Contending Political Rationalities of Central Asian Regionalism

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Abstract
This article studies the problems of regionalism in Central Asia. Unlike Europe and Southeast Asia, which created strong organisations like the EU and ASEAN, Central Asia has weak and overlapping institutions. They do not provide real multilateral cooperation. Instead, foreign powers such as Russia, China, and the United States push their own projects. This often leads to bilateral ties rather than true regional integration. As a result, Central Asian states may lose influence in the international system. The paper argues that these states need to create their own regional project. Examples from the EU and ASEAN show that regionalism can succeed when local actors take the lead, even if foreign powers are present. The EU's new policy toward Central Asia may help support this process.

Keywords: Central Asia, Regionalism, Cooperation, Multilateralism, Foreign Powers

Introduction

Regional institutions are becoming an important part of world politics (Acharya, 2007). In different parts of the world, we can observe the presence of at least one leading regional institution helping its member states better interact among themselves and with the international system. The EU in Europe or ASEAN in South-East Asia are among the foremost examples of this evolution (Acharya, 2003/2004). In contrast, it is difficult to trace stable evolutions in Central Asian regionalism. Even if there are several regional organisations in Central Asia, it is difficult to analyse them coherently due to unexpected evolutions they can go through, as well as the fact that they overlap in many domains. Moreover, these organisations lack one essential feature of working regional institutions: qualitative multilateralism (Beeson & Jayasuriya, 1998). This is largely due to the domination of geopolitical thinking concerning the overall evolution of Central Asia. For this and other reasons, Central Asian states have not been able to develop viable regionalism. However, foreign powers involved in Central Asia have been promoting regional projects in the region. Namely, we can observe the presence of Russian, Chinese, and US efforts to define the evolution of Central Asian regionalism (Bohr, 2004; Blank, 2007). Russia and China are trying to promote one particular organisation as a leading regional instrument and to construct the regional order of Central Asia around this organisation. The US has also recently announced a new project that could influence the shape of the Central Asian region. We shall elaborate on these differing attempts at regional ordering (see Part II). Initial observation of these different approaches permits us to remark on two important points that can influence the evolution and the nature of Central Asian regionalism. First of all, these approaches may follow competitive and exclusive logics vis-à-vis each other. Hence, there are different contending projects of Central Asian regionalism at work. Secondly, regardless of which of them will prevail, the regionalism stemming from these interactions will be a regionalism of a set of bilateral relationships (see Part II). These factors can further hinder the development of genuine Central Asian regionalism. For overcoming these negative influences, Central Asian countries should consider the examples of European and ASEAN regionalisms, which could develop sometimes despite the involvement of foreign powers (Katzenstein, 2005).

Regionalism has become a significant aspect of the international system. Groups such as

the European Union (EU) and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) show how countries can cooperate based on common values like unity, fairness, and equality (Buzan & Wæver, 2003; Acharya, 2007). These organisations help nations build strong ties and promote peaceful cooperation and economic growth, not only for political or strategic purposes. But when there are no solid systems for cooperation, stronger countries can dominate a region. This often creates spheres of influence or informal empires, as happened in the past with Germany, Japan, and the Soviet Union in the 20th century (Cooley, 2012). Central Asia is an example of a region where countries have not worked well together after the fall of the Soviet Union. At first, there was hope that the five countries would join efforts. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) supported this idea as well (Laruelle & Peyrouse, 2015). However, cooperation did not happen. The countries have different political and economic systems, and there are tensions between them (Jonson, 2013). Because of this, many see Central Asia as a place where big powers like Russia, China, and the United States try to expand their influence (Cooley, 2012; Blank, 2008).

If states fail to develop institutions responding to considerations of solidarity, justice, and equality, this does not mean that they will stay free from institutional constraints in their relations with other states. They risk finding themselves embedded in institutional contexts responding to objectives of, and directed by, hegemonic powers, which could take the form of spheres of influence, protectorates, or informal empires (Lake, 2001).

The efforts of Germany and Japan to establish zones of economic influence in the inter-war period by concluding commercial treaties with countries under their influence, as well as the Warsaw Pact dominated by the Soviet Union, illustrate these conclusions best (Hemmer & Katzenstein, 2002). However, despite the calls of the international community (i.e., the last UNDP Report on Central Asia) and the early efforts to build a regional system in Central Asia, regional integration projects failed to achieve desired outcomes. Various reasons were given to explain the failure of regional integration projects in Central Asia: from the lack of harmony between national political, economic, and social models of development to the persistence of a traditional geopolitical order in the region perpetuating different rivalries in different concentric circles (Bohr, 2004).

A quick overview of academic literature on Central Asian regionalism reveals that the dominant prism is geopolitical analysis (Torbakov, 2004). Central Asia has traditionally been treated as a field of geopolitical confrontation between great powers. The ongoing debate on the renewal of the “Great Game” in Central Asia once again proves the domination of the geopolitical approach for analysing regional developments (Flikke & Wilhelmsen, 2008). On the other hand, the most recent theories elaborated for grasping the evolution of the international system— increasingly structured around regions—were rarely applied to the region. In Regions and Powers, Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver (2003) treat Central Asia as part of a traditional Regional Security Complex formed around Russia. More interestingly, Central Asia is almost absent from The World of Regions by Peter Katzenstein (2005). Even if the latter work is much more comprehensive than Buzan and Wæver’s opus, Katzenstein makes only a very brief reference to Central Asia about Eurasian thought present in Russia.

