

REGIONAL SECURITY

**DANGER AND SECURITY
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It is the received wisdom of Western policy, journalistic and entertainment communities as well as much of the academic world of area studies that Central Asia is a source and site of particular dangers. We contend that it is time that the preconceptions and oversights of this “discourse of danger” were exposed.

The question that we address in this paper is “How, why, and to what effect is Central Asia thought of and portrayed as being a particularly dangerous place?” Our answer identifies and explores a “discourse of danger” which makes the region knowable to Western officials, academic communities, journalists, and publics. By “dis-

¹ This is a revised version of J. Heathershaw and N. Megoran, “Contesting Danger: A New Agenda for Policy and Scholarship on Central Asia,” *International Affairs*, Vol. 87, No. 3, May 2011, pp. 589-612. Reproduced here with permission.

course” we mean pervasive and taken-for-granted assumptions that provide a background and vocabulary for making sense of the world. We argue that the contents of much international policy and practice, news and current affairs writing, documentaries and films, and even academic studies of security, conflict and international affairs in Central Asia are derived in accordance with a preconceived “discourse of danger” which identifies threats to the West whilst ignoring insecurity as it is experienced by Central Asian communities. This article identifies and critiques this discourse of danger.

The task of such geopolitical analysis is important for two reasons.

- Firstly, the way that policy-makers think about certain places affects the way they act towards them. The Western discourse of danger thus endangers Central Asia.

- Secondly, this assumption of danger has profound implications for the kinds of academic research which get funded and published. Western Central Asian studies are partially shaped by assumptions of danger. This article is a challenge to this Western geopolitical vision of Central Asia.

It begins by outlining the theory of critical geopolitics that we use, then overviews the portrayal of danger in Western Central Asian studies. It then considers three aspects of the discourse of danger: Central Asia as *obscure*, *oriental*, and *fractious*. We conclude with a call for academics to contest the discourse of danger by being attentive to alternative local narratives of danger and the wider global economic processes which are transforming society and economy in Central Asia.

Critical Geopolitics and the Discourse of Danger

To answer the question outlined above, we use the theoretical framework of critical geopolitics. Geopolitics is, following Agnew, the study of how “the world is actively ‘spatialized,’ divided up, labeled, sorted out into a hierarchy of places of greater or lesser ‘importance’ by political geographers, other academics and political leaders.”² *Classical geopolitics* assumes that the physical geography of the world significantly determines the course of human history. The British imperialist Halford Mackinder (1861-1947) is the chief exponent of this form of geopolitics. *Critical geopolitics*, on the other hand, denaturalizes the global order by portraying it as socially and historically constructed. It does this through an “examination of the geographical assumptions, designations, and understandings that enter into the making of world politics,”³ exploring how “descriptions of places and people are stitched together to narrate and ‘explain’ events.”⁴ It does not deny that the world is a dangerous place for many people, but emphasizes the enquiry into how, why, and with what effects certain places become understood as dangerous.

Critical geopolitics contends that geopolitics is more than the “formal” writings of academic geopolitical experts like Mackinder. It encompasses the “practical” geopolitical discourses of bodies such as foreign policy think-tanks and government bureaucracies, and the “popular” geopolitical ideas encountered in the mass media, films, novels, television documentaries, and the like. As Ó Tuathail

² J. Agnew, *Geopolitics: Re-Visioning World Politics*, Routledge, London, 2003, p. 3.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁴ K. Dodds, “Geopolitics in the Foreign Office: British Representations of Argentina 1945-1961,” *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, Vol. 19, No. 3, 1994, p. 276.

and Dalby contend, "Geopolitics saturates the everyday life of nations."⁵ This article employs this approach to explore the way in which Central Asia is written into global space as the object of multiple and intersecting formal, practical and popular geopolitical discourses which represent it as a particularly dangerous place. The task of such geopolitical analysis is important because the way that people, as individuals and embedded in organizational structures, think about places affects the way they act towards them.

