

Central Asia: Fractured Region, Illiberal Regionalism

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Introduction

Central Asia is a region that lacks meaningful regional institutions, has a weak regional identity, and is beset by a complex litany of political, economic, and social divisions, both within and between states. Tensions among Central Asian states over borders, resources, and security, combined with deep political and social cleavages within states and geopolitical competition across the wider region all support a view of Central Asia as a prime example of the concept of regional fracture. However, while acknowledging the significance of these underlying fractures, in this chapter I suggest a more complex, multilevel reading of regional interactions in which a focus on the role of shared ideas, norms, and beliefs provides a framework for some limited regional cooperation within a common discourse that is sharply at odds with the liberal norms that underpin most Western theories of regionalism. The result is a form of “illiberal regionalism,” which does not offer a resolution of fundamental fractures within and between societies but often provides an effective means to suppress their political articulation.

Central Asia: A Fractured Region

Academic and policy analysis of the Central Asian region has long stressed its potential instability and its fundamentally fractured nature (Lewis 2008; Cummings 2012; Cooley 2012), so much so that critics have warned against framing the region solely through “discourses of danger,” external narratives that exaggerate security threats and characterize the region as dominated by Islamist militancy, organized crime, and terrorism (Heathershaw and Megoran 2011). Nevertheless, the region clearly faces severe political and social tensions, including interstate conflicts over resources, water, and borders; intrastate clashes between authoritarian states and restive societies; Islamist movements challenging secular states; and geopolitical tensions between Russia, China, and the West. Against this backdrop, studies of regionalism in Central Asia have tended to answer the ontological question of “what we study when we study regionalism” (Hettne 2005, 543) by highlighting the failures of regional projects and the underlying divisions among states, often dismissing regional organizations as “virtual” or ineffective (Allison 2008; Collins 2012). Studies of Central

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Asian regionalism have stressed the failure of Central Asian states to develop their own regional organizations and have highlighted the continuing role of extra-regional powers in determining the region's politics and security (Allison 2004; Bohr 2004; Collins 2009; Cooley 2012). Instead of regionalization—"an active process of change towards increased cooperation, integration, convergence, coherence and identity" (Allison 2004, 465)—Central Asian societies became increasingly estranged from each other while their political leaderships united only for brief political summits under the hegemonic tutelage of Russia or China. Although external powers frequently initiated new regional initiatives, they were often ineffective or reinforced the very fractures they were intended to overcome. The result of this breakdown in regional cooperation has been repeatedly identified as imposing heavy social and economic costs on the region (Collins 2009).

The conventional portrayal of Central Asia as a fractured region begins with definitions. Constructivist approaches to the regionalism debate have argued that regions are not predefined entities with clear boundaries but are constructed and deconstructed through discourse, social and economic interaction, and political practice (Hettne 2005; Söderbaum and Shaw 2003; Emerson 2014; Godement 2014; Hettne and Söderbaum 2000; Söderbaum 2016). Regions are made and unmade through discursive mechanisms and political practices. Guy Emerson (2014, 560) argues that "the multiple discourses of regionalism, regional identity and the process of region building itself, are constantly being re-defined, with its boundaries and identifying structures the products of continual struggle and therefore reappraisal." Earlier constructivist thought tended to view this process of "imagining" the region as a move that might help to transcend the nation-state and contribute to the development of new, regional identities (Adler 1997), but in many postcolonial contexts it is historical experience and common memory that underlies the idea of the region, rather than any common hope for future regional integration. This is certainly the case in Central Asia, where the identification of Central Asia as a region—and therefore a space that is thought by policymakers to require institutionalized cross-boundary cooperation in a form of regional integration—stems above all from a common historical experience and a process of colonial demarcation.

Although the term "Central Asia" is now commonly used in English to portray the five post-Soviet states of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, there are many