The source of this geopolitical domination is twofold. Regional processes in Central Asia are strongly influenced by the behaviour of foreign actors involved there. Russia, China, and the USA are the most important among them. All of these actors actively present in Central Asia see each other's behaviour and relationships through the prism of traditional “Great Game” analysis. According to the Great Game narrative, Central Asia is an important piece in a strategic confrontation among great powers for regional and global domination. Hence, it is important to prevent other powers from dominating Central Asia (Torbakov, 2004). In its modern version, the control of Central Asia offers the controlling side unique opportunities to define the transportation of oil and gas resources of the region (Buzan & Wæver, 2003). Secondly, Central Asian states themselves adopted the old balance of power politics as the

main instrument of their foreign policy. Not only do they try to use this instrument to play major powers involved in Central Asia against each other, but they also see themselves obligated to balance each other (Tolipov, 2004b). The overwhelming presence of the Great Game logic has largely influenced the behaviour of foreign as well as local actors. Logically, academic literature is oriented towards geopolitical analysis. The media also contributes largely to perpetuating this Great Game narrative by describing any act of significant cooperation between one of the foreign powers with one or another Central Asian state as a tactical move in the Great Game.

This paper aims to study how countries in Central Asia work together. It looks at ideas about regionalism and power politics. The paper also talks about how outside countries try to influence the region. It checks how these efforts affect cooperation and also builds organisations in Central Asia. In the end, the paper asks if Central Asia can move beyond being only a place where big countries fight for power, and instead create real teamwork that helps peace, growth and share values.

Part I. Contending Political Rationalities of Central Asian Regionalism

By using the Political Rationalities Approach, we shall see that even if the behaviour of foreign actors in Central Asia is usually analysed through the prism of Great Game logics, their behaviour is orienting more and more towards institutional and normative agendas. We will use Political Rationalities Theory (PRT) for analysing the agency of the three most influential foreign actors involved in Central Asia. These agencies compete with each other to define the institutional and normative evolution of Central Asian regionalism. The PRT was initially formulated by Rose and Miller to understand the relationships between power and government (Rose & Miller, 1992). Inspired by this work, IR scholars developed new frameworks for understanding different trajectories of European and Asian regionalisms. They used the term “political rationality” to describe “an approach to the problem of economic and political governance, informed by contingent political forces and economic practices, which reflects and determines norms, directs state purposes, constitutes objects of regulation, and which is mediated by local institutional infrastructure” (Beeson & Jayasuriya, 1998). We will use the term political rationality to describe different approaches of involved actors for promoting a particular model of Central Asian regionalism. Each political rationality is centred around one leading regional structure and circulates a certain normative image of itself. As all of these political rationalities focus on Central Asia, they are influenced by each other.

Until recently, we could observe the presence of an exclusively Central Asian approach to regionalism represented by the Central Asian Cooperation Organisation. CACO's members consisted of Central Asian countries only and excluded China and Russia. But, CACO ceased to exist after its merger with EEC (Tolipov, 2005). In the absence of a political rationality exclusive to Central Asian states, processes influencing the overall development of the region are influenced mainly by three major political rationalities. We shall name them “American,” “Russian,” and “Chinese” political rationalities. One of the important features of these PRs is that they can all be associated with existing or proposed institutional models. Namely, they can be associated with “Greater Central Asia,” “Eurasian-ODKB,” and, more and more, “SCO” initiatives, respectively. They pursue increasingly divergent institutional and normative agendas (Kavalski, 2007). Moreover, besides institutional and normative components, the soft power element is also increasingly present in these political rationalities (Hill, 2006; Congressional Research Service, 2008).

Elements of Russian Political Rationalities

The 1990s were characterised by the weakening of Russian influence in Central Asia. Central Asian countries established bilateral links with most countries of the world, including

major powers like China and the USA. They started integrating into universal and multilateral institutions like the UN, IMF, and OSCE. They also tried to develop regional institutional structures that excluded Russia. However, due to the domination of a geopolitical approach in their foreign policy as well as the lack of mutual understanding, the organisation embodying exclusive Central Asian regionalism, namely CACO, ceased to exist in 2005. This was due to the reassertion of Russia in the region (Roy, 2004) as well as Central Asian states' failure to mediate among themselves (Tolipov, 2005).

For Russia, its presence in Central Asia is of vital importance for economic, geopolitical, and increasingly demographic reasons (Trenin, cited in Flikke & Wilhelmsen, 2008). Also, Russia still shares strong historical and cultural links with Central Asian countries. The presence of an important Russian diaspora in the region is another defining element of Russian Central Asia policy (Laruelle, 2008a).

The institutional dimension of Russian Political Rationality in Central Asia has been increasingly centred around the Eurasian Economic Community (EEC) and the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO). Some observers refer to this situation as the Kremlin's new “CSTO for war, EEC for economy” formula developed after the breakup of the Single Economic Space project, intended to keep Ukraine involved in the CIS integration process (Regnum News, 2006).

European Economic Community (EEC)

The European Economic Community (EEC) includes, besides Russia and Belarus, all Central Asian countries except Turkmenistan. With the increasing crisis in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), most recent examples being problematic Russia-Georgia and Russia-Ukraine relationships, the EEC is considered the only viable institution for economic cooperation in the post-Soviet space (Melikova & Sardovski, 2006). The EEC already has the most developed institutional structure, including the Interstate Council, Integration Committee, as well as the Parliamentary Assembly. The Economic Court of CIS temporarily acts as the Economic Court of the EEC according to a 2004 agreement between CIS and EEC. Negotiations of more developed integration structures like those of the Eurasian Economic Union or Customs Commission with supranational provisions are also conducted within the framework of the EEC. Russia and Kazakhstan recently created the Eurasian Bank of Development with 1.5 billion US dollars for financing regional projects. Russia will provide 1 billion dollars, and the rest will be Kazakhstan’s responsibility. For some, the new bank could develop into a counterweight to international financial institutions like the World Bank (Melikova, 2006).

Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO)

The Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) is an inter-state organisation providing collective security measures. Besides Russia, Belarus, and Armenia, its members include Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. The CSTO operates military bases in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. It has also established a Regional Anti-Terrorism Centre in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, which primarily focuses on sharing intelligence among member states. At the last CSTO meeting, it was decided to create a CSTO peacekeeping battalion (Mihailov, 2008a). The leading member of the CSTO is Russia. The military bases in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are Russian military structures operating under the CSTO mandate. One of the main reasons for other states joining the CSTO is the stipulation that Russia will sell arms to CSTO member states at domestic prices. Russia will also organise member states’ militaries, with the cost of these formations being covered exclusively by Russia (Mihailov, 2008b).

Russian leadership has been calling for closer cooperation between the EEC and CSTO.

According to Putin, “under contemporary conditions, it is impossible to provide for the stable growth of the economy without providing for its security. Under these circumstances, the issue of closer interaction between EEC and CSTO is one of the most acute tasks which will guarantee protection of integration processes from different threats” (Pravda, 2006). Recently, the General Secretary of CSTO, a Russian himself, announced the intention of member states to transform CSTO from a politico-military structure into a general international security organisation. Another interesting project of creating a Eurasian “Schengen Zone” is jointly prepared with the EEC (Litovkin, 2008).

Another important factor in Russian conduct in Central Asia is its increasing use of soft power. Not only does Russia use its financial and economic resources to promote its interests in the region, but Russian leadership also calls for making better use of its strong historical and cultural links with Central Asia (Flikke & Wilhelmsen, 2008). Recently, Russia was resisting calls to promote other regional organisations like the SCO as the leading regional instrument in Central Asia. It can be concluded that the Russian general vision is to make the EEC and CSTO the basis of a regional order regrouping Central Asian states around Russia.

Elements of Chinese Political Rationalities

Chinese policy in Central Asia is mainly motivated by security issues, geopolitical, and economic factors. Central Asian nations have strong links with the Chinese province of Xinjiang. Integrated into the Chinese empire starting from the 16th century, Xinjiang province is home to large Turkic minorities, Uyghurs being the most populous among them. Parts of the local population, seeing China as a colonial power, have nurtured separatist agendas for many years. As Xinjiang’s Turkic minorities have strong links with Central Asian Turkic nations, China’s interest is to closely monitor the evolution in the region to prevent Central Asia from becoming a field for activities of Xinjiang separatists. Their security policy is defined by their will to fight the “Three Evils,” composed of “terrorism, separatism, and religious extremism.” Geopolitically, China’s policy in post-Soviet Central Asia pursues the objectives of preventing Russia from reconverting Central Asia into its backyard, as well as avoiding the use of Central Asia by the US for strategic encirclement of China. As a global economic power, China’s needs for energy are increasing rapidly. From this perspective as well, China cannot ignore the large opportunities provided by Central Asian energy resources (Khojaev, 2007).

Now more confident about the Xinjiang factor in its relations with Central Asia (Kerr, 2008), China is increasingly involved in Central Asia for economic and geopolitical reasons. Chinese national companies are investing in the exploitation of oil and gas fields in Central Asia, while the Chinese party is at the origin of new transport route initiatives (Pannier, 2008). China is increasingly acting as a global economic power (Zvyageskaya, 2007).

China works in Central Asia mainly through the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). In the beginning, the SCO was created to address issues such as separatism, terrorism, and extremism, especially in the Xinjiang Uyghur region (Zhao, 2013). Over time, China also began using it to build strong economic and political ties. This approach is called the “Shanghai Spirit,” which focuses on trust, non-interference, equality, and respect for each country’s independence (Götz, 2015).

China combines economic support with political goals. It aims to create a peaceful and stable region that follows its model of development (Rolland, 2017). Through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China invests in roads, railways, and trade networks. China says this will help all countries develop together (Dollar, 2017). The SCO also allows China to take a leading role in the region and promote its vision of gradual, stable, and state-guided growth (Zhao, 2013).

Institutional Elements of Chinese Political Rationality

The institutional dimension of Chinese political rationality is increasingly embodied by the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). While other members' involvement in the SCO is characterised by their willingness to accommodate China's geopolitical presence in Central Asia (Tolipov, 2004a), China promotes the SCO as a general institutional framework in economic, political, and social domains. The SCO originated as a continuation of the Shanghai Five structure, which brought together China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan to settle border issues between China and each of these countries. In 2001, with particularly active involvement from China, the Shanghai Five was transformed into the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. Later, Uzbekistan became the sixth member of the organisation.

Even though Russia is a cofounder of the SCO along with China, the organisation is increasingly associated with China. This association is twofold. Firstly, China seemingly wants to rely on the SCO as a general framework for cooperation in Central Asia. Chinese President Jiang Zemin was the first to introduce the concept of the Shanghai Spirit in 2001, which is composed of "mutual trust, mutual benefit, equality, consultation, respect for different civilisations, and common prosperity" (Bailes et al., 2007).

The General Secretariat of the SCO is situated in Beijing. Significantly, the decision to make Tashkent the resident city of the Regional Anti-Terrorism Centre (RATC) of the SCO, instead of the earlier planned Bishkek, was secured mainly due to Chinese support. On the other hand, even though Russia's presence in the SCO is still considered a stake, Russian authors increasingly discuss the difficulties Russia faces in accommodating China's overwhelming influence within the organisation. Russia would prefer the SCO to focus on specific projects in limited fields, such as constructing an SCO energy club or intelligence sharing within the framework of the RATC in Tashkent. Generally, observers consider Russia unlikely to support the Chinese vision of an SCO free trade area, as it would struggle to counterbalance Chinese economic domination within the organisation. Moreover, a free trade area would imply free movement of workers across borders, which causes discomfort for Russia, given the demographic pressures in its Far East region (Bailes et al., 2007). From this perspective, many Russian observers increasingly see the SCO as "China in Central Asia" (Trenin, 2005). Since then, China has actively promoted the idea of transforming the SCO into a general regional organisation by, in particular, establishing an SCO free trade area (Cohen, 2006). China also pledged $900 million in buyer's credit to the Central Asian members of the SCO. China's overall vision and strategy for the SCO is summarised as an effort to construct "a harmonious region of lasting peace and common prosperity" (Bailes et al., 2007). The Chinese active presence in the SCO is regarded as China's first attempt at international leadership. This experience also supports China's engagement in broader international institutional relationships through instruments like the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) or ASEAN+3 (Jia, 2007).

