

The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and Security in Post-Soviet Central Asia

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Abstract: *Tracing the debate on the importance and influence of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) on regional security integration in Central Asia, this work assesses the degree of its integration. It mainly addresses the interplay between individual state security needs, norms and identities. My proposed perspective is based on constructivism, informed by the English school. The paper concludes that security cooperation between SCO member states in the security environment is impacted by three factors: 1) security, influenced by 2) identities and norms, inducing states to utilise 3) the functions of organisation to their needs. The work explores the implications of such security cooperation in the context of perceptions and the conduct of cooperation research.*

Keywords: Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, Central Asia, Russia, China, regionalism, constructivism, integration, cooperation

Introduction

Opinions about the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation's (SCO)¹ purpose vary tremendously despite the organisation's explicit statement of providing its members security against non-traditional threats.² Questions of whether

¹ 'The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) is a permanent intergovernmental international organisation which was proclaimed on 15 June 2001 in Shanghai (China) by the Republic of Kazakhstan, the People's Republic of China, the Kyrgyz Republic, the Russian Federation, the Republic of Tajikistan and the Republic of Uzbekistan.' From *Shanghai Cooperation Organisation*, 07 June 2002, available at: <<http://www.sectSCO.org/EN/brief.asp>> (accessed 05 May 2010).

² Some of the main goals are: 'to consolidate multidisciplinary cooperation in the maintenance and strengthening of peace, security and stability in the region and promotion of a new democratic, fair and rational political and economic international order; to jointly counteract terrorism, separatism and extremism in all their manifestations, to fight against illicit narcotics

the SCO should be considered a counter-balance against NATO,³ or whether it was created to counter China's influence in Central Asia, have been vigorously debated. One argument holds that the SCO successfully binds its members against undertaking any threatening action against the peace and security in the broad Central Asian region; in other words, its stated mission is to provide a working, regional collective security mechanism. Alternatively, Ambrosio argued that the SCO strengthens autocracy in Central Asian republics under the façade of promoting security.⁴ Additionally, the relative scarcity of research on the Central Asian region has also produced an ill-suited theoretical divide in its treatment of how the states in the region interact with global superpowers. One perspective of this debate is best represented by Ros-Lehtinen who regards the region as being 'vulnerable to variable whims of superpower self-interest,'⁵ while at the other end of the spectrum Smith claims that Central Asia is not part of a 'great game' between superpowers⁶ but rather experiencing a regional power struggle for dominance. This polarisation has kept the focus of research limited to two main camps, resulting in a general ignorance over other important issues and associated problematics.

The central claim of this work concerns the process of security regionalisation in Central Asia, represented by the SCO, which is best understood through a theoretical framework that combines three perspectives: the English School⁷,

and arms trafficking and other types of criminal activity of a transnational character, and also illegal migration', 'Charter of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation,' *Shanghai Cooperation Organisation*, 07 June 2002, available at: <<http://www.sectsc.org/EN/show.asp?id=69>> (accessed 06 April 2010).

³ Blank, Stephen, 'US Interest in Central Asia and Their Challenges,' *Demokratizatsiya*, (April 2007), p. 318; US Congress, 'United States Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe (Helsinki Commission)', Hearing: 'The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation: Is it Undermining US Interests in Central Asia?,' 26 September 2006; Nanay, Julie, 'Inside Track: SCO Gaining Importance,' *The National Interest online*, 08 August 2007.

⁴ Ambrosio, Thomas 'Catching the 'Shanghai Spirit': How the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation Promotes Authoritarian Norms in Central Asia,' *Europe-Asia Studies*, 60: 8, October 2008. p. 1321–1344.

⁵ Ros-Lehtinen, Ileana, 'Assessing Energy and Security Issues in Central Asia,' *Testimony to the House of Representatives Committee on International Relations, Subcommittee on the Middle East and Central Asia*, 25 July 2006. p. 4.

⁶ Smith, Dianne, L., 'Central Asia: A New Great Game?' *Asian Affairs*, Vol. 23, No. 3 (Fall 1996). pp. 147–175.