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alternative ways to label these territories as a regional entity. Definitions that highlight ethnic and cultural distinctions from the two major civilizations to the north and the east—Russia and China—may include Xinjiang, parts of southern Siberia inhabited by Turkic peoples, Mongolia, and Tibet, in a world sometimes termed “Inner Asia.” Soviet-era definitions, on the other hand, used the term “Srednaya aziya” (Middle Asia) to cover only the Tajik, Uzbek, Kyrgyz, and Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republics, but excluded the Kazakh SSR, reflecting a different colonial history and asserting a closer relationship between Kazakhstan and Russia than with the other Central Asian republics. Since 1991 the term “Eurasia” has been widely used in Russia and Kazakhstan to define a more ambiguous region, sometimes encompassing not only Russia and Central Asia but also other former Soviet republics (Laruelle 2008; Gleason 2010). A more expansive notion of “Greater Eurasia” developed by some Russian intellectuals covers much of the continent, including China, Russia, India, Central Asia, and Iran, and has a clear geopolitical agenda to construct a counterbalance to US power (Karaganov 2016). By contrast, another geopolitical construct, the idea of “Greater Central Asia” sought to disconnect Central Asia from Russia and instead reconnect it to Xinjiang, Mongolia, and Afghanistan in alignment with broader US strategy in the region (Starr 2005).

These diverse geographic labels highlight the extent to which social constructedness of regions always emerges from a particular interpretation of history. The current conventional definition of Central Asia derives from frontiers drawn during the period of expansion by imperial powers into the region in the nineteenth and twentieth century. The legacies of imperial history are evident in the most significant geopolitical line of fracture across the region, the frontier of Afghanistan along the Amu Darya river, the faultline introduced in the nineteenth century by Russia and Britain, which carved out Afghanistan as a buffer state between the two expanding Asian empires. Russia’s rapid nineteenth-century expansion across Central Asia determined the political content and the boundaries of the region to both south and east for the next 150 years. China’s influence in Inner Asia diminished sharply after 1911 but was reasserted in Xinjiang, Tibet, and Inner Mongolia after 1949 (Siegel 2002; Forbes 1986; Frankopan 2015). Soviet border policy, compounded by Sino-Soviet tensions after the 1960s, further hardened these borders and divided the region from historic trade routes and cultural ties to the rest of Asia. Imperialism defined the boundaries of

the present-day region but also informed the metaphor of the “Great Game,” the Russo-British struggle for influence in the region, which continues to be used as a discursive frame to assert the fractured nature of international relations in the region (Morgan 1973; Becker 2012; Yapp 2001).

A second historical fracture within the region stems from the Soviet process of national territorial delimitation, the creation of the titular Soviet republics that form the basis of today’s five nation-states: Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. Based on Soviet thinking about nationality—defined as a coherent ethnic group with its own territory—Soviet ethnographers and officials divided the region known in the late Tsarist period as Turkestan, which was populated by a very heterogeneous population in terms of ethnicity, language, way of life, and identity, into new territorial formations defined on the basis of a dominant titular nationality. The Soviet state prioritized national identities for a population that had largely self-identified through other categories, whether religious, tribal, nomadic, or settled, rather than the nationality categories to which they were now ascribed (Hirsch 2000, 2005; Edgar 2006). Passportization formalized these new divisions and institutionalized them in bureaucratic structures and symbolic representation.

Although Soviet delimitation policy is sometimes described as facilitating Moscow’s “divide and rule,” this account is misleading (Hirsch 2000). Border delimitation was based on ethnographic and demographic information, influenced by local political disputes and economic viability rather than attempting to maintain the logic of colonial rule. Nevertheless, there was certainly no exact fit between administrative boundaries and ethnic identity in the Soviet republics. Uzbek ethnicity, in particular, spills over into neighboring states. Uzbek communities in neighboring Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan cause anxieties of national identity in those countries (Fumagalli 2007). Disputes between ethnic Uzbeks and ethnic Kyrgyz over resources, status, and identity fueled interethnic conflict in southern Kyrgyzstan in 1990, and again in June 2010, when hundreds died in violent clashes. Soviet policy also encouraged large-scale migration by Russians and Russian speakers into Central Asia, particularly into Kazakhstan and major cities, such as Tashkent. This influx was partially reversed by an outflow of Russian speakers, primarily to the Russian Federation, in the 1990s. Nevertheless, Russian-speakers still form sizable minorities in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. In Kazakhstan, the Russian-speaking minority is largely

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resident in northern regions of the country that some Russian nationalists claim as Russian territory. Other diasporas—Soviet Koreans in Uzbekistan or Chechens in Kazakhstan—are the legacy of Soviet-era forced resettlement programs but have had a lasting impact on societies in the region.

