia have strong impact on the slow nature of regionalization; however, major powers tend to play their role in impeding the process.

**External constrains – major powers’ effects on regional cooperation**

From the neoliberal institutionalism point of view, global or regional powers have the capacity to influence regional cooperation. From the neorealism point of view, if major powers do facilitate stronger bonds between the states, they do so in order to maximize their power in the international system. According to Allison, disparate agendas and consequently different outcomes of the major powers competing for influence in Central Asia have a negative impact on the regionalization process. There are three main positions on the constraints caused by the major powers. The first one involves lack of American engagement in Central Asia. The second one deals with Russia’s traditional role in its near-abroad. The third view suggests that Sino-Russian competition holds back regionalization of Central Asia.

**Lack of American hegemonic influence,**

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130 Starr, Frederick S., “In Defense of Greater Central Asia,” Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program, September 2008, 10
131 Although most of the Central Asian states are rather underdeveloped, Kazakhstan is often considered a “middle income” country.
132 Starr, 8-10
133 Bohr, Annette, “Regionalism in Central Asia: New Geopolitics, Old Regional Order,” International Affairs, 80, 3 (2004), 493-498
134 Cooley (2012), 153
135 Cooley (2012), 154-155
136 Allison, 481
According to Neoliberal Institutionalism, cooperation is most commonly achieved through hegemonic influence and is difficult to be attained without it. At the same time, American presence in Central Asia is insignificant and despite its commitment in Afghanistan, the United States has not demonstrated strong interest in Central Asia the way it has done so in other parts of the world. In Central Asia the US has put more focus on achieving its interests (e.g. use of military bases and development of energy resources) rather than promoting its values (e.g. democracy and human rights). Neil Macfarlane suggests that the U.S. does not seek to strengthen regional structures in Central Asia, although it has the ability to do so. According to MacFarlane, “hegemonic power may produce cooperation as the dominant state seeks to design regional structure that institutionalize its dominance and as other regional states seek to avoid the cost of non-compliance.” Although US officials stress the need for regional cooperation on issues of [infrastructure], the bilateral emphasis of American assistance provides few incentives for states to move towards regional cooperation.” Contradictory impulses in US policy towards Central Asia and preference for bilateral relationships in the region have the same type of effect on the regionalism in Central Asia as the internal factors, i.e. “weak development of regional structures.”

This argument is built on the assumption that the US has the ability to foster regionalism in Central Asia. The position that presence of hegemony is essential to build functional regional structures has been disputed by a number of authors. Moreover, allocating the United States the capacity to play a dominant role in Central Asia minimalizes the role of the major powers adjacent to Central Asia.

Russia’s traditional and new role

Russia’s constraining role in Central Asian regionalism is twofold. On the one hand Russia would play central role in any grouping, thus creating an unequal relationship between the states. Additionally, there is an understanding in Central Asia that Russia would not welcome the development of any regional organization of which it is not a part. On the other hand, Russia is seen to be constraining regionalization by giving preference to the EAEC over other regional structures.

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137 Keohane, 243
140 MacFarlane, Neil S., “The United States and Regionalism in Central Asia,” International Affairs, 80, 3 (2004), pp. 447-461
141 MacFarlene, 448
142 MacFarlene, 455
143 MacFarlene, 449
145 Allison, Roy, “Regionalism, Regional Structures and Security Management in Central Asia,” International Affairs, 80, 3 (2004), 463-483
This position is consistent with the neorealism concept that states aim to maximize their power in the international system. Shumylo-Tapiola suggests that in Russia’s view the Eurasian Union [EAEC] may become a significant global player and “Moscow projects its own way of doing business onto the European model, thinking that a country can only be seen as equal to the EU if it controls its own ‘neighborhood’”. Additionally, Russia is concerned with China’s growing economic influence in Eurasia, and, in that context, the EAEC is seen as a “counterweight” to China and a protective “buffer of friendly countries” at the same time. The weight of geopolitical considerations may be seen as a guaranteed driving force for Russia’s interest in Central Asian regional cooperation. The importance of the EAEC for Russia is even more noticeable considering difficulties it has faced with integration attempts in the former Soviet space. However, if Russia is a driving force of regional cooperation, splitting the region into those who are “members of the club” and those who are not, would have adverse effect on regionalization of Central Asia as a whole. Russia’s closer ties with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan take place amid increasing distancing from Turkmenistan and, more importantly, Uzbekistan with whom Russia’s relations in the post-independence period have been relatively unstable.

Cooley and Laruelle argue that Russia’s recent foreign policy has shifted from one that emphasized regional mediation and maximizing influence across the whole region to a more focused logic of hierarchy that seeks to support selected states with more focused instruments, take sides in regional disputes, and push for deeper integration within regional security and economic organizations that have narrower membership. Cooley and Laurelle suggest three potential outcomes of this recent trend in Russia’s foreign policy. First, “it has the potential to alter the “multivector” equilibrium that has characterized foreign policy orientation of all the Central Asian states over the last decade.” Additionally, Russia’s closer ties with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan may increase economic rivalry between Russia and China, which in the recent past revolved mainly around commercial competition for energy resources. Finally, Russia’s new direction may contribute to the regional security dilemma between Uzbekistan and its neighbors. The last potential consequence may serve a serious blow to Central Asian regionness. It is difficult to conceive a functional Central Asian regionalization initiative without Uzbekistan.

