

CENTRAL ASIA AS A SECURITY COMPLEX: THEORY AND PRACTICE

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Introduction

The academic community is aware of three hypostases of Central Asia—(1) a geographical region; (2) a political entity; and (3) a civilizational expanse—each with its own limits. As a geographical region, Central Asia is limited by “*natural borders*” (mountains, rivers, the steppe, and the sea); as a political entity, it is contained within the state borders of the new political units; and as a civilizational expanse, it is described as the local *peoples’ cultural and/or ethno-linguistic community*, that is, by *civilizational factors*.¹

The idea of Central Asia as the space in which four post-Soviet Central Asian republics

and Kazakhstan are situated is the region’s most frequently used, not to say dominating, political description. Central Asia as a political entity is a target of academic studies in its own right² and

Central Asia conception (see: F.S. Starr, “A ‘Greater Central Asia Partnership’ for Afghanistan and Its Neighbors,” *Silk Road Paper*, Washington, D.C., March 2005; idem, “In Defense of Greater Central Asia,” *Policy Paper*, Washington, D.C., September 2008).

² See: *Central Asia and the Caucasus after the Soviet Union: Domestic and International Dynamics*, ed. by M. Mesbahi, University Press of Florida, Florida, 1994; *Central Asia in Transition: Dilemmas of Political and Economic Development*, ed. by Boris Rumer, M.E. Sharpe, New York, London, 1996; U.T. Kasenov, *Bezopasnost Tsentralnoy Azii: globalnye, regionalnye i natsionalnye problemy*, Kaynar University Press, Almaty, 1998; O. Roy, *The New Central Asia: The Creation of Nations*, New York Univer-

¹ Together with the geopolitical factors, the civilizational factors were laid in the foundation of the Greater

an inalienable part of the foreign policy strategies of the key members of the international community.³

city Press, New York, 2000; *Central Asian Security: The New International Context*, ed. by R. Allison, L. Jonson, Royal Institute of International Affairs, Brookings Institution Press, London, Washington, D.C., 2001; P. Necati, *Boundary Issues in Central Asia*, Transnational Publishers, New York, 2002; R.M. Alimov, *Tsentralnaia Azia: obshchestvennye interesy*, Shark, Tashkent, 2005; A.A. Kazantsev, *"Bolshaya igra" s neizvetsnymi pravilami: mirovaia politika i Tsentralnaia Azia*, MGIMO-Universitet, Moscow, 2008, etc.

³ The European Union formulated its Central Asia strategy: *European Union and Central Asia: Strategy for a New Partnership* (2007); the 2006 National Security Strategy of the United States of America contains the South and Central Asia section; Washington instituted the post of Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asian Affairs. Russia's National Security Strategy treats cooperation with the Central Asian states as a priority. The European

An analysis of the dynamics of regional security reveals the complete inconsistency of the "three hypostases" scheme. In the case of Central Asia, security (or the problems of security) is the most acceptable criterion of a region, the cornerstone of the Regional Security Complexes (RSC) idea described as "regions as seen through the lens of security."⁴ The regional security complex is a "very specific, functionally defined type of region, which may or may not coincide with more general understandings of region."⁵ This means that the region's functional factors describe Central Asia as an RSC.

Union, NATO, France, the U.S., and other countries and organizations created the post of coordinator for the Southern Caucasus and Central Asia.

⁴ B. Buzan, O. Wæver, *Regions and Powers. The Structure of International Security*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2003, pp. 43-44.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

The Theory of Regional Security Complexes: Main Provisions

Barry Buzan was the first to formulate the idea of the Regional Security Complexes,⁶ further developed by Ole Wæver and the Copenhagen School (International Relations); not infrequently, therefore, the Theory of Regional Security Complexes (TRSC) is described as "part of the Copenhagen School's collective theoretical approach to security."⁷ Highly structuralized, the Buzan-Wæver theory, which offers a ramified system of criteria, models, and types of regional complexes, has been universally accepted as the most effective analytical instrument applied to regional security dynamics.