Regional loyalties formed another set of cleavages inside states. After independence Kazakhstan periodically faced centrifugal forces from its northern provinces while oil-producing Western Kazakhstan occasionally proved restive, dissatisfied with the division of benefits with central elites (Cummings 2000). President Nursultan Nazarbayev shifted the capital to the new city of Astana, primarily to assert a new spatial identity for the nation and to overcome regional fracturing (Wolfel 2002). In Kyrgyzstan, a traditional north–south divide is often characterized as dividing the Kyrgyz nation along cultural, religious, and political lines. In reality, other internal fractures—among southern local elites, or between rural and urban areas—are often just as salient (Lewis 2008). Tajikistan’s strong regional identities—and forms of political economy associated with different regions—contributed to the civil war that the country experienced in the 1990s. The traditionally dominant northern region of Sughd was sidelined as the southern regions around Kulyab challenged eastern regions for political and economic power in the new state (Heathershaw 2009). In Uzbekistan, political struggles were also often characterized as being among regional elites, with Tashkent and Samarkand groupings dominant for much of the post-Soviet period while elites from Fergana and other regions were marginalized (Collins, 2006).

Formally coherent states were also challenged by the informal social structures that asserted alternative spatial imaginaries, challenging the reach of central governments and creating alternative regional networks not dependent on formal interstate relations. Informal social and political networks were formed through genuine and fictive kinship networks and through mutual relations developed through business, informal institutions, and political activism (Collins 2006; Schatz 2004; Tuncer-Kilavuz 2009). In some cases, underlying historical clans played a role. In Kazakhstan, for example, three broad historical clans in Kazakh society, known as *zhuz* or horde, and various subclans appeared to reinforce fractures within the Kazakh nation (Schatz 2004; Junisbai 2009). In many cases, however, substantive political and business networks developed based on long-standing financial, educational, or institutional connections, and these formed both within states and across borders. These networks acted as

patron–client systems in which relations of trust and mutual support operate vertically, culminating in a particular patron at the top of a pyramid-type structure (Hale 2015; Radnitz 2010). Although often viewed as weakening the state, in some cases informal networks and patron–client systems functioned in ways that strengthened formally weak post-Soviet states (Lewis 2017). In a similar way, at a regional level, informal networks of political, business, and security elites ensured that some types of regional linkages were maintained even when formal state-to-state relations were weak or dysfunctional. Kathleen Collins (2006) argues that neopatrimonial, authoritarian regimes are resistant to economic regionalism because it often requires liberal reforms that might undermine their domestic political position. However, the informal networks that constitute these states can form transboundary networks in ways that mitigate the lack of formal cooperation. Organized criminal networks—allied with state institutions or powerful political elites—manage effective trade corridors in illicit goods across the region, including opiates smuggled from Afghanistan (Lewis 2014). Smaller-scale smuggling routes were frequently able to ensure that cross-border trade networks continued to function even in situations where cross-border movement was formally halted. Security and intelligence services often maintained informal links, even when political relations between states were poor.

These historical, ethnic, and social cleavages contributed to a crisis of sovereignty for the post-Soviet Central Asian state. In response, state-led nation-building programs promoted a national identity that often denied underlying ethnic differences. Attempts to develop a singular national Uzbek identity, for example, occluded alternative identities, such as the Tajik cultural roots of many residents of Samarkand. Similarly, the Tajik nation-building process was impatient with diverse regional and ethnic identities across Tajikistan: The central government repeatedly intervened to suppress aspirations of autonomy among the Ismaili people of Gorno-Badakhshan in Eastern Tajikistan. They had formed part of the opposition during the 1990s civil war and subsequently faced military interventions in 2012 and 2014 to suppress “warlords” who often received significant local support. Almost inevitably, this imposition of narrow nationalism at home also involved the identification of enemies abroad. Governments often presented the wider region as a source of danger, not as an opportunity for peaceful cross-border trade and social interaction. In Uzbekistan, President Islam Karimov argued, “Uzbekistan is encircled by countries burdened with ethnic,

demographic, economic and other problems” (cited in Megoran 2005, 561–62). As a result, according to Nick Megoran, “the 1990s thus witnessed a marked shift in Karimov’s sense of the geopolitical identity of Uzbekistan, from a self-confident polity at peace with itself and its neighbours to a besieged island of civilisation in a sea of anarchy that threatened to submerge it” (Megoran 2005, 562). All countries in the region used the experience of Afghanistan as an external threat to demonstrate the need to heighten internal security and as legitimation for authoritarian practices. The Kazakh and Uzbek authorities frequently pointed to political and social unrest in their neighbors, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, as examples of the dangers of liberalization and Islamist radicalism, and often viewed regionalism through a pathological lens that saw cooperation as permitting the infection of political instability to spread across boundaries.