⁷ There are multiple definitions, but according to Robert Jackson (1992:271), the English School is 'a variety of theoretical inquiries which conceive of international relations as a world not merely of power and prudence or wealth or capability or domination but also one of recognition, association, membership, equality, equity, legitimate interests, rights, customs and conventions, agreements and disagreements, disputes, offences, inquiries, damages, reparations, and the rest: the normative vocabulary of human conduct.'

constructivism⁸ and functionalism/neofunctionalism.⁹ In other words, the degree of regional security integration, in the context of the SCO, is impacted by three factors: 1) the transitional nature of security, 2) identities and norms that are at work in the region, and 3) the organisational functionality of the SCO.

According to an English school perspective, there are multiple layers of security, which are produced as a result of security regionalisation, and are at work in order to manage different types of security through those that were created and are managed by the SCO and other regional security mechanisms. These are the drivers that have an incremental impact on regional integration. In the social aspect of the English school explanation, a set of drivers that have a diverse (incremental or detrimental) effect on the process of integration is a *complex of identities* (ethnic, ideological, group and class identities). One example of the explanation for various setbacks in regional integration is reducible to the specific *ambitions* a state might maintain in its pursuit of cooperation.

The functionalist/neofunctionalist perspective explains that the process of integration begins in a limited, functional area. This partial cooperation gains momentum for further rounds of integration into other areas. This ‘spill-over’ also helps explain current developments in the SCO. Political spill-over is expressed in the creation of a supranational governance model, namely the SCO. Functional spill-over would explain the interconnection in *economic* sectors or issue-specific areas, which may result in one policy-area spilling over into another. In other words, integration is an inevitable process rather than a desirable state of affairs that could be introduced by the political or technocratic elites of the involved states’ societies.

Regionalisation, Regionalism and Security in Central Asia

Regions are examined through multiple lenses and using multiple approaches though there is wide agreement that the process of defining and theoretically shaping a region is referred to as *regionalisation*. According to Hurrell the notion of regionalisation is ‘the growth of societal integration within a region and the often undirected processes of social and economic interaction,’¹⁰

⁸ The view of Wendt (1992:395) that ‘anarchy is what states make of it’ where, despite some splits and divisions among the member states in addressing territorial and water issues, in cooperating in the SCO, members were the main actors; influencing cooperation in their own ways.

⁹ The neofunctionalist perspective, according to Haas (1960:10), influences regional cooperation thanks to ‘the creative work’ which ‘aims at general good that normally tends to be obscured.

¹⁰ Hurrell, Andrew, ‘Regionalism in Theoretical Perspective,’ in *Regionalism in World Politics*, by Louise Fawcett and Andrew Hurrell (eds) 1995, Oxford: Oxford University Press. p. 39.

whereas Ravenhill refers to it as ‘the growth of economic interdependence within a given geographical area.’¹¹

To answer the question of what security regionalism is for Central Asia we must look at security in its regional context; as a set of ideas, norms, institutions and identities that are created and recreated by states. When applied to Central Asia, the term ‘region,’ as it is constructed by the states, *only* includes Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. International relations theories tend to view regional structures in two ways, 1) unchangeable, and 2) changeable, by the members of the structure. In other words, it is represented in the discourse between *voluntarism* and *determinism* and is controlled by whether statesmen have power to change events or not.¹² Central Asia has its own complexities and to some extent have rejected regionalisation consistent to Allison’s evaluation in which ‘*regionalisation* – understood as an active process of change towards increased cooperation, integration, convergence, coherence and identity – has not been an obvious feature of security (or other) policy interactions in Central Asia.’¹³

A broadened definition of security includes freedom from military, political, societal, economic and environmental threats. As Buzan (et al) posits, ‘all [security] threats ... are ... defined politically,’¹⁴ the influence of the other sectors of what constitutes security, therefore, is perceived in relation to the relevant sector. For example as Allison points out, ‘there appear to be better prospects for a security consensus among the Central Asian states about clear functional issues, particularly when it is not necessary to coordinate military asset,’¹⁵ emphasising the multi-facetedness and functionality of the concept.