At first, in 1983, the RSC was defined as "a group of states whose primary security concerns link together sufficiently closely that their national securities cannot reasonably be considered apart from one another."⁸ This definition was mainly applied to the dynamics of the political and military security sectors⁹ dominated by the state.

It was revised when it became clear that the range of participants in the security sphere was expanding, while the state-oriented approach to security lost some of its former significance. In 2003, it was defined as "a set of units whose major processes of securitization, desecuritization, or both are

⁶ See: B. Buzan, *People, States and Fear: The National Security Problem in International Relations*, Harvester Wheatsheaf, Hemel Hempstead, 1983; B. Buzan, *People, States and Fear. An Agenda for International Security Studies in the Post-Cold War Era*, Second Edition, Lynne Rienner Publishers Boulder, Colorado, 1991.

⁷ B. Buzan, O. Wæver, *op. cit.*, p. xvii.

⁸ B. Buzan, *op. cit.*, p. 106.

⁹ See: B. Buzan, O. Wæver, *op. cit.*, p. xvi.

so interlinked that their security problems cannot reasonably be analyzed or resolved apart from one another.”¹⁰

When compared, the above definitions reveal that whereas the first merely declares the objective state of affairs, that is, the actors’ “security concerns link together sufficiently closely,” the second points out that “security problems cannot reasonably be analyzed or resolved apart from one another,” which means that the states should pursue coordinated (and imposed, to a certain extent) concerted policies in the security sphere; this is described as an irrefutable necessity. It should be said, however, that the necessity for carrying out a joint policy, that is, the subjective side, is created by the objective nature of RSC.

The TRSC stems from materialist and constructivist approaches: the materialist approach relies on the ideas of territoriality and the balance of power that stresses the anarchic nature of international relations. In this sense, this approach is very close to neorealism and even borrows its key paradigms. The constructivist approach relies on the conception of “securitization;” as the cornerstone of the TRSC, it concentrates on the political processes within which the “security issues get constituted.”¹¹

Securitization is a discursive process that formulates a social problem accepted by the political community as an *existential threat*; it keeps security and routine policy apart.¹² It excludes the objective nature of threats, while security is viewed as a product of inter-subjective activity. This means that securitization should not concentrate on an assessment of vague objective threats seen as a “real” threat to a certain security object, but on an effort to achieve the actors’ agreement about what constitutes a threat. In this sense, “security is what actors make it.”¹³ This process, which identifies real security threats in the vast number of social (interstate) problems, outlines, by the same token, the boundaries of an RSC; this, in turn, makes it independent of other security complexes.

Security implies “strong territoriality;”¹⁴ this means that it is conceptualized in the (material) expanse limited by the region’s borders, in which the logic of territoriality is its basic property. The state of security and/or insecurity in it is determined by the level of physical interaction among the actors, mainly, the regional states. Transborder relations, a recent and fairly important trend of international relations, have already largely changed our interpretation of security and threats, however the factor of adjacent states in the security policy of the states in any specific region remains its inalienable element.

Still, the dual nature of the proximity/spatiality factor crops up in interstate relations: on the one hand, the geographic location (proximity) of states creates “high interaction opportunities that “may lead to more cooperative behavior;”¹⁵ this promotes trade, economic, and cultural ties and, in the final analysis, regionalism. On the other hand, however, the same factor may lead to conflicts: the history of interstate, ethnic, and religious conflicts shows that more likely than not such conflicts flare up between states, ethnic, or religious groups in the same geographic space.

The TRSC explains this by the amity/enmity model regarded “as distinct factors in the security problematique.”¹⁶ This model largely clarifies the picture of interstate relations and the nature of security and/or insecurity relations in the region. The relations of amity between states, an assurance that other states will help and support, can be treated as qualitative relations of amity; enmity betrays itself in fear and suspicion in the states’ relationships.