Danger in Western Central Asian Studies

Danger has long been one of the pre-eminent lenses through which Central Asia has been made knowable to Europeans and North Americans via Central Asian studies in the Western world, particularly the U.K. and U.S. An unknown and un-aligned Central Asia was seen as a potential danger to British imperial power in the nineteenth century "Great Game." The idea that Central Asia presented an enduring threat to Moscow was repeated in dominant Western literatures on the region during the Cold War. Scholars found in latent Turkic national pride a "firmest and surest refuge" against Soviet attempts to remake the region.⁶ Because Soviet Central Asia experienced "the failed transformation,"⁷ the region maintained an inherent antagonism to Moscow and posed an "Islamic threat to the Soviet state."⁸

With the collapse of the U.S.S.R., Western Cold War knowledge of Central Asia was superseded by 1990s "transitology." This paradigm assumed that the newly independent Central Asian republics were making a "transition" to Western-style democratic market-capitalism. It was nonetheless haunted by the fear that this normative shift to the Western model was endangered. Fuller, for example, wrote that the U.S. was concerned that the region might become "the breeding ground of civil war, nuclear proliferation, radical Islamic movements, a battleground for Asian geopolitics, an ecological wasteland, an economic basket case, or the target of a resurgent Russian imperial vision."⁹ The ethnic violence in the late-Soviet period in the region and the Tajik civil war seemed to confirm these fears and led to conflict prevention and peacebuilding analysis of the region, as epitomized by Rubin and Lubin's 1999 study for the Council on Foreign Relations, *Calming the Ferghana Valley*.¹⁰ Thus over the past century and a half the region has been consistently written into Western geopolitical imaginations as a place of danger.

The challenge to this reading of Central Asia was begun by scholars who have engaged seriously with critical studies of International Relations and Geopolitics. In a 2000 review essay of *Calming the Ferghana Valley*, Megoran criticized the CPA project for its superficial analysis and methodological deficiencies.¹¹ Other scholars joined the debate in Heathershaw and Torjesen's 2005 special issue

⁵ G. Ó Tuathail, S. Dalby, "Introduction: Rethinking Geopolitics: Towards a Critical Geopolitics," in: *Rethinking Geopolitics*, ed. by G. Ó Tuathail, S. Dalby, Routledge, London, 1998, p. 5.

⁶ G. Hambly, A. Bennigsen, D. Bivar, H. Carrère d'Encausse, M. Hajianpur, A. Lamb, Ch. Lemerrier-Quellejey, R. Pierce, *Central Asia*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1969, pp. 241-242.

⁷ *Soviet Central Asia: The Failed Transformation*, ed. by W. Fierman, Westview, Boulder, 1991.

⁸ A. Bennigsen, M. Broxup, *The Islamic Threat to the Soviet State*, Croom Helm, London, 1983.

⁹ G. Fuller, "Central Asia: The Quest for Identity," *Current History*, Vol. 93, No. 582, 1994, p. 149.

¹⁰ See: B. Rubin, N. Lubin, *Calming the Ferghana Valley: Development and Dialogue in the Heart of Central Asia*, Report of the Ferghana Valley Working Group of the Center for Preventive Action, Century Foundation, New York, 1999.

¹¹ See: N. Megoran, "Calming the Ferghana Valley Experts. A Review Essay of *Calming the Ferghana Valley: Development and Dialogue in the Heart of Central Asia* by Nancy Lubin, Barnett Rubin, and the Center for Preventive Action, The Century Foundation Press, New York, 1999," *Central Asia Monitor*, Vol. 2000, No. 5, pp. 20-25.

of *Central Asian Survey*, “Discourses of Danger in Central Asia.”¹² Contributors highlighted the lack of empirical evidence for claims made about danger by various regional and international peace builders and conflict preventers.

In 2007 this challenge received a response from the conflict prevention community in a special issue of *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, “Conflict and Conflict Resolution in Central Asia: Dimensions and Challenges,” edited by Sandole and Korostelina. The issue included a number of studies from a conflict analysis perspective which explored the potential for violence in the region. In the conclusion Sandole argues that the papers have succeeded in countering the “discourse of danger” while, at the same time, pointing to areas of concern that should be addressed by appropriate actors within the five societies concerned, the immediate neighborhood as well as by the “concerned international community.”¹³

His analysis provides a determinist reading of conflict formation whereby poor education prompts migration which in turn generates social breakdown. Migrants swell the ranks of “unofficial’ political Islam” to rebel against a retrenched authoritarian regimes, thus impacting decisions made in the international “Great Game” over Central Asia which serves to further exacerbate this rebellion and conflict.

Sandole’s account fails to acknowledge the role of subjective interpretation and his own presuppositions that infers conflict potential from Central Asia’s “problems,” rather than from empirical data.