According to Chinese officials and scholars, the SCO introduces a new normative model to world politics. The SCO is regarded as the first genuinely mutually beneficial organisation, sharply contrasting with the bloc logics that dominate global politics. It is organised around the "Shanghai Spirit," which consists of mutual trust, mutual benefit, equality, consultation, respect for different civilisations, and common prosperity. The SCO is essential for constructing "a harmonious region of lasting peace and common prosperity" (Bailes et al., 2007).

Elements of US Political Rationalities

Since the fall of the Soviet Union, the United States has been active in Central Asia. Its involvement ranges from bilateral contacts to influence within international institutions such

as the IMF, addressing general development issues in the region. US interest in Central Asia is also driven by geopolitical considerations dating back to the Cold War. The Soviet Union's relocation of missile testing and launch bases to Central Asia during this period sparked US interest as early as the 1950s (Maine, 2003). This fact, combined with the relocation of numerous factories to Central Asia from the European parts of the USSR during World War II, supports the relevance of Heartland narratives concerning Central Asia's unique strategic defence position. Initially, US involvement in Central Asia, following the Soviet Union's collapse, primarily focused on preventing Russia and other powers from dominating the region (Maine, 2003).

While the geopolitical value of Central Asia for the US remains debated, the events of September 2001 added a crucial reason for American involvement. Central Asia became strategically important for the US-led War on Terror. Since then, the US has operated military bases in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. However, in 2005, the US was forced to withdraw troops from Uzbekistan at the explicit request of the Uzbek government (Bailes et al., 2007).

In general, the US political rationality (PR) in Central Asia is primarily defined by its status as a global power. The main objective of US involvement has been to maintain the geopolitical balance and prevent it from shifting in favour of other major powers in the region, namely China and Russia. This strategic consideration has likely influenced the US preference for a bilateral approach rather than a regional one in its relations with Central Asian countries. Observers note that the US even seeks to influence decisions within multilateral institutions to benefit its preferred allies in the region (Macfarlane, 2004). This bilateral approach has been met with considerable criticism from various analysts (Starr, 2005).

Institutional and normative elements of US political rationality

More recently, the US has initiated efforts that could lead to multilateral institutional cooperation. Specifically, the US has been developing a regional project known as the Partnership for Greater Central Asia. This effort can be understood as a response to the criticisms of its bilateral policy in the region. The article that introduced the Greater Central Asia Project takes a critical stance toward US bilateralism in Central Asia (Starr, 2005). It advocates for the development of a comprehensive framework for US involvement in the region, with Afghanistan as a central factor. The US is encouraged to expand its successful reforms in Afghanistan and propose a general cooperation framework encompassing Afghanistan and the Central Asian states. Such a framework is expected to break the isolation of Central Asian states and foster the development of economic and political ties with the broader Asian region (Starr, 2005).

Current US initiatives in Central Asia, such as USAID's Regional Energy Markets Assistance Program—which aims to assist Central Asian states in improving service delivery and preparing institutional and regulatory frameworks for new regional trade arrangements—are being implemented within the framework of the Greater Central Asia agenda (Starr, 2005).

The interest shown by the USA in the Asian Development Bank (ADB) financed project "Central Asian Economic Cooperation" (CAREC) may indicate an important role for CAREC within their broader regional strategy (Feigenbaum, 2007). Normative considerations also play a significant role in this approach. According to the authors of the Greater Central Asia initiative, the project aims to transform Central Asia into a zone of "secure sovereignties sharing viable market economies, enjoying secular and open systems of government." The development of parliamentary institutions, political parties, the rule of law, and free speech is prioritised within the Greater Central Asia project. In this perspective, it is crucial to convince the concerned states that democratic reforms enhance, rather than undermine, stability and security.

After the events of September 11, 2001, the United States started engaging with Central Asia, focusing mainly on partnerships to fight terrorism (Blank, 2008; Cooley, 2012). Over time, it expanded its efforts through initiatives like the Greater Central Asia project and the C5+1 group. The U.S. promotes ideas like democracy, free markets, and human rights, following liberal economic principles (Mankoff, 2011).

Another important goal for the U.S. is to limit the growing influence of Russia and China in the region. It supports regional organisations and funds various projects through agencies such as USAID and CAREC (Cooley, 2012). The U.S. pushes for clear rules, transparent governance, and strong cooperation to help improve security and development. Still, some local governments see the U.S. as too controlling or inconsistent, which makes it harder for Washington to earn their full trust (Laruelle, 2015).

Part II. Perspectives on the Future of Central Asian Regionalism

Regionalism refers to the process by which countries within a certain geographic area collaborate to achieve shared political, economic, or security goals. This cooperation can range from small, informal arrangements to large, institutionalised organisations that foster a sense of regional unity (Hettne, 2005). The form regionalism takes varies depending on internal factors such as common identity and political systems, as well as external influences like the role of powerful states and global governance frameworks (Fawcett, 2010).

In Central Asia, building regionalism is challenging. Although the five countries are geographically close and share many cultural similarities, strong regional cooperation is rare. Many scholars describe Central Asia mainly as a place where Russia, China, and the United States compete for influence (Cooley, 2012). However, this view often overlooks other important aspects, such as shared values and regional organisations that encourage cooperation.

