

Research Proposal for CASI Visiting Scholar Program

“Central Asian States in the ECO-ASEAN Interface: Capacity Borrowing, China Hedging and Cross-Regional Diplomacy”

Jason E. Strakes
OSCE Academy in Bishkek

Since its inauguration in September 1995, the annual Joint Ministerial Meeting of the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) held on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly has sought to establish closer cooperation between these two regional organizations. The post-Soviet member states of ECO (Azerbaijan and the five Central Asian republics) have played a particularly prominent role in these engagements since their inception, serving as co-chairs of meetings as frequently as its founders (Iran, Turkey and Pakistan), and pursuing active participation in cross-regional diplomacy, most recently the Nowruz Festival in Jakarta, Indonesia in March 2013 and Joint Forum on Tourism in Antalya, Turkey in November 2014, as well as the planned 1st Joint Business Forum to be held in Pakistan in the near future. However, despite the conclusion of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between secretariats and its adjacent Work Programme in policy areas including trade and investment, tourism, narcotics control and development of small and medium enterprises in January 2006, their actual level of coordination and integration has remained essentially limited. As of the 14th meeting in September 2014, the need for fuller implementation of previous agreements remains at the forefront of its agenda.

This situation suggests the following research questions: First, what accounts for the persistence of state participation in cross-regional arrangements despite the lack of progress in deeper institutionalization? Second, what is distinctive about the role played by states in post-Soviet Central Asia in contributing to the relationship between regional organizations? The present study extends two hypotheses that seek to address these queries. The first posits that domestic and external criticism of ineffectuality frequently directed at regional integration efforts by Central Asian states has over time

motivated decision-makers to seek increased administrative and policy-making capacity through a “borrowing” strategy, in which they progressively model their procedural mechanisms and best practices after more advanced and experienced regional organizations. This proceeds from the logic of (neo)liberal institutionalism, which assumes that significant incentives for cooperation among states emerge through repeated interactions, despite the lack of a central authority to enforce international agreements or penalize noncompliance. At the same time, it is proposed that since the mid-1990s, the ASEAN member states have increasingly sought to diversify their foreign relations in response to the preponderant political, economic and military influence projected into the Southeast Asian region by the People's Republic of China (PRC). As a result, they have pursued a “hedging” strategy through intensive engagement with those Central Asian states directly contiguous with the western boundaries of the PRC (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan) or that have pursued greater strategic involvements with Beijing (Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan), as well as the primary East-West conduit of the emerging New Silk Road project (Azerbaijan). This reflects the logic of counterbalancing, “flanking maneuvers” and aggregation of resources in response to common perceived threats familiar to realist geopolitics. However, rather than an emphasis on evaluating international relations theories, this study intends to delve into the deeper historical context of ECO-ASEAN relations in order to reveal the essential meaning behind these diplomatic patterns and practices. The empirical analysis will therefore test the above propositions by utilizing the qualitative methodology of process tracing of historical events. It will examine the diplomatic behavior and foreign policy decisions of individual post-Soviet and Southeast Asian states at both bilateral and multilateral levels from 1995 to present in order to identify causal links between the above defined strategies and the level of ECO-ASEAN cooperation. This approach utilizes several data sources, including official websites and proceedings of international conventions, English-language and translated media reports and policy documents, and the academic literature on comparative regional institutions and integration, supplemented where possible by personal interviews with foreign service personnel. I believe that the facilities and research

assistance provided by the Central Asian Studies Institute (CASI) would provide a significant advantage in pursuing this agenda. As part of this proposed project, I also hope to collaborate with the faculty and staff of American University of Central Asia (AUCA) whose research interests and areas of specialization relate to international relations and regional organizations in contemporary Eurasia. The ultimate objective of the fellowship period will be to produce a manuscript of sufficient quality for submission to a peer-reviewed academic journal. Finally, I seek to disseminate the preliminary findings to students and faculty in lectures, seminars, and working papers, and to contribute to the scholarly community of CASI and AUCA.