Our *discourse of danger* argument is not that Central Asia does not face difficulties and insecurities. Rather we argue that claims like Sandole’s are derived in accordance with a preconceived self-referential discourse of danger which identifies threats to us, whilst failing to appreciate the insecurities that are felt and experienced by Central Asians. These may relate more to the structural violence generated by capitalist restructuring and nationalist boundary making.¹⁴ Moreover, it is not that Islamism, organized crime, and terrorism are not real aspects of social life in Central Asia. They are found in Central Asia as well as many other parts of the world. Rather the issue that we raise is that of the evidential basis for hyperbolic claims of “state failure” made by some analysts. Moreover, such analyses often fail to grasp the real social and political significance of the activities, which are identified as “threats,” and how they affect and are affected by other social processes. Sandole’s deterministic reading, in which underdevelopment naturally leads to conflict, is not justified by the evidence. Other analysts emphasize the relative weakness of Islamism in the region¹⁵ and the relative lack of conflict between Great Powers in the so-called “new great game.”¹⁶ It is not empirical data, but a pre-existing geopolitical discourse of danger which provides the primary basis for Sandole’s arguments. The article now outlines the three key features of the discourse of danger.

Dimension 1:

Central Asia as Obscure

The first and arguably most distinct feature of the Western geopolitical vision which we identify is that of the obscure. Central Asia, according to such analysis, is particularly distant, inaccessible and

¹² “Discourses of Danger in Central Asia,” ed. by J. Heathershaw, S. Torjesen, *Central Asian Survey*, Vol. 24, No. 1, 2005, pp. 1-96.

¹³ D. Sandole, “Central Asia: Managing the Delicate Balance between the ‘Discourse of Danger,’ the ‘Great Game’ and Regional Problem Solving,” *Communist and Post-Communist Studies*, Vol. 40, No. 2, 2007, pp. 260-261.

¹⁴ See: N. Megoran, “The Critical Geopolitics of the Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan Ferghana Valley Boundary Dispute, 1999-2000,” *Political Geography*, Vol. 23, No. 6, 2004, pp. 731-764.

¹⁵ See: D. Lewis, *The Temptations of Tyranny in Central Asia*, Hurst and Company, London, 2008.

¹⁶ K. Collins, W. Wohlforth, “Central Asia: Defying ‘Great Game’ Expectations,” in: *Strategic Asia 2003-2004: Fragility and Crisis*, ed. by R.J. Ellings, A.L. Friedberg, National Bureau of Asian Research, Seattle, Washington, 2003, pp. 291-317.

unintelligible, and this presents a danger to the West which must be guarded against. “The Great Game” evokes these features, particularly as republished accounts of British and American explorers are picked up in contemporary accounts of the “New Great Game.”¹⁷

Aaron Sorkin’s *The West Wing* was an extremely popular and critically acclaimed U.S. television series, running from 1999-2006, which represented life in the fictional White House of President Jed Bartlett (Martin Sheen). Its audience, which reached 15-20 million at the height of its fame, is largely composed of the wealthy, professional, urban and “liberal.”¹⁸ Sorkin argues that in creating the series he sought to represent an idealized version of Washington politics for a learned audience.¹⁹ Its portrayal of the U.S. Government is credible if not realistic and is all the more important for its opinion-forming functions. As one analysis of *The West Wing* argues, “popular culture matters and provides the basis of what many people believe about the world in which they live.”²⁰

The post-Soviet Central Asian states provide three storylines of the *West Wing*. Two of these constitute sub-plots within single episodes, whilst the third—a major international armed conflict in Kazakhstan—is a significant and ongoing narrative across the final season. In addition to these three plotlines there are a few passing mentions of Central Asian states. Without exception these depictions are consistent with a general portrayal of Central Asia in *The West Wing* as obscure, uncertain and thus dangerous.

Central Asia’s first appearance in *The West Wing* is found in “The Leadership Breakfast,” season 2, episode 11 (broadcast 10/01/01), where the failure of an otherwise extremely knowledgeable character, Sam Seaborn (Rob Lowe), in conversation with a powerful columnist, to distinguish between Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan (and the latter’s putative nuclear arsenal), leads to embarrassment. Sam later realizes his mistake in discussion with a colleague, Donna Moss, and is clearly crestfallen:

Sam: Kyrgyzstan’s on the side of a hill near China and has mostly nomads and sheep.

Donna: Well maybe there are nuclear weapons in Kyrgyzstan.

Sam: There are barely pots and pans in Kyrgyzstan.