Russia, China and the US can be associated with the promotion of a certain regional order for Central Asia. As their projects concern the same regional space, their political rationalities interact and influence each other. What are the relationships between these three political rationalities, and what will be their consequences for the evolution of Central Asian regionalism? Initial observations show to the existence of a logic of competition and exclusion between their approaches. However, it is difficult to elaborate on the nature of Central Asian regionalism in the future. As processes in this region are evolving unexpectedly, we cannot say which Political rationality will prevail upon others and what turn will take regionalism there. But, regardless of which political rationality will prevail, one aspect of Central Asian regionalism seems to be certain. Unless exclusive Central Asian regionalism develops, any regionalism in Central Asia will be that of a set of bilateral relationships.

Because of the competing interests of outside powers and the lack of trust among the Central Asian states, the future of regionalism seems limited to two main paths:

- If the Greater Central Asia project gains momentum, it could link the region more closely with South Asia. However, it might also increase divisions inside the region as countries face conflicting external pressures and competing alliances (Laruelle, 2019).
- Another possibility is the continued dominance of Russia and China, which could keep Central Asia as a buffer zone between two major powers. This would reduce regional independence and weaken collective action (Cooley, 2012).

In both cases, unless Central Asian countries themselves create a truly independent and inclusive form of regionalism, the region will likely continue to rely on external bilateral relations instead of building strong multilateral cooperation (Kuhn, 2017). Real

multilateralism needs shared values, equal standing for all members, and a commitment to work together—conditions that do not yet exist in Central Asia's current regional systems (Laruelle, 2014). For now, the region's institutions are more like a patchwork of unequal power, political bargaining, and short-term deals, which prevent the creation of a united and principled community of states (Gleason, 2018).

Logics of Competition and Exclusion Between Political Rationalities (PRs)

When discussing the interactions and relationships between the Russian, Chinese, and U.S. approaches, it is important first to highlight that each of their respective political rationalities (PRs) is shaped by the image they have of themselves and of each other.

How do they see themselves and each other?

U.S. involvement in Central Asia reflects its intention to capitalize on its victory in the Cold War by establishing itself as a Eurasian land power (Kerr, 2008) and to prevent the emergence of new global powers (Brezinski, 1997). From the U.S. perspective, Chinese and Russian interests in Central Asia are inherently imperialistic and pose a threat to the sovereignty of Central Asian countries (Blank, 2007). Thus, the U.S. approach in Central Asia can be characterized primarily as that of a global power determined to maintain and defend its hegemonic status.

Besides the significant security factor linked to the Xinjiang issue, Chinese involvement in Central Asia is also driven by its emergence as a global actor capitalizing on its economic and financial achievements. Observers view China as an emerging global economic power in the region. Many Chinese authors describe China's regional approach to Central Asia as one of its first successful attempts to act as a great power by contributing institutionally to international order (Jia, 2007).

The Russian reassertion in the CIS in general, and Central Asia in particular, is realized within the framework of its post-imperial project. According to Russian observers, after initial hesitation, Russia has distanced itself from the Western orbit. Strengthened by its status as a "great energy power," Russia aims to position itself as an "indispensable country" in world politics (Trenin, 2006). Whether this grand project takes the form of a liberal empire (Chubais, 2003) or a pragmatic post-imperial project, Central Asian states remain a crucial part of Russian plans. Great powers need client states (Trenin, 2006). The presence of significant Russian populations in Central Asia also plays a defining role in shaping Russian policy in the region (Laruelle, 2008a). Furthermore, the growing influence of Eurasianist thought in Russian political circles emphasizes Russia's destiny as a great power with a special moral mission (Laruelle, 2008b).

Russia aims to maintain its influence in Central Asia, having been the dominant power in the region for many years. It engages with other countries through organisations such as the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) and the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) (Laruelle, 2015; Götz, 2015). These organisations help Russia keep the region connected politically and economically while encouraging countries to align with Moscow's strategic goals (Cooley & Heathershaw, 2017). Russia employs both hard power—military and security measures—and soft power, such as cultural ties and shared Soviet history, claiming to provide stability and protection from internal and external threats (Laruelle, 2015).

Contending relationships between their Political Rationalities

At first glance, the relationships among a global power (the US), an emerging global economic power (China), and an indispensable country with a special Eurasian mission (Russia) appear more confrontational than harmonious. The US perceives the foreign

policies of Russia and China in Central Asia as inherently imperialistic, while Russia and China view the US presence as an attempt to weaken their positions and strategically encircle them. Consequently, despite their own divergences, Russia and China are believed to have formed an alliance to push the US out of Central Asia. They argue that recent colour revolutions in the post-Soviet space are, in fact, manifestations of US plans to install favourable leaders in the region (Jia, 2007).

When the impact and reverberations of these revolutions were still fresh, Uzbekistan, speaking from the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) platform, demanded the withdrawal of US troops from its territory. The recent appeal for a Greater Central Asia project can be seen as an attempt by the US to capitalize on its presence in Afghanistan—a traditional buffer zone—to extend its influence into Central Asia. According to authors affiliated with the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute (CACI), linking Central Asia to South Asia is essential to end Russia's prevailing influence and to move the region away from Russia's orbit (Norling & Swanström, 2007). However, this project has received a lukewarm reception from the concerned states so far. Most Russian and Central Asian authors view the Greater Central Asia idea as a US move aimed against the interests of Russia and China, reflecting the US's global power ambitions (Laumulin, 2005).

The Greater Central Asia project can also be interpreted as a reactionary move in the geopolitical game. In fact, other major powers such as China and Russia have been quite successful in developing regional institutions with strong support from Central Asian states. Despite initial scepticism, the SCO has consolidated its institutional influence in the region and attracted important actors like India and Iran as observer states. Meanwhile, Russia has strengthened its integration projects through organisations like the Eurasian Economic Community (EEC) and the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO). From this perspective, the US Greater Central Asia initiative evidences American efforts to develop alternative regional frameworks (Jia, 2007; Norling & Swanström, 2007; Laumulin, 2005).