These anxieties over sovereignty and security partly explain the difficult interstate relations experienced in the region during the first twenty-five years of post-Soviet independence. Processes of border delimitation were often strongly contested and in some cases remained uncompleted more than twenty-five years after the collapse of the USSR. At least until the death of President Karimov in 2016, Uzbekistan had poor relations with all its neighbors, intervening in the civil war in Tajikistan in the late 1990s; launching military raids against guerrilla forces in southern Kyrgyzstan in 1999; and imposing severe constraints on cross-border trade and travel with Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Uzbekistan’s autarkic economic policy of import substitution further accentuated border disputes, limiting intraregional trade, people-to-people contacts, and transport links across the region. As a result, Central Asia became one of the least integrated and trade-friendly regions in the world (Cooley 2012). Traveling across borders was often accompanied by tales of harassment, bribery, corruption, and violence. While external powers promoted visions of connectivity and regional trade, the realities of borders in the region became very different (Reeves 2015). Frontiers remained nodes of extreme tension rather than exchange. The Uzbek–Kyrgyz and Uzbek–Tajik borders were heavily mined and fortified and were often closed to travel and trade. Shootings were common. In May 2015 twenty-two-year-old Mansur Makhmudjon Uulu was shot dead when he attempted to cross the Kyrgyz–Uzbek border with potatoes and apricots to sell (Putz 2015b). Uzbek border guards shot dead thirty-six-year-old Kazakh Ualikhan Akhmetov, the father of seven children, when he went out fishing on the Syr Darya river (Putz 2015a). These everyday

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geopolitical tragedies are stark reminders of the fundamentally fractured nature of the region.

<A>Regional Identity and External Hegemony</>

The emphasis on national sovereignty and the construction of postcolonial national identities undermined the development of a coherent regional identity. Uzbekistan, for example, which might have assumed the role of regional leader, became an internally focused autarkic state, reluctant to become involved in regional initiatives that might challenge its policies of hard borders and ultrasovereignty. Turkmenistan followed an even more extreme course of self-isolation under the rhetorical protection of a policy of neutrality. Both states pursued active policies of exclusionary nation building, focusing on Uzbek and Turkmen identity to the detriment of any supranational loyalties. Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan were all open—to varying degrees—to other modes of regional cooperation, but, without Uzbekistan’s involvement, there was only limited capacity to develop any genuine regional cooperation. In 2016–17 there were initial signs of a new regional policy emerging in Tashkent, which pursued improved relations with its neighbors and sought to revive trade links within the region, but progress remained slow.

A lack of top-down regional integration, or what has been dubbed “Old Regionalism” (Hettne 2005; Söderbaum 2016), was accompanied by a lack of any indicators of what scholars identified as “new regionalism,” defined as “a range of formal/informal mid-level ‘triangular’ relations among not only states but also non-state actors, notably civil societies and private companies” (Söderbaum and Shaw 2003, 1). New regionalism acknowledged the significance of regional activity in the fields of culture, education, private business, and civil society, with nonstate actors complementing regional organizations and states. It also viewed new regional initiatives as more open to globalization and less likely to be influenced by hegemonic powers in determining a sense of “regionness” (Söderbaum and Shaw 2003; Söderbaum 2016). Very few of these attributes of new regionalism could be easily identified in Central Asia. There were almost no regional civil society organizations, business associations, or educational networks, with the exception of those that were externally funded and designed. There was some bilateral trade between countries in the region, but for all countries the main trade links were with extraregional partners—namely, China, Russia, and the EU. Labor migration also had some regional aspects, with both Kyrgyz

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skilled workers and many Uzbek laborers working in agriculture or trade in Kazakhstan. However, these intraregional flows were outpaced by migration to extraregional states in ways that undermined rather than strengthened a sense of Central Asian regional space. As many as 1 million Kyrgyz, 1.5 million Tajiks and more than 3 million Uzbek citizens worked as labor migrants in Russia, producing alternative spatial imaginaries constituted by new patterns of settlement and migration. These “bottom-up” flows tended to reinforce hegemonic concepts of regionalism, in which external actors played leading roles in defining the region and shaping regional norms and institutions.