The confusion later in the episode turns farcical as Sam asks Donna, when she meets the columnist at an art gallery later in the week, to drop into conversation that he had obviously meant Kazakhstan.

We suggest that it is no coincidence that it is Central Asia which proves beyond the limits of even Sam Seaborn’s knowledge. It is post-Soviet Central Asia which is consistently interpreted by journalists, commentators, travel writers and film-makers as “lost,” “unexplored” or “distant.” This treatment of Central Asia as a popular geopolitical object is hugely important. In that it is naturally mistaken or misunderstood, Central Asia remains in tension with modern international and geopolitical discourses which demand intelligible and fixed boundaries, insides and outsides. Central Asia’s failure, from this perspective, to abide by these certainties of the modern age enables its actors and institutions to be discounted, where Central Asia is read as an opponent to our ideals but an opponent whose character remains indistinct. This situates the region on the fringes—“on the side of a hill” without “pots and pans”—and thus geostrategically unimportant.

¹⁷ Z. Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and its Geostrategic Imperatives*, Basic Books, New York, 1997; S.F. Starr, “Making Eurasia Stable,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 75, No. 1, 1996, pp. 80-92; for a discussion, see: M. Edwards, “The New Great Game and the New Great Gamers: Disciples of Kipling and Mackinder,” *Central Asian Survey*, Vol. 22, No. 1, 2003, pp. 83-102.

¹⁸ L. Elber, “‘West Wing’ at Ratings Crossroads,” Associated Press, 22 October, 2002, available at [http://b4a.healthyinterest.net/news/000172.html], 31 July, 2009.

¹⁹ See: Interview with Aaron Sorkin, Season 1, DVD box-set special feature.

²⁰ S. Philpott, D. Mutimer, “Inscribing the American Body Politic: Martin Sheen and Two American Decades,” *Geopolitics*, Vol. 10, 2005, p. 338.

A much longer regional storyline takes place across most of *West Wing*'s final season of 2005-6. These episodes feature a plot to assassinate the fictional President Isatov of Kazakhstan (once again mistaken at first, this time for Uzbekistan) and a regional oil company head. This leads to a rigged election, civil conflict ("the Kazakh people are rioting in the streets because they've been screwed out of an election") and the invasion of the country by China and Russia (a "war over oil"). The two great powers are only kept apart by a massive American intervention of around 150,000 troops. As White House Press Secretary C.J. Cregg (Alison Janney) comments, "I'm trying to keep China and Russia from annihilating the Northern Hemisphere over oil in Kazakhstan."

This New Great Game plotline is fascinating in that it shows how an obscure or unknown Central Asia is made known in terms of established international and geopolitical dogmas of national security and conflict resolution. China and Russia are represented as inevitably conflicting powers competing over finite resources. The United States is portrayed as a benign, third-party peacemaker. National elites remain in the shadows, corrupted and controlled by great powers, and completely disregarding of the rights and welfare of their peoples. Finally, the peoples of Central Asia remain hidden from view except as bearers of a universal human desire for political transition to democracy. These roles in the storyline are not at all dissimilar to the roles identified in the geopolitical scripting of the region by the Western press during the two most prominent political events of 2005, Kyrgyzstan's "Tulip revolution" and Uzbekistan's "Andijan massacre." Both events were widely and spuriously interpreted in the press as popular struggles for democracy repressed by authoritarian governments and disregarded in great power politics despite Western pressure for reform. In that Central Asia is an obscure and uncertain place it presents dangers towards which Western powers understandably remain indifferent, but do so at their peril.

Dimension 2:

Central Asia as Oriental

The second feature of Western geopolitical discourse on Central Asia is that of the region as Oriental. Orientalism is inextricably intertwined with experiences of colonialism in the Middle East.²¹ Myer has shown how Western Cold War writing on Central Asia orientalized the subject specifically in terms of a colonized people.²² Today, the Asian-ness of Central Asia is understood internationally in terms of the language of counter-terrorism, counter-narcotics and the practicalities of the ongoing Western operations in Afghanistan. Since gaining independence from the Soviet Union, Central Asian states have been increasingly represented as being comparable with their neighbors to the south, in particular Afghanistan and Pakistan, rather than to their European former Soviet compatriots. International security discourse on the five post-Soviet states orientalizes them as prone to dangerous "Af-ghanicization" and as an extension of the wider region of the Middle East and/or Asia.