If China and Russia are indeed united in their stance against the US in Central Asia, this does not imply that they share a fully harmonious position on all issues. In fact, Russian observers increasingly express concerns about China's predominance in several areas, including the economy. A recent Russian newspaper article reported that, for the first time in history, China has achieved a positive trade balance in its relations with Russia. The article further noted that the nature of Sino-Russian trade relations is taking on characteristics akin to a metropole-colony relationship, with China increasingly importing raw energy resources from Russia while Russia purchases industrial goods from China (Naumov, 2008).

These concerns could lead to growing divergences between China and Russia regarding the regional order in Central Asia. While China aims to establish the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) as the foremost regional cooperation institution, Russia, aware that it may become a subordinate partner within such an organisation, promotes the Eurasian Economic Community (EEC) and the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) as broader frameworks for cooperation between Russia and Central Asia. According to many observers, Russia's interest in the SCO is primarily driven by geopolitical motives, as it fears that unchecked competition with China in Central Asia might weaken Russia's position (Blank, 2008). The SCO, however, allows for coordinated geopolitical bargaining between Russia and China over Central Asia (Tolipov, 2004a).

The normative components of the three political rationalities also diverge on crucial points. While the US is generally associated with calls for democratic reform, Russia's concept of "sovereign democracy" resonates more with Central Asian countries (Naumov, 2008; Blank, 2008; Tolipov, 2004a).

Central Asian leaders also appreciate the Chinese model of economic development, which

achieves transformation without challenging the official communist ideology (Flikke & Wilhelmsen, 2008). These differences are reflected in the normative objectives of their respective projects for Central Asia. From the US perspective, in order to counterbalance the negative influence of China and Russia, Central Asian states should develop an independent regional integration. The Greater Central Asia initiative is seen as a tool to help these states break out of the isolation imposed by Russia and China.

For China, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) is envisioned to foster the establishment of a "harmonious region with sustainable development and common prosperity" (Jia, 2007). The normative divergence between these political rationalities was notably illustrated by their contrasting reactions to the events in Andijan, Uzbekistan. While SCO is promoted by Russia and China as an instrument contributing to the development of a democratic world order and upholding international law principles, its foundational documents do not explicitly reference democracy or human rights. Nonetheless, both SCO and the Eurasian Economic Community (EEC), as multilateral organisations holding observer status at the United Nations, can provide normative legitimacy for Central Asian governments. Positive assessments by observers regarding recent elections in Central Asian countries exemplify this legitimising function (UN General Assembly, 2003; UN General Assembly, 2004).

The three main powers in Central Asia—Russia, China, and the United States—cooperate at times but also compete and attempt to limit each other's influence. They engage in organisations such as the SCO, the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), and the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), which aim to foster regional cooperation. However, differences in visions of regional governance create tensions (Götz, 2015). For instance, Russia and China emphasise respect for each country's sovereignty and non-interference, whereas the United States prioritises the promotion of liberal values. Moreover, Russia's EEU focuses on economic integration, while China favours separate bilateral agreements with individual states (Cooley & Heathershaw, 2017).

Because of these differences, cooperation in Central Asia is often short-term, limited to bilateral relations, or focused on specific issues. There is no strong, unified regional organisation that enjoys full support from all members (Jonson, 2013). This keeps the region divided and prevents the formation of a single community with shared goals.

The United States wants to maintain its influence in Eurasia after the Cold War and sees Central Asia as strategically important (Cummings, 2012). Washington believes that Russia and China exercise too much control in the region, which could harm the freedom and democratic development of Central Asian states (Cooley, 2012). It promotes democracy and human rights through initiatives such as the "Greater Central Asia" plan, which aims to connect the region with South Asia—especially Afghanistan—to reduce Russian and Chinese influence (Laruelle, 2019). The U.S. also focuses on security by fighting terrorism and supporting free-market systems (Weitz, 2017).

China views Central Asia as part of its broader global economic strategy and seeks stability in the region. It is concerned with security in Xinjiang, energy supply, and improving trade routes (Overland & Laruelle, 2019). China mainly operates through the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), which was created to combat terrorism but now also supports economic ties and diplomatic relations (Feng & Laruelle, 2020). Beijing does not require its partners to adopt democratic systems, focusing instead on business agreements, infrastructure projects, and trade expansion to benefit its economy (Kaczmarski, 2017; Rolland, 2017).

Russia seeks to restore its role as the leading power in Eurasia, with Central Asia holding special importance due to historical ties (Cooley, 2012). It uses cultural, linguistic, and

security connections, particularly through organisations like the CSTO and EEU (Gleason, 2018). Moscow promotes the idea of “Eurasians” and positions itself as the region’s core (Laruelle, 2014). Russia leads several regional initiatives and often tries to limit China’s influence (Lo, 2015). While it focuses on both security and economic cooperation, it also competes with China as Beijing’s presence grows stronger (Kuhn, 2017).

Central Asian Regionalism as a Set of Bilateral Relationships

Although the contentious nature of the relationships between these political rationalities (PRs) is evident, it remains difficult to determine the future nature of Central Asian regionalism. If the Greater Central Asia project prevails, Central Asian regionalism will, at minimum, include Afghanistan and become more integrated with South Asia. This outcome could also lead to further fragmentation within Central Asia. The recent treaty establishing the Persian-Speaking Union between Afghanistan, Iran, and Tajikistan (Medrea, 2008), as well as a Tajik author’s observation regarding the temporality of Tajikistan’s dependence on Russia and its suggested orientation toward the Persian-speaking world, are symptomatic of centrifugal forces at play in the region (Abdullo, 2007). Conversely, if the Russian and Chinese positions dominate, Central Asia’s status as a bloc caught between two giants will be reinforced. In either scenario, as long as genuine Central Asian regionalism fails to develop, geopolitical pressures on the region’s states are likely to increase.