China’s and Russia’s attitudes within the SCO

There is a view voiced by the authors of both neorealist and neoliberal institutionalism camps that although Russia and China are the two driving forces of SCO, the giants actually

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147 Shumylo-Tapiola, Olga, “The Eurasian Customs Union: Friend or Foe of the EU?” www.carnegieeurope.eu, 4
148 Ibid
149 Aside from Belarus and Armenia, the three Central Asian EAEC members are the only countries where Russia’s influence remains strong and where attitudes towards the large neighbor are rather benign
151 Ibid, 5
152 Ibid, 6
153 Ibid
154 Uzbekistan borders all the other Central Asian countries, contains half of the region’s population and has the largest military force among the five; moreover Uzbeks constitute sizable minorities in each of the other Central Asian states
impede regionalization of Central Asia. In that context, according to Kaukenov, there are two levels of systematic contradictions within the SCO: rivalry between Central Asian states and competition between Russia and China. First, regional rivalry, the lack of stability and more notably, “anti-Chinese moods” in most of Central Asia make the “Shanghai spirit of trust […] not acceptable in practice.” Second, according to Kaukenov, Central Asia serves as a field for competition between Russia and China in contrast to their general agreement on most of the major international issues. One of the reasons for this competition is that both Russia and China have been seeing relationship with the US as more important than with each other. The other reason is Russia’s reluctance to promote the SCO’s rapid development. On Russia’s list of Central Asian regional priorities, the SCO appears to be below the EAEC and arguably less important than numerous bilateral relations with Central Asian states. Naarajarvi suggests that although “the SCO helps in making the Central Asian republics see themselves as subjects instead of objects”; […] it is “[…] because of China and Russia, the more Central Asian regionalism is seen through the prism of SCO, the less regionalized it is.”

Furthermore, there exists a view that SCO’s failures are not being scrutinized by the member states as seriously as they would be in other regional organizations because these failures would not necessarily interfere with China’s and Russia’s ambitions for growth. Both Russia and China have other directions for development and “small drawbacks in regional cooperation in Central Asia can be acceptable.” At the same time, according to Naarajarvi, “for the Chinese, the idea of the SCO is more important than the actions of it: it is mainly Chinese-led, security-focused international organization with an emphasis on state sovereignty and territorial integrity”

Moreover, since “the regionalization of Central Asia seems to be tightly in the hands of the state administrations,” ‘grassroots’ regionalization may not be one of the SCO’s members’ goals. The SCO’s rhetoric of common values, termed as socialization, should be viewed skeptically. First, the main point of cultural connection between China and Central Asia is Xingjian, with is large population of Turkic people, mainly Uighur and Kazakhs, who are ethnically, linguistically and culturally close to Central Asian Turkic peoples. However, China’s policy in Xinjiang, which revolves around populating the region with Han Chinese and

156 Kaukenov, Adil, “Internal Contradictions of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization,” CAA&CC Press AB (no pagination)
157 Kaukenov points out political competition between Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, animosity between Uzbekistan and its smaller neighbors (Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan), competition for natural resources (particularly water) and lack of power transfer mechanisms throughout the region.
158 Ibid, (no pagination on the e-copy)
159 Ibid
160 Ibid
161 Ibid
162 Naarajarvi, 116
163 Naarajarvi, 124
164 Naarajarvi, 119
165 Naarajarvi, 115
166 Naarajarvi, 122
preventing transnational contacts between Uighur, runs counterproductive to bottom-up regionalization between China and Central Asian states.\(^{168}\)

On a state level, as argued by social constructivism authors, the SCO’s position reflects “Beijing’s foreign policy belief that institutional identities intimate socializing processes that affects the norms and behavior of participating countries.”\(^ {169}\) However, common principles and norms of behavior may be the only cohesive set of values between China, Russia and Central Asia. The SCO’s “multi-civilizational” rhetoric uncovers that the differences between the cultural and social values of China and those of the former Soviet states are so wide that it would be close to impossible to build a narrative of a common past or a shared destiny. Moreover, the civilization rhetoric could be applied in a similar way to many other regional cooperation initiatives around the world. The same pertains to the “Shanghai Spirit”, i.e. “’mutual trust, mutual benefit, equality, consultation, respect for multi-civilizations, and striving for common development.’”\(^ {170}\) It is difficult to conceive of any rational agent, state or otherwise, which would argue against ’mutual trust, mutual benefit, equality, consultation, respect for multi-civilizations, and striving for common development.’”

**Conclusion**

The set of external and internal constrains discussed above, along with the preceding discussions on the nature of Central Asian regional organizations and the interests of the regional state actors, suggests that Neoliberal Institutionalism has a number of weaknesses in explaining the nature of regional cooperation in Central Asia. Arguably, material factors and, to a lesser extent, social norms play a more important role in regional cooperation in Central Asia than legalized institutional frameworks. Hence, a combination of neorealism and social constructivism approaches may provide better framework for understanding the nature of regionalism in Central Asia.

The involvements of Russia and China are crucial in the regionalization of Central Asia. However, there are visible adverse effects of the two powers’ engagement in the region. While regional structures are unlikely to develop without Russia’s participation, Russia-driven integration initiatives through the EAEC are likely to have negative effect on regionalism in the whole of Central Asia. Exploring the specific nature of this effect opens up a potential area for further research.

China’s economic power has not been sufficient to foster strong regional cooperation in Central Asia. One possible answer includes geopolitical and political considerations of Central Asian leaderships, which drive the states closer to Russia. Another answer lies in the weakness of China’s civilizational rhetoric, suggesting that China lacks the ability to promote its norms and values in the region. China’s challenge in promoting economic-based multilateral cooperation in Central Asia questions the utility of economic power in promoting regionalism.

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\(^{168}\) Naarajarvi


\(^{170}\) Kavalski (2012), 117
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