¹⁰ B. Buzan, O. Wæver, J. de Wilde, *Security. A New Framework for Analysis*, Lynne Rienner Publishers Boulder, London, 1998, p. 201; B. Buzan, O. Wæver, op. cit., p. 44.

¹¹ B. Buzan, O. Wæver, op. cit., p. 4.

¹² See: Ibid., p. xvi.

¹³ Ibid., p. 48.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 29.

¹⁵ H. Starr, “Territory, Proximity, and Spatiality: The Geography of International Conflict,” *International Studies Review*, Vol. 7, 2005, p. 397.

¹⁶ B. Buzan, op. cit., p. 190.

Any regional security complex can be described as an “understructure of [the] international system,”¹⁷ that is, there is a certain level of mutual dependence between existing/adjacent RSCs. The global and regional security levels are connected by the mechanism of “*penetration*,” the logic of the balance of power forces the regional rivals to look for allies outside the region.

Penetration may develop into “*overlay*” when the interests of the great powers dominate over those of the regional states. The absence of security relations among states of the same region can be described as the worst scenario for the RSC. This is intensified by regional rivalry/confrontation, a low securitization level, the absence of organizational and legal structures conducive to settlement of common (regional) problems, protracted military occupation, etc.

Can Central Asia be Described as a Security Complex?

There is no straightforward answer to this question.

The authors of the TRSC classified Central Asia as a “weak subcomplex.”¹⁸ They describe Central Asia as a region of weak states and weak nations; moreover, Russia, an extra-regional power, plays a dominant role in shaping the structure and content of regional security. This means that the regional security dynamics and securitization of the numerous security problems remain at a very low level.¹⁹

In Central Asia, security dynamics have been developing as an inalienable part of the process of securitization of the post-Soviet expanse, while the institutionalization of interstate relations and the functioning of individual RSCs there was described by the “subcomplex plus Russia” formula.²⁰ There are objective reasons behind this: first, the security vacuum left by the destroyed unified defense and security system provided by the Soviet Union should be filled; second, for objective reasons it was not easy to build national (interstate) RSC foundations.

The factor of strong and weak states may serve as another argument in favor of the above. It should be said that the weakness was also caused by the regional states’ new, *sovereign*, status. According to the TRSC, neither the military nor the economic might of a state serves as a criterion of its weakness or strength. “The concept of strong and weak states rests on the degree of sociopolitical cohesion within the state.”²¹ States with weak government and public institutions might become vulnerable to external threats and the penetration of external powers.

Analysts have pointed out that the newly independent states of Central Asia have become stronger, they have recognized that they have similar interests and face similar security challenges, geopolitical rivalry in the region has intensified, and there is a foreign military-political presence in the region and in Afghanistan. These factors have forced researchers to readjust their opinions about the status of the Central Asian RSC; they have arrived at the following conclusions:

- (1) Central Asia is part of a larger security complex; those who agree with this thesis believe that China’s stronger influence in the region will probably push Central Asia toward the Asian supercomplex²²;

¹⁷ B. Buzan, O. Wæver, *op. cit.*, p. 48.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 423.

¹⁹ See: *Ibid.*, pp. 423-424.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 397.

²¹ B. Buzan, O. Wæver, J. de Wilde, *op. cit.*, p. 46.

²² See: A.P. Lukin, “Teoriia kompleksov regionalnoy bezopasnosti i Vostochnaya Azia,” *Oikumena*, No. 2, 2011, p. 18.