The region's significance for international security derives from spatial imagination and territorial reasoning where Central Asia is on the "frontline" with Afghanistan, and even part of the same region.²³ By such accounts, Central Asia is an especially perilous and porous region of the world. It is described by the head of the Strategic Studies Institute of the U.S. Army War College

²¹ See: E. Said, *Orientalism*, Vintage, New York, 1979.

²² See: W. Myer, *Islam and Colonialism: Western Perspectives on Soviet Asia*, Routledge/Curzon, London, 2002.

²³ See: S.N. MacFarlane, "The United States and Regionalism in Central Asia," *International Affairs*, Vol. 80, No. 3, 2004, pp. 447-461.

as a “key theater in the war on terror”²⁴ which according to Giragosian, “has acquired a new strategic relevance.”²⁵

The coupling of South Asia and Central Asia in U.S. foreign policy is about more than just the consequence of the Afghanistan intervention and the use of bases in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. A pre-existing conception of Central Asia as essentially Asiatic and anti-Soviet has combined with the tumult of post-9/11 events to cause linking of Central Asia with Afghanistan in the structure of American foreign and defense policy making. According to Assistant Secretary for European and Eurasian Affairs Elizabeth Jones, “since 9/11 U.S. strategic interests in the region have focused on anti-terrorism, especially the elimination of terrorist and other destabilizing groups.”²⁶ This led to a massive increase in the U.S. strategic role following 9/11 in the establishment of the Gansi (Manas) and Kharshi-Khanabad military bases, and overflight rights across Tajikistan and Turkmenistan. Hill notes, “The primary American interest is in security, in preventing the ‘Afghanization’ of Central Asia and the spawning of more terrorist groups with transnational reach that can threaten the stability of the interlocking regions and strike the United States.”²⁷

Such thinking has even contributed to an internal re-organization of the U.S. state department. By late-2005, Jones’ department of European and Eurasian affairs had lost responsibility for the region which had been incorporated into a South and Central Asian section (see Map 1). This shift was foreshadowed by the moving of the Central Asian region from the Pentagon’s Atlantic Command to its Central Command (CENTCOM) in October 1999. In itself this bureaucratic change reflects U.S. thinking about Central Asia as a region apart from other Former Soviet Slavic states. This has consequences. It is easier, for example, to understand why Washington-based analysts may believe Russia’s role in the region is decreasing and peripheral²⁸ if they see Central Asian states as more culturally and politically akin to Pakistan or Afghanistan than to Belarus or Georgia.

In Washingtonian security analysis, claims based on cultural-historical affinities are supplemented by considerations of present security environments. For Thomas Barnett, Professor of Warfare Analysis at the U.S. Naval War College, Central Asia is part of a “non-integrating gap” (including most of Africa, the Middle East, South America and Pakistan/Afghanistan, but not Russia or Europe) that is dangerous to the “core” of globalization because of its disconnectedness from it.²⁹ For Chris Seiple, Director of the Washington think-tank the Institute for Global Engagement, Central Asia sits “atop the crescent of crisis that rises from North Africa to Central Asia before descending into Southeast Asia.”³⁰ Former U.S. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld identifies a “broad arc of instability that stretches from the Middle East to Northeast Asia” and which threatens critical U.S. interests.³¹ The affiliations of these writers illustrate the circulation of ideas between governmental and non-governmental institutions. In detaching Central Asia from its Post-Soviet space and reattaching it firmly to Asia, they also represent the Central Asian republics as dangerous.

This geopolitical conception is contested in local popular and elite discourses. China’s economic and security ties to the region are increasing exponentially but are viewed with suspicion by many

²⁴ D. Lovelace, “Foreword,” in: *Strategic Consequences of the Iraq War: US Security Interests in Central Asia Reassessed*, ed. by E. Wishnick, US Army War College: SSI, p. iii.

²⁵ R. Giragosian, “The Strategic Central Asian Arena,” *China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly*, Vol. 4, No. 1, 2006, p. 133.

²⁶ “Paraphrasing of Jones’ Testimony,” in: *Strategic Consequences of the Iraq War: US Security Interests in Central Asia Reassessed*, p. 4.

²⁷ F. Hill, “The United States and Russia in Central Asia: Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iran,” 15 August, 2002, *Brookings*, 13 July, 2001, available at [http://www.brookings.edu/speeches/2002/0815russia_hill.aspx].