External Powers and Hegemonic Regionalism

In a further distinction from the new regionalism literature, which presumed an end to hegemon-led forms of regionalism in the post–Cold War world, Central Asia has been distinguished by multiple efforts to overcome regional fractures and to induce regional cooperation through externally led regional institutions (Cooley 2012; Lewis 2015). Indeed, almost all post-Soviet regional initiatives have been led by regional powers, primarily Russia and China, but with sporadic proposals also introduced by the US and the EU. Each of these projects explicitly sought to overcome intraregional fractures and promote trade, connectivity, and regional integration. They proposed alternative mechanisms for increased regional cooperation, however, effectively importing a regional identity, a set of norms and values, and a particular discourse that corresponded to the identity projection of the external partner. As a result, geopolitical projects, far from overcoming intraregional divides, have often added a further complex layer of fractured relations on top of existing interstate differences.

The EU promoted regional integration as a central feature of successive EU strategies toward Central Asia, effectively mirroring the EU’s own identity in its policy toward the region (Boonstra 2015), but these regional projects usually failed to achieve their objectives. The US initiated the New Silk Road (NSR) project, which sought to build on the wider footprint of US power in the region, particularly in Afghanistan, to overcome historical fault lines in the wider Central and Southern Asian region, and to reconnect disparate political entities into a new zone of free trade and connectivity (Kuchins, Sanderson, and Gordon 2009; Laruelle 2015c). The idea was first mooted in 2009, when the US began using Central Asian transport infrastructure to

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resupply International Security Assistance Force troops in Afghanistan through the Northern Distribution Network. In a 2011 speech in Mumbai, US secretary of state Hillary Clinton announced this new strategy designed to link Central and South Asia.

Historically, the nations of South and Central Asia were connected to each other and the rest of the continent by a sprawling trading network called the Silk Road. Indian merchants used to trade spices, gems, and textiles, along with ideas and culture, everywhere from the Great Wall of China to the banks of the Bosphorus. Let's work together to create a new Silk Road. . . . That means building more rail lines, highways, energy infrastructure, like the proposed pipeline to run from Turkmenistan, through Afghanistan, through Pakistan into India. (US Dept of State 2011a)

Clinton's speech outlined a lost, mythical world along the Silk Road, characterized by peaceful trade in goods and ideas, and proposed overcoming existing fractures through US-led free trade and infrastructure initiatives. While free trade offered an ideological panacea to overcome the region's divisions, US geopolitical goals nevertheless reinforced new boundaries, effectively constructing a Central Asian region integrated with South Asia, differentiated from the former colonial power, Russia. In reality, the discourse of connectivity along the NSR was undermined by the reality of continued obstacles to trade, including that of corruption, which the military Northern Distribution Network appears to have worsened rather than improved (Lee 2012, 25). An electricity network promoted as part of the NSR—CASA-1000—far from promoting more regional integration, threatened to deepen tensions over water and energy use between Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. Most significantly, a growing strategic interest by the US in the region in the 2000s—and a fear among political elites of what were perceived as Western-backed “color revolutions” in the neighborhood—stimulated counter projects by Russia and China, which intensified geopolitical competition across the region.

Russian-led regional cooperation initiatives in Central Asia were complicated by the colonial past and sensitivities about sovereignty among Central Asian states. The original post-Soviet regional organization set up after the collapse of the USSR—the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS)—became largely moribund by the mid-1990s as it encountered the new sovereignty projects of independent post-Soviet states. Instead, selective forms of

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regional cooperation emerged, first in the security sphere and later in trade and economic policy. In security, Russia's Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) brought together Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Tajikistan (and, until 2012, Uzbekistan) in a security pact. However, the CSTO had very limited capacity to address security challenges arising from interstate conflicts or from intrastate violence (Lewis 2015). A Russian think tank published a report in 2011 calling for significant reforms to internal decision-making procedures and for capacity to mount peacekeeping-type operations (Yurgens 2011). Yet such pragmatic proposals misunderstood the nature of emerging Russian policy in the region. The failure to develop the CSTO as an effective multilateral regional security organization reflected a very different understanding in Moscow of how regional stability should be achieved in Central Asia. Rather than prioritizing multilateral peacekeeping interventions, Russia preferred to support strong allied regimes in the region through bilateral security and military relationships. In that sense, the CSTO was not a genuine multilateral regional organization but an institutional framework through which Russia could pursue bilateral goals.