- (2) the bipolar approach according to which Central Asia belongs to the RSC consists of two security complexes with equal statuses. Those who side with the idea do not doubt the separate nature of the Central Asian RSC, however certain circumstances indicate that the two RSCs should be treated as a single whole. In particular, some researchers think that Afghanistan, as the main hub of the RSC of South and Central Asia, brings the two regional security complexes (Central and South Asia) together,²³ or they insist on a single Central Eurasian RSC.²⁴

Central Asia is an independent RSC in its own right; this is what an ever increasing number of analysts (myself included) thinks.²⁵

The Central Asian RSC is primarily formed by the common locality and common history of its peoples/states and by the fairly stable models of amity/enmity, conflict, and cooperation. The global powers' rivalry, an extension of geopolitics and external alliances and a product of the strategic and economic interests of Russia and China, on the one hand, and the United States, on the other, is responsible for the security dynamics of the Central Asian RSC. Afghanistan is a buffer between three RSCs—the Gulf, Central Asia, and South Asia.²⁶

The processes going on in the region and, therefore, regionalism have been serving as the starting point of securitization and security institutionalization in Central Asia from the very first days of independence of the local states. Despite the fact that the currently functioning institutions of security were set up with the active involvement of the global powers, the main role belonged to regional prerequisites and the regional organizations (the SCO and CSTO as the Central Asian projects established to address the region's security problems).

The events of the late 1990s in the south of Kyrgyzstan known as the Batken events²⁷ added vigor to the organizational and legal efforts within the Shanghai Five.²⁸ It should be said that in 1998 its members announced that it was an open structure and they would “greet all interested states of the region (Central Asia.—*I.B.*) wishing to join the process.”²⁹ In this way, the mechanism of more active cooperation between heads of the law and order structures and special services of the Shanghai Five was launched. They coordinate their struggle against security threats; a Bishkek Group was set up to synchronize their activities, etc.

Securitization was manifested in the SCO's activities; its members joined forces to fight “three evils”—terrorism, extremism, and separatism—threats to their continued existence, according to the TRSC vocabulary. On 15 June, 2001 in Shanghai, the constituent session adopted the Shanghai Convention on Combating Terrorism, Separatism and Extremism, one of the key SCO documents, togeth-

²³ See: A. Priego, “Pakistan mezhdru regionalnymi kompleksami bezopasnosti Tsentralnoy i Iuzhnoy Azii,” available at [<http://www.ca-c.org/journal/2008-06-rus/06.shtml>].

²⁴ See: J. Eyvazov, “Central Eurasia through the Prism of Security: A Regional System or a Subsystem?” *The Caucasus & Globalization*, Vol. 5, Issue 1-2, 2011.

²⁵ See: F.F. Tolipov, *Bolshaia strategiiia Uzbekistana v kontekste geopoliticheskoy i ideologicheskoy transformatsii Tsentralnoy Azii*, Fan Publishers, Tashkent, 2005, p. 46; *Central Asian Security: The New International Context*; Sh. Tadjbakhsh, “Central Asia and Afghanistan: Insulation on the Silk Road, Between Eurasia and the Heart of Asia,” *PRIO Paper*, Oslo, PRIO, 2012, available at [<http://www.prio.no/Research-and-Publications/Publication/?oid=3287917>].

²⁶ See: Sh. Tadjbakhsh, op. cit., pp. 4-5.

²⁷ The terrorists who invaded Kyrgyzstan in 1999 demanded a corridor; they wanted to reach Uzbekistan to fight against its constitutional order and territorial integrity. In this way they camouflaged their true aim: control over the Osh-Khorog drug trafficking route and the Sary-Tash hub on the borders of China, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan (see: U. Botobekov, “Situatsiia v Ferganskoy doline: religiozny ekstremizm, oborot narkotikov,” in: *Mnogomernye granitsy Tsentralnoy Azii*, ed. by M.B. Olcott, A. Malashenko, Moscow Carnegie Center, Gendalf, Moscow, 2000, p. 52).

²⁸ Significantly, China was also involved in the Batken events: it used its military transport aviation to deliver weapons to the Kyrgyz military and cooperated, on a free basis, with the border guards of the Batken Region (see: O.A. Moldaliev, *Sovremennye vyzovy bezopasnosti Kyrgyzstana i Tsentralnoy Azii*, Bishkek, 2001, pp. 30-31).