²⁸ See: H. Plater-Zyberk, “Tajikistan: Waiting for a Storm?” *Central Asia Series*, Conflict Studies Research Centre, London, Vol. 4, No. 13, May 2004.

²⁹ See: Th. Barnett, *The Pentagon’s New Map: War and Peace in the Twenty-First Century*, Berkeley Books, New York, 2004.

³⁰ Ch. Seiple, “Uzbekistan: Civil Society in the Heartland,” *Orbis*, Spring, 2005, p. 246.

³¹ See: D. Rumsfeld, *Annual Report to the President and to Congress*, Department of Defense, Washington, 2002, available at [http://www.nti.org/e_research/official_docs/dod/2002/81502DOD.pdf], July 2009, p. 11.

U.S. State Department Bureau of South and
Central Asian Affairs



in the elite and general population. Surprisingly to many Western observers, public opinion surveys in Central Asian states consistently show greater trust in Russia than in the United States. Twenty-first century labor migration flows have reconnected Central Asia to Russia, and it is to Russia that thousands of Kyrgyzstani Uzbeks fled since the violence in the south of the country that began in June 2010. Similarly, some Central Asian elite conceptions of their affinity with Europe meant that the announcement of the re-organization of the State Department in 2005 was greeted with perplexity and disdain by some analysts in the region.³² That post-Soviet Central Asian regimes are now more often compared with Afghanistan than Belarus is not natural, but is the product of the discourse of danger.

Dimension 3:

Central Asia as Fractious

We identify as a third feature of the discourse of danger the representation of Central Asia as *fractious*, and thus both dangerous to the West and in need of reconstruction. This representation has marked Western writings on the perceived threats of inter-ethnic conflict and inter-state boundary disputes in the Ferghana Valley.

In the Ferghana Valley of 1990s Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, transitologists feared that the region would be torn apart by ethnic conflict. Identifying what they posited as “the ethnic basis of the new Central Asian countries,”³³ they assumed that massively violent ethnic clashes “are likely to increase in frequency and intensity.”³⁴ This view was premised upon the assumption that “ethnicity” was a tangible force that was more significant than any other social process. These formulations lacked both any attempt to theorize “ethnicity” or any solid empirical basis in research. Rather, they relied upon a particularly problematic reading of a number of violent incidents in late Soviet Central Asia. Most significant of these were the June 1990 clashes between Uzbeks and Kyrgyz in the Uzgen and Osh regions of southern Kyrgyzstan.³⁵ These incidents were taken as examples of the “ethnic discord” which allegedly “has always been a major feature of the Central Asian landscape.”³⁶ More significantly, it was widely assumed that because these “tensions continue to smolder,”³⁷ they would continue to characterize the region. This deterministic interpretation of ethnic conflict has been active once more in a partial reading of the violence in Osh and Jalalabad of 2010 (see below).

This “ethnic conflict” reading of Central Asia as fractious was buttressed by interpretations of boundary problems in the late 1990s and early 2000. Central Asian republics either began or accelerated the processes of delimiting and demarcating their international boundaries. From late 1998 onwards Uzbekistan paid greater attention to the control of flows of people and goods over its boundary, closing many minor crossing points, re-routing transport links away from cross-boundary sections, stepping up customs and security checks, and even erecting a two-meter high barbed wire perimeter fence along large sections of its Ferghana Valley boundary and mining other stretches. These unilateral

³² See: Interview conducted by one of the authors with Rashid Abdullo, independent political analyst, Tajikistan, Dushanbe June 2005.

³³ R.S. Clem, “The New Central Asia: Prospects for Development,” in: *Geography and Transition in the Post-Soviet Republics*, ed. by M.J. Bradshaw, John Wiley and Sons, Chichester, 1997, pp. 171-172.

³⁴ R. Kaiser, *The Geography of Nationalism in Russia and the USSR*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1994, pp. 370-371.

³⁵ See: A. Asankanov, “Ethnic Conflict in the Osh Region in Summer 1990: Reasons and Lessons,” in: *Ethnicity and Power in the Contemporary World*, ed. by K. Rupasinghe, V. Tishkov, United Nations University, Paris, 1996.

³⁶ M. Haghayeghi, *Islam and Politics in Central Asia*, St Martin’s Press, New York, 1995, p. 186.

