

Major Powers and Regionalism in the post-Soviet Central Asia

Research Proposal

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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 ethnicities and languages of their nationals, shared culture and history, common resources and Soviet-era infrastructure provide a wide range of grounds for cooperation. Hence, according to one of the basic definitions of a *region*,¹ post-Soviet Central Asia has the predisposition to be one. However, after the independence the level of cooperation between people and agencies in the neighboring Central Asian states has declined. At the same time, the region hosts a number of multilateral organizations and initiatives. In this context the general puzzle is *why, despite pre-existing interdependence and geographic proximity, has regional cooperation in Central Asia revolved around overlapping regional organizations rather than bottom-up developments*. In other words, why has regionalism in Central Asia resulted in institution building and not in actual cooperation on the ground?

Existing literature provides a general answer. Constraints emanating from within Central Asia include reluctance of developing states to invest in common initiatives, wariness of each other's intentions, continuous reforms in multiple sectors, preoccupation with sovereignty, focus on the development of external links,² certain states' hegemonic ambitions, focus on nation building while disregarding sizeable minorities, non-complimentary nature of the economies and mainly personalist regimes.³ External constraints stem from the roles of major powers, particularly Russia and China. Several questions arise in this context.

First, there are indications that Russia-driven integration initiatives through the Eurasian Economic Community / Eurasian Economic Union have an effect on regionalism in Central Asia, but the specific nature of this effect has not been determined. Consequently, the first question is – how does this “deep” and “exclusive” form of integration affect the degree of cooperation between the states which participate in the Eurasian integration projects and those which do not?

Second, the literature suggests that China's economic power has not been sufficient to foster stronger regional ties. One possible answer includes geopolitical and political considerations of Central Asian elites, which drive them closer to Russia. Another explanation lies in the weakness of China's civilizational rhetoric which is insufficient to promote Chinese norms and values in the region. The field research aims to find evidence to support these answers.

Finally, the literature does address the nature of Sino-Russian relationship in Central Asia, but there is no agreement as to whether Central Asia is an area of cooperation or competition. Moreover, there is little discussion as to how Sino-Russian overall relations affect the nature of their engagement in Central Asia. Therefore, the main question of the dissertation is the following: *how do the changes in Sino-Russian relations affect regional cooperation in Central*

¹“Region is a limited number of states linked together by a geographical relationship and by a degree of mutual interdependence”

Joseph Nye as quoted in De Lombaerde, Philippe, Fredrik Soderbaum, Luk Van Langenhove and Francis Baert, “The Problem of Comparison in Comparative Regionalism,” *Review of International Studies*, 36, (2010), 736

² Starr, Frederick S., “In Defense of Greater Central Asia,” *Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program*, September 2008, 10

³ Bohr, Annette, “Regionalism in Central Asia: New Geopolitics, Old Regional Order,” *International Affairs*, 80, 3 (2004), 493-498

Asia? This question serves as a common theme. If Russia's selective integration is a response to China's activities, *how does this deeper integration affect regional cooperation between all the Central Asian states?* If China's increased economic involvement in the region is connected to its relations with Russia, *why is this type of engagement inefficient for enhancing regional cohesion?* The dissertation aims to establish the relationship between the independent variable, i.e. changes in Sino-Russian relationship and the dependent variable, i.e. the degree of regional cooperation in Central Asia.

The empirical chapters analyze how the two major powers affect various sectors, which can enhance regional connectivity. I use qualitative approach to develop cases which test the following hypothesis: *first, Russia-driven integration initiatives are fragmenting the region; second, China is at times ambivalent towards regionalization of Central Asia and at times unable to develop regional cooperation because pure economic power is not sufficient to do so; third, the relationship between the two powers is crucial for understanding the nature of their impact on regional cooperation.* While the thesis is reliant on the evaluation of regional organizations, I use state-based approach to analyze engagements of various actors, whether they are states, multilateral institutions or profit-driven establishments. The theoretical approach combines elements of Neo-realism and Social Constructivism, under which states' material capabilities matter more, but their ability to socialize other actors for their own benefit is also important.

Methodology

The main methods include *documentary analysis, media analysis and elite interviews.* Research is organized around the three themes; *determining the causal relationship between Russia driven and China driven integration initiatives; establishing impacts of Eurasian integration on Central Asian regionalism; and determining the utility of China's economic tools in fostering regionalism.*

Documentary and media analysis should serve to establish causal relationships between integration initiatives and state actors' responses to them. Furthermore, the analysis aims to measure the effect of the Eurasian integration on regional infrastructure (i.e. roads, rail links, energy and communication networks). Moreover, I seek to determine whether and how regional cooperation has been affected by Chinese economic engagement (i.e. investments, companies' activities, imports, bilateral economic agreements, joint ventures).

Interviews will be used to support and clarify the findings of the documentary analysis. I intend to conduct interviews in Bishkek and Almaty. The target groups would include academic experts, officials from related agencies (i.e. transport, energy, telecommunications), representatives of Chinese firms and local agents operating in related industries. At this stage two cases have emerged as being particularly important in demonstrating the ambivalence of Chinese engagement in Central Asia.

The first one is the proposed railroad between Kashgar and Andijan, which had failed to materialized despite China's expressed willingness to finance it. It is crucial to determine the main factor which had prevented China and Kyrgyzstan to agree on the project. The second case is the Line D of the Central Asian pipeline which is being built through Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, instead of using the pre-established Kazakhstan route. The aim in this case is to establish the main motivator for China to follow this new and arguably challenging route.