²⁹ *Joint Statement of the Participants of the Almaty Summit*, 3 July, 1998.

er with the Declaration on the Establishment of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Taken together, the outcrops of terrorism and extremism in Central Asia in the late 1990s can be likened to the “Kosovo events,” which caused revision and reassessment of the role and place of the European security institutions.

As distinct from the regional security system, an RSC is an objective phenomenon, while the regional security system is its product. The regional security system can be described as “an internal mechanism and mode of organization of interstate relations designed to maintain regional peace and stability;”³⁰ it is a product of activity among the subjects, that is, the regional states. They proceed from their common and mutually conditioned security, which makes coordinated policy and joint efforts indispensable. In other words, these factors determine the dynamics of regional security.

The RSC exists *ipso facto* and concentrates on security problems. Through securitization, that is, active cooperation among the region’s states, a certain security problem is recognized as *a threat to national/regional security*. This means that the security problems of the Central Asian RSC are different from those of the RSCs of South Asia, the Caucasus, and the Gulf.

I have already written that security problems are the main instrument in identifying the *true RSC borders* and the content of regional security dynamics. These problems are absolutely objective and exist independently of the subjects’ intentions. This means that the absence of adequate cooperation level among the region’s states when it comes to opposing common threats (which is typical of the Central Asian RSC) should not be regarded as a factor that makes its autonomous nature non-existent.

The academic community distinguishes between inner (regional) and external threats to Central Asian security. The former includes the still pending international-legal border issues; mounting transborder threats (religious extremism, terrorism, illegal trade migration, etc.); undeveloped constitutionalism and institutions of civil society in some of the Central Asian states; the absence of efficient bilateral and multilateral (regional) mechanisms for settling transborder problems, etc.

External prerequisites might be of global (the events of 9/11) or regional origin and/or be caused by the neighborhood factor. The external prerequisites of the Central Asian RSC are the following: domestic instability in Afghanistan; the “instability belt” around the region—Afghanistan-FATA³¹-Kashmir-XUAR³²; the prospect of a continued military presence in Afghanistan, etc. This means that what is going on in Afghanistan, FATA, XUAR, and Kashmir is directly related to the Central Asian region and the borders of the Central Asian RSC.

Afghanistan— the “Main Nerve of Central Asia”³³

The geographical RSC borders are “zones of weak interaction,” while the states within them are called insulators.³⁴ As distinct from a buffer state found in the center of a strong securitization model, the insulator is found at the margins where two RSCs meet.³⁵

³⁰ I.I. Bobokulov, *Mezhdunarodno-pravovye aspekty regionalnoy bezopasnosti: voprosy teorii i praktiki*, University of World Economy and Diplomacy, Tashkent, 2010, p. 34.

³¹ The Federally Administered Tribal Areas is a specific region of Pakistan at the border with Afghanistan inhabited by Pashtun tribes.

³² The Xinjiang-Uyghur Autonomous Region of the People’s Republic of China.

³³ V. Korgun, “Afghanistan—glavny nerv Tsentralnoy Azii,” available at [<http://www.centrasia.Ru/newsA.php4?st=1087426800>].

³⁴ See: B. Buzan, O. Wæver, *Regions and Powers*, p. 41.

³⁵ See: *Ibid.*, p. 41.

From the very first days of the political independence of the Central Asian nations, the situation in Afghanistan has been and remains *the external backbone* of their security. This fact is conditioned by several circumstances, the main being geographic proximity, common borders, common history, and common civilization of the peoples of Central Asia and Afghanistan. As the fundamental factors of cooperation of states, they predetermine the common destiny of these peoples and nations.