A *region* is understood in two terms, security – as Buzan describes ‘a prominent subsystem of economic political and security relations that exist among a set of states whose fate is that they have been locked into geographical proximity with each other’¹⁶ and social constructivist (identity-based), applied to Central Asia, a ‘subjective feeling has also taken hold of opposition movements and many Central Asian transnational actors.’¹⁷ This implies that, though the states in Central Asian are in geographical proximity to each other does

¹¹ Ravenhill, John, ‘Regionalism,’ in John Ravenhill (ed.), *Global Political Economy*, 2nd edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007). p. 174.

¹² Viotti, Paul, R., and Mark V. Kauppi, *International Relations Theory: Realism, Pluralism, Globalism, and Beyond*, Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1999. pp. 72–73.

¹³ Allison, Roy, ‘Regionalism, Regional Structures and Security Management in Central Asia,’ *International Affairs* (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944-), 80:3 (may 2004). p. 465.

¹⁴ Buzan, Barry, Ole Waever, and Jaap de Wilde, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*, (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers), 1998.

¹⁵ Allison, pp. 463–483.

¹⁶ Buzan, Barry, *People, States and Fear: An Agenda for International Security Studies in the Post-Cold War Era*, (Harlow: Longman), 1991. p. 188.

¹⁷ Kubicek, Paul, ‘Regionalism, Nationalism and Realpolitik in Central Asia,’ *Europe-Asia Studies*, 49: 4 (June 1997). p. 640.

not reveal everything as the dynamics in the region that help to understand regionalism in Central Asia, are also influenced by ‘shared a common material culture, social structure, cultural value-system and historical memory; and, not least, they were bound by both the Soviet legacy, and the need to find a way of collectively managing the region’s trans-boundary natural resources.’¹⁸

The uniqueness of Central Asian regionalism lies in its historical origins. Whereas other regions (East Asia, Africa, Latin America, etc), were influenced by, and experienced the impact of the end of the Cold War indirectly, Central Asia was *directly* influenced and has undergone dramatic transitions primarily due to its past being a part of the larger Cold War structure that suddenly ceased to exist.

Allison distinguishes Central Asian regionalism as going *beyond* the region, as he sees ‘various regional and macro-regional entities have been developed with a core group of Central Asian states. Some of these regional frameworks, structures and processes have had a clearly pronounced security agenda; in other cases the security function is only incipient.’¹⁹

Another important aspect of Central Asian regionalism is in regards to its multiplicity, i.e. one should see it as different types of regionalisms fused into one. First, this regionalism is defined by its geography, topology and geology. For instance, there is a degree of interdependence regarding the management and distribution of water resources, which demonstrates a degree of consensus over a vital issue. This aspect of regionalism defines the postures and political steps that states may take. On the other hand, regionalism, as a states-led endeavour – driven primarily by China, and represented by the SCO – is distinct because it satisfies the self-interests of its largest, and increasingly most powerful, member. Therefore, the SCO may be understood as a reflection of Central Asian regionalism and as a tool that reinforces certain power relationships between regional states and induces them into further economic cooperation. In other words, China has significantly added to settling the boundaries of where Central Asia begins and ends as a means of extending its influence into a now defined region in pursuit of narrow national interests.

According to Sajjadpour, the most critical security challenges found in Central Asia have internal characteristics.²⁰ The Central Asian states inherited a set of institutions that, according to Shatz, dictate conditions of state building.

¹⁸ Bohr, Annette, ‘Regionalism in Central Asia: New Geopolitics, Old Regional Order,’ *International Affairs*, 80:3 (May 2004). p. 486.

¹⁹ Allison. pp. 463–483.

²⁰ Sajjadpour, Seyed Kazem, ‘Iran, the Caucasus and Central Asia,’ in Ali Vanauzizia and Myron Weiner (eds.), *The New Geopolitics of Central Asia* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994). p. 197.