³⁷ D. Fane, “Ethnicity and Regionalism in Uzbekistan,” in: *Ethnic Conflict in the Post-Soviet World: Case Studies and Analysis*, ed. by L. Drobizheva, R. Gottemoeller, C. McArdle Kelleher, L. Walker, M.E. Sharpe, London, 1996, p. 275.

moves created great inconvenience for many in the borderland, leading to frustration and anger at crossings, scuffles between residents and soldiers, fatal shootings of smugglers, and the loss of cattle and life and limb in minefields. McGlinchey grouped these various processes and disputes together and labeled them a “low level border war.”³⁸ In some academic quarters it thus became received wisdom to talk about the danger of “the volatile Ferghana Valley.”

But it was not just academics who produced geopolitical representations of the Ferghana Valley as dangerous because it was fractious. Journalists,³⁹ development planners,⁴⁰ and television documentary makers,⁴¹ used the same language and logic. These representations assert that violence is probable because ethnic conflicts occurred in the past. In so doing, they have little room for *politics*, for the role of ethnic entrepreneurs in inciting violence, or for local state and non-state authority mechanisms of defusing tension. The violence in Osh in June 2010 is a case in point. It is no coincidence that it did not occur in the Akaev period (1991-2005) because President Akaev managed ethnic relations more effectively and formed alliances with Uzbek leaders in the South. Relations worsened under President Bakiev (2005-2010) because of his reliance on extreme nationalist allies, and violence exploded in the wake of his departure in the power vacuum he left. This is about politics, but the discourse of danger overlooks the intricacies of local politics.

The crude rendering of ethnic conflict as inevitable because it occurred in the past, and because the region is fractious, is sustained by a disregard for more rigorous scholarly research that contests its assumptions and conclusions. Schoeberlein argued that “ethnicity” is a fluid and malleable social process in Central Asia, from which conflict scenarios could not be easily read.⁴² Smith was not alone in observing that “if the cases of inter-ethnic violence are mapped over the period of the post-Soviet transition, it is clear that the occurrence of new violent ethnic conflicts has declined sharply since the early 1990s.”⁴³ Megoran demonstrates how “border disputes” were not simply given political realities, but processes constructed as such within contested domestic political contest with no necessary link to ethnic conflict.⁴⁴ In his study of boundary issues in Central Asia, Polat observed that Central Asian states have “for the most part resolved the issues virtually on all fronts through sustained efforts since independence.”⁴⁵ Physical danger and structural violence are very much a part of life in the region, but the particular account of conflict and insecurity offered by the discourse of danger—where Central Asia is represented as obscure, oriental and fractious—is inaccurate. A more complex story of modern social and political conflict must be told. This should attend to new, contingent and highly political causes of conflict found in the processes of state formation, nation-building and the development of highly unequal market economies.

Implications:

A New Agenda for Central Asian Studies

Western geopolitical discourse misrepresents and constructs Central Asia as inherently dangerous in so far as it is obscure, oriental, and fractious. In academic writing, journalism, documentary,

³⁸ E. McGlinchey, “Powerless in Kyrgyzstan,” *RFE/RL Newsline*, 13 July, 2000.

³⁹ See: Ch. Caryl, “Declining Democracy,” *Newsweek Web Exclusive*, 21 January, 2001, available at [www.newsweek.com].

⁴⁰ See: B. Rubin, N. Lubin, op. cit.

⁴¹ See: “Holidays in the Danger Zone: Meet the Stans,” BBC, 2002-2003.

⁴² See: J. Schoeberlein-Engel, *Identity in Central Asia: Construction and Contention in the Conceptions of “Ozbek,” “Tajik,” “Muslim,” “Samarqandi” and other groups*, Ph.D. thesis. Harvard, 1994.

⁴³ G. Smith, *The Post-Soviet States: Mapping the Politics of Transition*, ArNo.lid, London, 1999, p. 227.

⁴⁴ See: N. Megoran, “The Critical Geopolitics of the Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan Ferghana Valley Boundary Dispute, 1999-2000.”

⁴⁵ N. Polat, *Boundary Issues in Central Asia*, Transnational Publishers, Ardsley, 2002, p. 167.

and international aid these representations are mutually reinforcing and pervasive. This “discourse of danger” shapes much of the language through which knowledge about the region is produced and communicated. In short, it makes Central Asia knowable to a Western audience.