One point that can be emphasised regarding the nature of Central Asian regionalism, regardless of which PR prevails, is that all promote a regionalism largely based on bilateral and even discriminatory principles. None truly supports the kind of genuine multilateralism that is essential for effective regionalism. Instead, these institutional frameworks often serve as platforms for conducting bilateral dialogues, where the “big brother” acts as mediator among its quarrelling “little brothers.”

At first glance, Central Asian states appear embedded within a multilateral regional system. Meetings of the Eurasian Economic Community (EEC) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) bring together representatives from several Central Asian and neighbouring countries. Decisions at the level of the Councils of Heads of State are made on a consensus basis. If one adopts a nominal definition of multilateralism—as the practice of coordinating national policies among three or more states—then it can be affirmed that Central Asian states have succeeded in integrating multilateral structures to manage relations with each other and with neighbouring powers such as China and Russia. However, in practice, current regionalism in Central Asia exhibits predominantly bilateral behaviour rather than genuine multilateralism. Distinguishing between nominal and qualitative definitions of multilateralism helps clarify this trend. While the nominal definition focuses simply on the number of participating parties, the qualitative definition concerns the nature of relationships among the involved states. Genuine multilateralism entails more than a mere count of member states; its defining characteristic lies in certain principles governing the ordering of relations among those states. Multilateralism requires, on the one hand, indivisibility among members of a collective with respect to the range of behaviours in question—meaning that the attitude of one state toward any member of the group is consistent with its attitude toward all other members. On the other hand, multilateralism generates expectations of diffuse reciprocity, where the behaviour of individual states is not driven by strict quid pro quo considerations (Ruggie, 1992).

Applying this framework to Central Asian regionalism reveals that the ordering principle remains predominantly bilateral rather than multilateral. Even within institutional frameworks such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), the Eurasian Economic Community (EEC), or the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), relationships are largely bilateral and based on quid pro quo arrangements. For instance, Russia reserves the majority of voting rights within the EEC and CSTO. The CSTO is commonly perceived as

extending a Russian security umbrella to its members, with military structures in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan operating under Russian control (Flikke & Wilhelmsen, 2008). Moreover, Central Asian states participate in the CSTO not primarily for collective security provision but to benefit from Russian guarantees and access to affordable Russian arms. Institutionally, Russia holds most voting rights and effectively wields an unofficial veto within the EEC. The distribution of votes in both the EEC and its subsidiary projects, such as the Customs Commission, is discriminatory. As one Russian observer bluntly noted, “talk in the CSTO and EAEC is not so much about multilateral relations as about several pairs of bilateral relations with Russia” (Trenin, 2006).

When Uzbekistan joined the European Economic Community long after its creation, in 2004, this fact was described as a simple bilateral issue of Uzbekistan rapprochement with Russia (Tolipov, 2005; Fumagalli,2007). This was confirmed by the awarding of major contracts by Uzbekistan to Russian companies Gazprom and Lukoil, following the signing of the protocol of Uzbekistan's adhesion to the EEC at the Interstate Council (Melikova & Sardovski, 2006).

China also seemingly prefers bilateral contacts with Central Asian countries. For one Central Asian observer, the SCO is not truly a multilateral organisation with six members; due to significant differences among its members, relationships within the SCO can only be represented as 2+4 or as 1+1+4 (Tolipov, 2004a). When China pledged 900 million US dollars to develop economic relations within the SCO, this was interpreted as a Chinese gesture towards Uzbekistan (Panfilova, 2006). Some observers suggested this was a repetition of China’s strategy to build special relationships with its commercial partners by conditioning credits on, for example, the purchase of Chinese products. For them, China’s general strategy is to become the dominant power in the region, potentially turning Central Asian states into vassals of China (Swanström, 2005). Significantly, the 900-million-dollar credit pledged by China is conditioned on the purchase of Chinese products (Flikke & Wilhelmsen, 2008).

US policy in the region has been criticized for its bilateral nature. The Greater Central Asia idea can be perceived as a response to these critiques. However, close scrutiny of the GCA project and recent signals from the American establishment point to the contrary. The US still views bilateral relationships as key to its regional policy success in Central Asia. For example, a recent study reaffirms the centrality of Uzbekistan for the US and the weakness of relying on Kazakhstan as the principal US partner in the region (Blank, 2007). Moreover, if the GCA project develops, it will have to coherently incorporate traditional bilateral relationships like US-Pakistan or US-India.

In Central Asia, regional cooperation is often presented as multilateral but is, in practice, mostly bilateral. This is largely shaped by the strategic interests of major external powers such as Russia, China, and the United States. Although multilateral bodies like the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), and the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) exist, real decision-making is often based on bilateral ties and patron–client relationships rather than genuine multilateral governance (Kuhn, 2017; Laruelle, 2019).

Russia’s dominance is most visible in the CSTO and EAEU, where it holds greater voting power, controls the agenda, and leads operations. These organisations act less as platforms for equal members and more as tools for Russian geopolitical influence, maintaining a hierarchy that limits the independence of Central Asian states (Gleason, 2018; Cooley, 2012). For example, CSTO military cooperation depends heavily on Russian command and resources, which creates security dependence rather than shared defence (Laruelle, 2014). Central Asian members often join these groups to gain Russian protection and economic benefits, rather than to strengthen regional unity.

China's work in the region, mainly through the SCO and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), also operates this way. The SCO officially makes decisions by consensus, but outcomes often reflect bilateral deals, especially between China and individual Central Asian states (Feng & Laruelle, 2020). The BRI's loan system—where funding is linked to buying Chinese goods and services—ties countries directly to Beijing, while doing little to promote broad regional integration (Rolland, 2017). This "transactional regionalism" focuses on flexible, country-specific partnerships instead of building regional institutions for shared goals.