He notes that

the parameters for political manoeuvre in regime transitions may be set by previous decisions intended to address entirely different political problems. In moments of institutional upheaval, such as those that confronted post-Soviet elites, framing choices can have lasting and profound consequences because they set the terms of debate. When leaders are strongly hemmed in by previous choices, rationality is not as useful an analytic tool as when they have a broad range of choices available.²¹

Despite such common security concerns, obstacles to security cooperation were exacerbated by regional governments insecure in their post-Soviet identities and sovereignty.²² As these issues were being addressed, there was much internal political turbulence which threatened the legitimacy and longevity of many states in the region. At the time it was important to ensure that the ‘non-interference’ clause inherent to the Westphalian system was upheld and that China was discouraged from interventions. Indeed, as a means of protecting its energy-related interests and avoid being drawn into the (then) unfolding Central Asian conflicts, China expended its political energies to construct a viable institutional framework, the so-called ‘Shanghai Five’ organisation that included the neighbouring Central Asian states and Russia, which later (2001) transformed into the SCO.

Since its initial baby-steps, the nearly decade-old organisation has split its focus into two identifiable spheres: first, the sphere of Russo-Chinese relations, and secondly, the sphere of Sino-Central Asian relations. The second part of this formula is of particular interest since traditionally, despite geographic proximity, China had very limited relations to Central Asia and probably views the SCO as the most effective instrument to successfully penetrate the region in defence of its material interests. This sentiment is explored by Sheives who argues that

the PRC has done little to influence Central Asia, partly due to its own instability along its periphery, and internal problems in the Chinese heartland. However, since the collapse of the Soviet Union, China has instituted warm relations with each of these five [sic.] newly independent Central Asian states.²³

A portion of this work will reveal ways in which China has used the SCO as a tool of engagement with the Central Asian states.

²¹ Schatz, Edward, ‘Access by Accident: Legitimacy Claims and Democracy Promotion in Authoritarian Central Asia,’ *International Political Science Review / Revue internationale de science politique*, 27:3 (July 2006). pp. 263–284.

²² Swanström, Niklas, ‘The Prospects for Multilateral Conflict Prevention and Regional Cooperation in Central Asia,’ *Central Asian Survey*, 23:1 (March 2004). p. 42.

²³ Sheives, Kevin, ‘China Turns West: Beijing’s Contemporary Strategy towards Central Asia,’ *Pacific Affairs* 79:2 (Summer 2006). pp. 205–224.

Theoretical Considerations

Debunking (Neo)Realism and (Neo) Liberal Institutionalism

In order to fully comprehend the dynamics of the SCO and properly gauge its functions, *raison d'être* and prospects, it is important to provide the theoretical perspectives most in-tune with the organisation. Prior to doing so, it is important to debunk those theories which attempt, inaccurately, to capture the nuances of the SCO. This section is therefore devoted to revealing some shortcomings of (neo)realism and (neo)liberal institutionalism, as applied to the SCO, to pave the way for the English school-constructivist-(neo)functionalist theoretical marriage.

According to neorealism, the international environment is anarchic and the intentions of others too uncertain for states to cooperate for any enduring period of time. The fear that others will attempt to maximise relative gains is enough to discourage states from long-term cooperation, even for mutually beneficial rewards. In short, relations between states are always competitive. Waltz best described this concern:

When faced with the possibility of cooperating for mutual gain, states that feel insecure must ask how the gain will be divided. They are compelled to ask not, 'Will both of us gain?' but 'Who will gain more?' If an expected gain is to be divided, say, in the ratio of two to one, one state may use its disproportionate gain to implement a policy intended to destroy the other. Even the prospect of large absolute gains for both parties does not elicit their cooperation so long as each fears how the other will use its increased capabilities ... The condition of insecurity ... the uncertainty of each about the other's future intentions and actions ... works against their cooperation.²⁴

Neorealists believe that international politics is in a state of continuous conflict and competition, and suggest that regionalism may be advanced *only* to enhance national security in combined efforts of combating perceived threats and to maintain a balance of power; the only reprieve states have from conflict.

During the Cold War, Central Asia – being a part of the Soviet Union – lacked any specific threat other than the common threat posed by the West. In the post-Cold War period however, the security environment has undergone drastic changes and, at times, the perceptions and exogenous states' behaviour have significantly influenced the region. Despite such changes, the Central Asian states undertook to turn the 'Shanghai Five' into the SCO to improve regional security and better respond to shifting international dynamics. During

²⁴ Waltz, Kenneth, *Theory of International Politics* (United States: McGraw-Hill, 1979), p. 105.

this period, while neorealists anticipated instability due to the US-led involvement in Afghanistan and the wider Central Asian region, SCO members attempted to renew their shared interests by pushing for an increase in multilateral activities rooted in the organisation which has been self-reinforcing in the sense that regional security cooperation has led to the institutionalisation of regional relations.