The discourse of danger is not merely of academic interest, but has real implications. Representations of danger are not just representations of reality, but part of reality. Thus, for example, in the aftermath of June 2010 violence in Osh international organizations and media generally narrated an account of Uzbeks endangered by Kyrgyz state and society: some depictions employed words like “pogrom” (ICG 2010) and “genocide.”⁴⁶ Kyrgyz society, following such reports via the Internet, was stung by what it read as misrepresentations that ignored the suffering of Kyrgyz and the putative threat to the Kyrgyz state. It broadly reacted by denying the victimhood of Kyrgyzstani Uzbeks and justifying a backlash against them. The way we represent Central Asia as dangerous has real impacts upon local realities.

Likewise, the discourse of danger informs Western policy. Megoran *et al* discuss Western programs to support Central Asian border control. Ignoring the frequent alliances of smuggling networks with corrupt law enforcement practices, these well-intentioned schemes subject shuttle-traders and petty smugglers to increased disruption and extortion, without seriously affecting the activities of major criminals.⁴⁷ Bichsel examines international attempts to resolve irrigation disputes in the Ferghana Valley.⁴⁸ She shows how a discourse of danger in these initiatives informs simplistic and inaccurate understandings of ethnic conflict,⁴⁹ and therefore programs simply enhance the power of local elites who were battling for control of state power and resources. Likewise, Heathershaw demonstrates how a discourse of danger with respect to post-conflict Tajikistan locates threats in an Islamized and ethnically fractured society and a weak or failed state. This leads to international state-building assistance which strengthens authoritarian regimes in their economic and political domination and arguably worsens the very problems it seeks to address.⁵⁰ The discourse of danger creates practices of international aid which are part of the problem rather than part of the solution. In this sense, the discourse of danger actually endangers Central Asia itself.

The Western discourse of danger is objectionable both because of its crudity and inaccuracy, and because it endangers Central Asia. We argue that opposing and contesting the discourse should be a primary task, indeed a new agenda, for Central Asian studies.

The task is not limited to critiquing Western representations. Discourses of danger about Central Asia are found in Russian and other languages. They are often linked with the English-language literature. For example, the Russian field of conflict studies (*konfliktologiya*) draws on the Western field of conflict resolution.⁵¹ Within the region, many Central Asian scholars reproduce the discourse of danger in joint publications, in consultancy, and in reports commissioned by international organizations. The specific ways in which unequal power relations reproduce the discourse of danger in Central Asia should be subject to special scrutiny.

Because the discourse of danger is so embedded within powerful networks this will not be easy. Other accounts are produced, but too often they fall on deaf ears. They are just not as convenient, not in keeping with certain presuppositions which hold fast and may require a greater degree of knowledge and experience of Central Asia to be understood. “Political palatability,” Myer argues, “remains

⁴⁶ L. Harding, “Kyrgyzstan Killings are Attempted Genocide, Say Ethnic Uzbeks,” *The Guardian*, 17 June, 2010, p. 1.

⁴⁷ See: N. Megoran, G. Raballand, J. Bouyjou, “Performance, Representation, and the Economics of Border Control in Uzbekistan,” *Geopolitics*, Vol. 10, No. 4, 2005, pp. 712-742.

⁴⁸ See: Ch. Bichsel, *Conflict Transformation in Central Asia*, Routledge, London, 2009.

⁴⁹ See: Ch. Bichsel, “In Search of Harmony: Repairing Infrastructure and Social Relations in the Ferghana Valley,” *Central Asian Survey*, Vol. 24, No. 1, 2005, pp. 53-66.

⁵⁰ See: J. Heathershaw, *Post-Conflict Tajikistan*, Routledge, London, 2009.

⁵¹ See: M. Reeves, “Locating Danger: *Konfliktologiya* and the Search for Fixity in the Ferghana Valley Borderlands,” *Central Asian Survey*, Vol. 24, No. 1, 2005, pp. 67-81.

a strong criterion in determining which interpretations of Central Asian political and social dynamics gain an ascendancy.”⁵²

The aim of any counter-narrative to the discourse of danger must be to reveal some of the diverse experiences of danger as felt by individuals, families and communities in the face of nationalism, capitalist restructuring and new modes of territorial governance; in short, to help us understand Central Asia’s place in global politics differently. In doing so they contest the geopolitical assumptions upon which the discourse of danger is based. Once we have mitigated the dangers that we, as Central Asian scholars, pose to the region, we may be better placed to contribute towards mitigating the numerous other dangers that its people face.

⁵² W. Myer, *op. cit.*, p. 269.