Successive regional economic initiatives pursued by Russia in the 1990s and 2000s were ineffective. The Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), a customs union of five members (Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Belarus, and Armenia), which began functioning in 2015, was a much more ambitious project that adopted technocratic functionalist ideas to overcome regional fractures and obstacles to regional trade. Technocrats working in its supranational body, the Eurasian Economic Commission, in Moscow referenced the European Union as their institutional model. However, attempts to develop the commission—and a corresponding EEU court in Minsk—as autonomous supranational institutions were stymied by the unwillingness of individual member states to cede sovereignty and their preference for political means to achieve economic goals and to resolve cross-border disputes. Moreover, the EEU was characterized by a duality between a technocratic project, often supported by liberal economists and business (Vieira 2015, 4; Dutkiewicz and Sakwa 2015), and a geopolitical project, aimed at asserting Russia's role both in the region and as a pole in a new multipolar global order (International Crisis Group 2016a). Within the “technocratic” EEU, borders often became easier to negotiate as customs posts were dismantled, but the EEU also produced new fractures defined by the boundaries of the customs union, at which high trade tariffs and new regulatory barriers

were enforced. In this way the EEU also created new barriers to cooperation in the region by integrating Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan into a Russian-led customs union while Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan remained outside, reflecting a further division across Central Asia between states oriented toward Moscow, such as Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, and those that sought to maintain more distance from Russia (Cooley and Laruelle 2013).

Abbott Gleason is among many skeptics who argue that “the unity of post-Soviet ‘Eurasia’ is fragmentary and fleeting” (Gleason 2010, 31), and that “the positive, attractive power of a ‘Eurasian idea’ under any kind of Russian hegemony is at present negligible” (Gleason 2010, 32). There is certainly concern in many Central Asian capitals about Russian intentions in the region, but attitudes vary by country and by social group. There is broad support for close relations with Russia among both elites and the wider population in Kyrgyzstan, contrasted with very ambivalent and even hostile positions to more Russian influence among elites in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. Attitudes toward Eurasian initiatives also vary within societies. Across the region, opinion polls—although not always reliable—suggest that among all Central Asian societies, regional integration with an orientation toward Russia has quite widespread support (International Crisis Group 2016a). What this means is more ambiguous, however, since the concept of “Eurasia” remains contested and polysemous. The EEU asserts a technocratic and institutional meaning for Eurasia, but the term is used with many other political, economic, and cultural meanings (Laruelle 2015c; Smith and Richardson 2017). For far-right Russian nationalists, for example, Eurasia is more ideology than geography, a counterhegemonic idea that unites all those opposed to an “Atlanticist” liberal international order (Dugin 2014). For Kazakhstan, on the other hand, a very different form of Eurasianism offers the possibility to enhance cooperation with Russia while ensuring national sovereignty and openness to the wider world (Kudaibergenova 2016). These diverse meanings have led some to argue that “far from being a significant ideational, geographic, economic and strategic space, Eurasia . . . is an incoherent mess of spaces” (Smith and Richardson 2017, 5). Yet the contested nature of “Eurasia” does not lessen its importance as a geopolitical imaginary. The promise of Russian visions of Eurasia to overcome fractures within the Central Asian region by redefining it through a close relationship with Russia may prove illusory, but the different conceptualizations of Eurasia will continue to have profound impacts

on geopolitical thinking in the region.

China's regional initiatives explicitly reject a concept of divisive regionalism, and instead have sought to promote an inclusive vision of connectivity, trade, and cooperation. Chinese foreign policy thinking claims to overcome conflictual international concepts such as "balance of power" or "alliances," seeking instead "win-win" solutions in a harmonious international environment. While Russia's regional initiatives often prioritized spaces and boundaries, China's initiatives have been focused more on the promotion of economic and infrastructure links across the region, linking to the global economy, rather than promoting a conventional form of regional integration (Kaczmarek 2017). Nevertheless, despite an explicit denial of any form of regional hegemony, Chinese initiatives are inevitably characterized by significant asymmetries of economic power and suggest to some the emergence of a new sinocentric form of regional order (Callaghan 2015). China's projects in Central Asia have sought to reconstitute the region by connecting it to China's internal efforts to overcome domestic divisions and the assertion of a new type of Great Power relations in the international system (Godement 2014).

China's first attempt to institutionalize its presence in Central Asia was through the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, a regional security club, which included China, Russia, and four of the five Central Asian states (India and Pakistan also joined in 2017). Turkmenistan asserted its long-standing policy of neutrality as a justification for its unwillingness to enter any regional organizations, but that stance did not prevent it from forming an increasingly dependent economic relationship with China, which became the main buyer for Turkmen gas exports. Tajikistan also developed increasingly close economic ties to Beijing, although its reliance on Russia for security ties and as a destination for millions of labor migrants ensured that relations with Moscow remained critical for the regime. The increasing influence of China complicated the geopolitical landscape of Central Asia, ensuring that any Russian vision for overcoming regional fractures through a renewed model of Moscow-centric hegemonic regionalism was unlikely to succeed.