In neorealism, conventional wisdom favours uni- or bipolarity which are perceived as inherently more stabilising than multipolarity. This logic is deeply flawed when explaining the SCO and Central Asian regionalism: the Central Asian members of the SCO hope, in security matters, to limit Russia's military presence, to counter China's influence, and balance the US's military presence in the area, whereas in its economic security dimension, opts for the widening and deepening of SCO integration into an Central Asian economic system. This may assist the individual states resist US pressures, and preserve the states' economic and national independence and 'China's geo-political, geo-economic and geo-strategic importance in the region.'²⁵ Regarding Russia, Bhatti argues that 'Russia's interests in the fields of security, economy, and energy require a rapid reciprocal response from the Central Asian governments...'²⁶ In other words, all the parties involved are reliant on a degree of enduring political and diplomatic engagement.

Alternatively, neoliberal institutionalism, emphasise cooperation among states. Indeed, the SCO has attempted to enhance regional security cooperation through increasing the level of self-restraint. For example, the SCO sought to promote regional confidence and security-building measures (CSBMs) by reinforcing transparency and openness. As the primary interest of the states is in 'cooperation' between national states, neoliberal institutionalism seems to have relevance for the SCO in explaining the mechanisms of security, but it is limited in the context of SCO security regionalism. Unlike neoliberal institutionalists' argument of limiting sovereignty for increased cooperation, the SCO states are more interested in state-building by *strengthening* their sovereignty instead of limiting it. Indeed, the process of limiting sovereignty is better seen in the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO),²⁷ and not the SCO.

²⁵ Chien-peng, Chung, 'The Shanghai Co-operation Organisation: China's Changing Influence in Central Asia,' *The China Quarterly*, no. 180 (December 2004). p. 992.

²⁶ Bhatti, Roj Sultan Khan, 'Russia: The Traditional Hegemon in Central Asia,' *Perceptions, Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, Istanbul, 2008 available at: <<http://www.sam.gov.tr/perceptions/volume13/autumn/RojSultanKhanBhatti.pdf>>

²⁷ Collective Security Treaty Organisation (from original Russian), available at: <<http://odkb.gov.ru/start/index.htm>> (Accessed 08 May 2010). The members of the CSTO are Armenia, Belorussia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and Tajikistan. Uzbekistan was a signing party of CSTO in 1992, but in 1999 ended its participation in the activities of organisation, at the same it time expressing its desire to maintain membership. Georgia and Azerbaijan joined in 1993, but withdrew in 1999.

This claim, however, is also debatable as Essenov notes that ‘the first clause prohibits all member states from forming military alliances with other non-CST countries and from taking any joint aggressive action (with any other group of states) against any CST signatory. In accordance with clause four, if any CST member state is threatened by another state or group of states, this will be seen as an act of aggression against all CST members.’²⁸ In other words, we may see that both institutions encourage the members to adhere to the basic principle of non-intervention and respect for each other’s sovereignty. Neoliberal institutionalism’s interest is rooted in building legal norms, coercive rules and material interests, but the SCO states are inclined to retain informal and non-legalistic norm-based rules. The framework of cooperation in the SCO represents a mixture between formal and informal (non-legalistic) methods of the ‘Shanghai Spirit’ and members do not necessarily push the organisation towards a legally binding security architecture.

Although the above section provided only a brief snap-shot of (neo)realism and (neo)liberal institutionalism’s shortcomings, these are enough to debunk the central premises of such theories in an attempt to move beyond them and forge ahead with a new theoretical framework to understand the SCO.