The United States shows a similar pattern. While it promotes regional integration through initiatives like the C5+1 platform, which brings together the U.S. and the five Central Asian republics (Weitz, 2017), most work happens through bilateral talks and aid programs for individual states. This means there is no strong collective regional plan.

This preference for bilateralism over multilateralism affects Central Asia's ability to work together as a region. Ties with external powers can create competing loyalties among Central Asian states, reducing trust and cooperation within the region. This slows the creation of strong, rule-based regional institutions that could balance external influence (Kuhn, 2017). For example, Uzbekistan's energy deals with Russia and infrastructure loans from China are handled bilaterally, leaving aside wider regional strategies (Laruelle, 2019). Even in multilateral settings, informal groupings often appear. The SCO's politics sometimes follow patterns like "2+4" or "1+1+4," where smaller Central Asian states align separately with China or Russia instead of acting together (Feng & Laruelle, 2020). This division limits progress in joint policy-making and collective security.

Overall, Central Asia's current regionalism is a patchwork of bilateral ties operating under the cover of formal multilateral bodies. Without moving toward inclusive, rules-based multilateralism, the region will likely continue depending on external powers and miss the chance to build a strong, independent regional order that can balance great power competition with internal cooperation (Gleason, 2018).

Conclusions

The presence of competition and exclusion logics between major PRs shaping Central Asian regionalism, as well as the prevailing bilateral nature of the latter, can lead to the emergence of negative kind of regionalism in Central Asia. But, due to the lack of genuine Central Asian political rationality guiding regional processes, Central Asian countries will be embedded increasingly in current regionalism projects promoted by foreign powers. Increasingly under institutional constraints of these frameworks, Central Asian states may find themselves in a very disadvantageous position in the international system guided more and more by multilateral institutional logic. Further development of institutional and normative constraints within the framework of these competing regionalism projects will diminish the chances of genuine Central Asian regionalism. On the other hand, if Central Asian states could reactivate and develop a regional project among themselves, it would help their real integration into the international system. Working regionalism is indeed an important factor for the development of states, and it will also help them participate in the life of the international community for the benefit of all. If they could develop genuine Central Asian regionalism, better serving their real needs, they could overcome the continuation of perpetuating Great Game logics, which have negatively influenced the evolution of Central Asia. Following David Kennedy's words, the transformation of international social life into an institutional process sets the regime against the repetition of history. European countries have been able to overcome centuries-long logics of competition and exclusion, which led to devastating wars on the continent, by developing working multilateral institutions (Kennedy, 1987).

The examples of the EU as well as ASEAN show the importance of international institutions

based on qualitative multilateralism. The development of working regionalisms was not spontaneous in Europe and Asia. If war and chaos played the role of a “break” in Europe, facilitating the move to institutions (Kennedy, 1987; Laffan, 1998), observers trace the genuine development of regional institutions in Asia to the Asian Financial Crisis in the late 1990s. If ASEAN was already moving in the direction of consolidating regional order after the end of the Cold War (Acharya, 2003/2004), the Asian Financial Crisis played an important role in accelerating this movement. Today, ASEAN is increasingly gaining a prominent place in both the Asian and global order. Not only has it consolidated, but it is also at the centre of growing institutional relationships in Asia and the Pacific.

Foreign Political Rationalities were not absent during the formation of European and Asian regionalisms either. However, local Political Rationalities succeeded in becoming central and were able to turn the presence of foreign Political Rationalities into a supporting element for the development of regional projects. Europe used US involvement to develop regional institutions (Laffan, 1998).

The spectre of negative consequences of foreign powers' involvement in the region led ASEAN member countries to develop working regionalism. ASEAN regionalism could develop despite the constraining effects of US involvement (Beeson, 2005). Now, their regionalism permits them to involve major powers like China and the USA positively. In contrast, the distinguishing feature of Central Asian regionalism can be said to be the absence of a coherent local Political Rationality. Central Asian states are trying to engage major powers like Russia and China without first developing their own regionalism. Consequently, the presence of several contending political rationalities at work in the region is leading to the formation of a nominally multilateral, but substantially bilateral, regional system. To overcome this geopolitical curse, they should go beyond geopolitics and try to create a genuine multilateral approach among themselves. Indeed, the newly emerging EU Political Rationality could help this happen. The EU has recently adopted a new strategy for cooperation with Central Asia (Lobjakas, 2007). We know that the EU is now the leading example of working regionalism as well as a promoter of regionalism in other parts of the world. It supports and cooperates with regional institutions in Asia, Africa, and the Americas. If the European Union were to involve itself in Central Asia in its status as a normative power (Laïdi, 2005), this could play a favourable role in reactivating and developing genuinely Central Asian regionalism.

Further research would also be welcomed that could compare the agencies of those three major powers to similar experiences in other parts of the world. Indeed, the involvement of global powers was essential in the development of regionalism in Europe and elsewhere. But interestingly, the involvement of one power in one region was not of the same nature as its involvement in other regionalism projects. Comparing the US efforts to build regionalisms in Europe and Asia, Hemmer and Katzenstein concluded that US identification with Europe pushed them to develop a multilateral approach for dealing with post-war Europe. On the other hand, the lack of identification between the US and Asia led them to promote a set of bilateral relationships in post-war Asia. Accordingly, if European regionalism developed because of the US, Asian regionalism developed despite the US. Similar inquiries into the causes of the prevalence of bilateral logics in Central Asia—where all major powers involved in promoting certain regional orders chose bilateral approaches—will be very interesting. Using this perspective, it would also be interesting to compare the actual Political Rationalities of China, Russia, and the USA in Central Asia with their approaches to regionalism during the Cold War.

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