When Chinese president Xi Jinping announced the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013, in which Central Asia would play a central role, it opened up new possibilities for enhanced Chinese influence in the region. The BRI was framed as an international extension of the "Chinese Dream," an idea of a China restored to greatness, albeit without threatening any of its neighbors (Callaghan

2015). At a work forum on periphery diplomacy in 2013 Xi called for diplomacy that would “warm the hearts of others so that neighboring countries will become even friendlier” (Heath 2013). The BRI is a central initiative in this new regionalism, in which China’s national interests are designed to be complemented by the provision of regional public goods (Sørensen 2015). The BRI aimed to overcome the fractures of disputed borders and complex trade regimes through the construction of new Chinese-funded transport infrastructure and Chinese support for cross-border trade, improved customs procedures, and reduced nontariff barriers. Economic growth and cross-border trade was designed to support a zone of “harmonious societies,” pro-Chinese regimes in Central Asia along the BRI. By opening up trade with Central Asia, Beijing also hoped that the BRI would assist in overcoming deep divisions inside China, above all between Han Chinese and ethnic Uighurs inside Xinjiang. However, the grand aims of the BRI to enhance regional cooperation under the aegis of a benevolent Chinese state also risked fueling new fractures in society. Growing Chinese influence encountered historical anti-Chinese sentiment in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. Chinese investments—particularly plans to lease land to Chinese business—sparked protests in Kazakhstan in May 2016. Chinese business in Kyrgyzstan also faced popular protests and sometimes violent attacks (International Crisis Group 2017). Popular opposition was based not only on traditional xenophobic attitudes toward a powerful neighbor but also on perceptions that Chinese investments involved close relations with predatory elites and were often accompanied by allegations of high-level corruption and malfeasance. As such, foreign investments were frequently portrayed as accentuating already existing class cleavages and disparities between rich and poor (International Crisis Group 2017).

Russian and Chinese projects also aimed to prevent Western powers from achieving a strategic foothold in the region. Tension with US strategic goals has been an inevitable result of both Russian and Chinese regional initiatives, although for the most part the US has viewed the BRI initiative as less threatening to its interests than Russian regional projects. This united stance regarding a Western presence in the region has disguised potential tensions between Russian and Chinese regional projects in the region. In May 2015 in Moscow, Russian president Vladimir Putin and President Xi agreed to coordinate the EEU and the BRI, and there were numerous subsequent negotiations and meetings, but with few tangible results.

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This does not mean that cooperation is impossible: both sides understand that such talks and agreements effectively paper over incompatibilities between the two projects but construct an important discourse of cooperation that may make such differences less important.

The Eurasian Consensus? Overcoming Fractures through Norms and Discourse

These new institutional projects, primarily focused on regional economic cooperation, have so far failed to overcome the many underlying fractures in the Central Asian region, thereby contributing to the conventional argument that the region is fundamentally divided. In the realm of ideas and discourse, however, some countervailing trends might be identified that nuance or complicate this conclusion. An important recent strand in the regionalism literature focused on “the shared beliefs, norms and rituals that hold a region together,” the intersubjective meanings that together serve to constitute a region and underpin a common worldview among states and other regional actors (Emerson 2014). Emerson (2014) argues that while military and economic power still plays a central role in region building, the development of particular regional institutions and practices also depends on common understandings or discourse in which actors share a common language and ascribe similar meanings to events and arrive at a common understanding of the world. In Central Asia, it is possible to identify elements of a shared regional discourse that comprises a familiar set of illiberal norms, including state-led development, the subordination of civil society to the state, a valorization of internal and external sovereignty, and the downplaying of individual rights in favor of the state. Although there are significant differences in political systems across the region, ranging from neototalitarianism in Turkmenistan to the laissez-faire semidemocracy of Kyrgyzstan, many elements in this political discourse are shared by elites across the region. In a neo-Gramscian sense, these ideas form a hegemonic discourse in which there is wide agreement on fundamental meanings and interpretations of social phenomena, even where there is often significant disagreement among actors on specific issues.