Bringing in Constructivism

In criticising more traditional neorealist concepts as they apply to the security of Central Asia, Menon and Spruyt argue that ‘the consequences of preponderance depend on the nature of the regime in the stronger power and the level of domestic stability in the weaker state.’²⁹ In other words, they argue that the traditional concept of security bears at least two serious deficiencies in capturing the transitory characteristic of security. First, it lacks perspective as it neglects the aspects of security that are rooted in the internal situation of a state. Second, with its focus primarily on material factors of security it pays only limited attention to the effects and role of such ideational factors (ideas, norms, and culture). With its tendency to bind all states within the structure of the international system, all other dynamics are left unexplainable as it sees the system as ‘static.’

Contrarily, the constructivist perspective argues that it is very likely that the Central Asian regional identity, while the states are entangled in divisions across ethnic, linguistic and national identities, ‘will remain a chimera and regionalisation in the narrowly defined the Central Asian region is unlikely to

²⁸ Essenov, Murad, ‘The Anti-Terrorist Campaign and the Regional Security System,’ *The IISS Russian Regional Perspectives Journal for Foreign and Security Policy*, Issue 2. pp. 26–28.

²⁹ Rajan, Menon and Hendrik Spruyt, ‘The Limits of Neorealism: Understanding Security in Central Asia,’ *Review of International Studies*, 25:1 (January 1999). pp. 87–105.

move,³⁰ but at least a regional ‘collective identity’ has been conceived of, with the SCO, as a process through which its members counter their fears.

In order for the SCO to construct a regional identity, it had to follow a path of multiple trials through interaction between Russia, China and the Central Asian states. Here we may see that a constructivist perspective of international relations opens up the possibilities of actors to consider international structures as historically evolved and flexible.

Security regionalism, focusing on the scope and extent of the English School’s function explains the SCO mechanisms in the context of Central Asian security regionalisation. Emphasising the conceptualisation of security in a geopolitical context is difficult. It requires the development of specific theoretical approaches to regionalism in transitional terms. Here, the function of the English School helps in defining the effects and roles of ideational concepts and structures (ideological, ethnic and collective identities) where security regionalisation is constantly constructed and reconstructed. The post-Cold War Central Asian security complex,³¹ represents a triple-layered system of three distinguished security mechanisms: first, the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS)³² – a loose agreement built on the vague notion of the members’ intention to cooperate; second, the CSTO, which is a highly institutionalised form of cooperation between many states of the former USSR; and third, the SCO, which is primarily designed to manage security threats of new character.

Arguing for Cooperation

From the English school perspective there are multiple layers of security, which are produced as the result of security regionalisation and are at work in order to manage different types of security through the SCO. These are the drivers that have an incremental effect on regional integration. In the social aspect of the English school explanation, a set of drivers that has a diverse (incremental or detrimental) effect on the process of integration is a *complex of identities* (ethnic, ideological, group identities). One example of the explanations for setbacks is the *ambitions* that states might have in its pursuit of cooperation.

Constructivism helps identify aspects which other perspectives omit. The SCO, as an institution represents regional integration, which is expressed through states’ membership in the organisation. Regional integration is

³⁰ Bohr, p. 502.

³¹ The security complex theory, explanations and definitions are drawn from multiple sources. See: Buzan, Barry, *People, States and Fear*, 2007 (ed), also Buzan, Barry, ‘The Logic of Regional Security in the Post–Cold War World,’ in Bjorn Hettne (et al) *The New Regionalism and the Future of Security and Development* (London, Macmillan, 1999-2000). pp. 1–5, 12.

³² For the Commonwealth of Independent States website see: <<http://cis.minsk.by/>> (accessed 10 May 2010).

perceived as a process, it is not fixed. In other words it is constantly being transformed and retransformed by the member states. This is in sharp contrast to the fixed structural rigidity of realism and of institutional normativity (function) of an organisation.

Even constructivism, however, does not completely explain the complexity of identities. As Zehfuss explains, ‘excluding the process of construction of the state as a bearer of the identity and of domestic processes of articulating state identity are part of the problem. This reduces identity to something negotiable between the states.’³³

The functionalist approach explains that the process of integration starts in a limited functional area, security for the SCO. This *partial* cooperation gains momentum for integration into other areas called ‘spill-over’ by the neo-functionalist school. Political spillover is expressed in the creation of supranational governance structures; which for Central Asia, is found in the SCO. This integration becomes an inevitable process, rather than a desirable state of affairs, that could be introduced by the political or technocratic elites of the involved states’ and on societal levels.