The *contemporary challenges and threats to the Central Asian states* are equally important; their origins are related, to a greater or lesser degree, to the very complicated situation in Afghanistan. This largely affects the structure and content of the security policy of its neighbors. This means that they underlie the regional and national efforts designed to set up a “security belt” and institutional-legal foundations for combating contemporary threats in Central Asia.³⁶

Globalization and the increasing mutual economic dependence of the states make the “*peaceful potential*” of Afghanistan even more obvious; it may contribute to the stability and economic growth of the Central Asian countries. Afghanistan can become an important link of alternative transportation corridors and the energy system, play an important part in regional trade, and help to diversify hydrocarbon transit from Central Asia to the world markets. In other words, Afghanistan is not only and not so much an instability factor; potentially it may become an important component of the “material basis” of the region’s sustainable stability. This means that the Central Asian states and Afghanistan have mutually complimentary security interests.

The road to peace in Afghanistan, the cornerstone of domestic and regional stability, lies through the country’s direct involvement in the structure of regional cooperation. An analysis of its involvement in regional development reveals that, albeit a backbone, it still remains outside this system: its involvement in the main regional structures (the SCO, CSTO, EurAsEC) is purely token; it is absent from many other regional forums such as 6 + 1 (Japan-Central Asia) and the EU Troika and Central Asia structures. The same can be said of the projects related to energy production, transport, and trade. It seems that this does not suit the interests of the regional states and makes their security-related efforts unproductive.

The Future of the Central Asian RSC

Under the impact of various factors, the RSC might be transformed according to one of three possible patterns:

- (1) preservation of the status quo, which means that its basic structural elements will remain the same;
- (2) internal transformation—changes will unfold within the present borders: changes in the anarchical structure (in the case of regional integration); changes in polarity (disintegration, mergers, unequal development level); changes in the amity/enmity model; and
- (3) external transformation—changes of the RSC’s borders, that is, its expansion or contraction, which will inevitably change the list of its actors.³⁷

³⁶ The emerging security system in the region was intended, after all, to oppose the contemporary threats generated by Afghanistan. Domestic instability in Afghanistan was one of the main reasons why the CIS Collective Security Treaty (1992) was signed in Tashkent (in 2003, it was transformed into the Collective Security Treaty Organization; in 1997, the Contact Group “6 + 2” was formed; in 2005, the Contact SCO-Afghanistan Group was set up; later, in 2012, an anti-drug SCO strategy was formulated).

³⁷ See: B. Buzan, O. Wæver, op. cit., p. 53.

The future of the Central Asian RSC is determined by two trends—internal and external.

Internal transformation of the regional RSC within the limits of the five independent states can be described as unstable. The ups and downs are natural outcomes of the relations among the newly independent states related to building the foundations of regional security. This is shown by the emergence of several similar structures (the CACO and EurAsEC in particular) and their subsequent merging; the appearance of new specialized interstate structures based on the already functioning ones (such as the CSTO and EurAsEC based on the CIS and the SCO based on the Shanghai Five); the conflicting interests related to the unsettled border issues and the use of water from the transborder rivers, etc.

Internal transformation has not changed the anarchical nature of the Central Asian RSC. Despite the efforts of the region's states to develop cooperation within the region (which confirms the absence of disintegration processes), it is too early to talk about regional integration, that is, about a qualitatively new stage in transformation of the Central Asian RSC.

We can, however, point to the basic features of a security community, that is, of a model of interdependent security within which the members do not expect the use of force and are not ready to use it themselves.³⁸ As a rule, the member states of such communities have common fundamental values and share the conviction that peace guarantees the region's stability.

The absence of a roadmap for the Afghan conflict and the fact that the adjacent states are actively involved in Afghanistan's internal development transforms it from an insulator into a link between the Central Asian and South Asian RSCs. In other words, the RSCs are expanding or reaching new borders. The SCO and the counterterrorist operation in Afghanistan have added to the Chinese and American impacts on Central Asia. Today, however, there is no reason to expect a new RSC based on Central and South Asia—there are too many factors preventing this.

³⁸ For more detail, see: *Political Community and the North Atlantic Area*, ed. by K.W. Deutsch, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1957; *Security Communities*, ed. by E. Adler, M. Barnett, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1998.