Such an approach suggests that by analyzing common discourses among regional elites, we may perceive elements of “regionness” even in a region that is otherwise fractured by political, economic, and geopolitical divides. Some evidence for such a shared

set of norms can be found in the founding documents and texts of regional organizations, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which promote a shared set of norms at odds with the liberal principles promoted by Western states and organizations, such as the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (Lewis 2012). Ambrosio (2008) argued that a “Shanghai spirit” discourse was promoted through the SCO as a framework for a process of norm promotion by China across the region. China used the language of the “three evils” (terrorism, religious extremism, and separatism) and has seen them reproduced in regional forums and official discourse. This discursive formula is repeated in speeches at successive SCO summit meetings but also circulates within member states. For example, in February 2013 the antiterrorism center of the State Committee for National Security of Kyrgyzstan echoed this SCO trope when it announced “it [would] hold explanatory work in government agencies and other interested agencies on threats of international terrorism, religious extremism and separatism in Kyrgyzstan and Central Asia” (Kabar 2013). In this way, contested concepts such as “self-determination” or “minority rights” are given shared meanings that become institutionalized through regional organizations and bilateral relationships and become accepted as “common sense” by regional elites.

One version of this argument is the attempt by Filippo Costa-Buranelli (2014a, 2014b) to explain Central Asian regional politics through a reworking of English school theories of international relations, which argue that even in an anarchical international order, states can form an international society based on observance of some common norms and institutions. A rescaling of English school ideas to the regional level opens up a perspective that emphasizes cooperation among Central Asian states, rather than division. An analysis of voting patterns and speeches by Central Asian representatives at the UN, for example, demonstrates that they share common positions in many debates on the interpretation of international norms in ways that belie their regional divisions (Costa-Buranelli 2014b). This idea of an evolving set of shared norms is more nuanced than notions of “autocracy promotion,” which suggest a conscious, linear process of learning, testing, and adopting particular policy ideas from external actors (for discussion, see Ambrosio 2010; Burnell and Schlumberger 2010; Bader 2015; Tansey 2016). Instead, the emergence of a common discourse that references a common set of agreed meanings and interpretations of reality comes through

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constant processes of social interaction influenced by preexisting historical, cultural, and social norms and practices.

This shared discourse has important consequences for our understanding of a fractured region. First, it partly explains why—despite fundamental fractures between and within states—armed conflict has been relatively rare in the Central Asian region. Second, this intersubjective agreement among actors offers an explanation for the ability of certain hegemons to assert their influence in the region effectively while others are sidelined or marginalized. Russian and Chinese influence in the region is not only the result of security support or economic assistance but also reflects their ability to share normative understandings with states in the region, which are intensified by regular institutional exchange in forums such as the SCO or other multilateral formats. Western attempts to gain traction in the region, on the other hand, have been hampered not only by limited funding and a lack of political commitment but by the absence of a shared set of norms that would underpin broader cooperation. Third, shared discourses permit configurations of geopolitical power that might appear paradoxical when viewed through a neorealist lens. As discussed earlier, the prospects for Sino-Russian relations are often viewed negatively when analysts focus on strategic political or economic interests. But agreement by both powers on the wider normative landscape provides a basis for their ongoing cooperation in the region (Wishnick 2016).

Conclusion

Central Asia remains a deeply fractured region, lacking the most obvious attributes of the new regionalism such as effective regional associations, civil society links, or extensive business cooperation and intraregional trade. Despite these deep fault lines, a multilayered approach to regional fracture suggests that a focus primarily on evidence of regional fracture threatens to overlook important areas of agreement, particularly those evident in the area of norms, ideas, and interpretations of the world. Despite personal, political, and economic differences, regional leaders often share a common discourse and view the world in similar ways. External powers such as China have introduced new normative content into this shared discourse but without significant resistance since their ideas tend to overlap with existing concepts of the nature of the state and its role in relation to society. Even more evident is the extent to which contemporary

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Russian models of political and economic order, which emphasize counterrevolutionary ideologies and conservative norms, have become central to ideological and political thought across the region. These illiberal ideas, rather than being imposed from outside, have evolved organically through a constant process of discursive interaction among elites in the region. Many of the forums and institutions that served as the platforms for this normative and discursive agreement were dismissed by Western analysts as ineffectual “talking shops.” In reality, it may turn out that this role—as discursive forums—served a critical function in developing a shared regional discourse based not on liberal norms or the tenets of the new regionalism but on authoritarian and illiberal ideas of political and social order. Despite the continuing salience of serious political, social, and economic fractures in the region, agreement among elites on shared norms has begun to provide a framework for the emergence of new forms of “illiberal” regionalism in Central Asia.