A Pivotal Point of Regionalisation – Sovereignty

On what theoretical ground may the 1) transitional nature of security, 2) identities and norms, and 3) the organisational function of the SCO, be bound together? The answer is simply sovereignty.

In the search for the connection between security and sovereignty in Central Asia, Kubichek argues that

Ties between the states are along narrow functional lines, and any political spillover remains elusive. Perhaps, as some predict, if Central Asian states all become democratic, a consensus on basic questions can be found, leading to something akin to the European Union. This, however, remains a big ‘if,’ since there is little sign that democratic movements have much strength in most of these states. Moreover, this assumes that Central Asian states will be able to work out these problems on their own, in conditions of complete sovereignty. This, however, is not the case, since Russia casts a very long shadow over the region.³⁴

Kubichek also points out that the security predicament of the Central Asian states has ‘domestic, regional, and global dimensions.’ Nonetheless, he argues that the primary dimension of security in the developing world is a ‘domestic’ one. That is, the security problematic of Central Asian states is much more

³³ Zehfuss, Maja, *Constructivism in International Relations*, (Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 89.

³⁴ Kubicek, pp. 637–655.

complex and 'is dependent upon outcomes on four different levels: domestic politics within Russia, relations between Russia and the other states, relations among the states themselves, and relations within the states between current elites and their challengers.'³⁵

Security in post-Soviet Central Asia has been categorised in its functionality (politics, military, social) that may be identified with a wide range and dimensions on an internal (domestic), regional and extra-regional scopes.³⁶ Kubicek provides a useful insight by noting 'there are inherent tensions between the internal and external demands on Central Asian states.'³⁷ Allison defines dimensions of security which can be applied to the SCO's security mechanisms by stressing

The weakness of security-related regionalism in Central Asia, except in forms relying on hegemonic sponsorship, reflects factors largely beyond the control of the local states: first, the legacy or presence of Russian regional hegemonic influence, which may or may not be displaced over time by the projection of US global hegemonic power into this theatre; second, the related phenomenon of the varied effects of the competitive engagement of major powers in the region; third, the exhausting demands on local states of seeking to consolidate national sovereignty in a peripheral zone in the world system. State capacity has been a crucial influence on the sustainability of regional projects. And aside from all these factors, a great deal still depends on the political commitment of state leaders to regional frameworks which rely on top-down security planning³⁸.

This analysis allows us to identify several levels: first, strong external influences define, and set security priorities on the regional and extra-regional levels; secondly, the strictly regional level, focusing on overlapping ethnic and territorial claims as well as natural resource management; and third, the domestic level, defined by internal issues such as clan and ethnic tensions, social arrangements between religious and civil groups and governments, demography and mass migration of more educated parts of the populace, the so-called 'brain-drain.'

Security in Central Asia should be understood in the context of interactions between the states of the region indicating that the member states of the SCO may be considered as the primary actors in addressing any regional security problems, but since security concerns on the domestic, regional and extra-regional levels are highly interlinked, the interface of these connections is particularly important for understanding security practices of certain countries.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 652.

³⁶ Bohr, p. 486.

³⁷ Kubicek, p. 653.

³⁸ Allison, p. 481.

Sajjadpour, for instance, suggests that the greatest threats to Central Asian security are seen to be more internal ... the painstaking process of nation building, the legitimacy crisis, rapid social and economic transformation, decolonisation, ethnic diversity, border disputes, and a catalogue of other issues are all sources of instability in the post-Soviet republics.³⁹

In this context Allison notes that

regional structures in Central Asia have come to offer the role of ‘protective integration’ – a form of collective political solidarity with Russia against international political processes or agendas that are interpreted as challenging politically incumbent regimes and their leaders. This type of political ‘bandwagoning’ on the international stage is accompanied by an emphasis in domestic politics on the statist principle of ‘constitutional order’ and ideologies of national sovereignty.⁴⁰

This notion is emphasised in the SCO Charter where member states, chose to confirm their sovereignty by committing themselves to the principles of the modern Westphalian state system, including ‘mutual respect of sovereignty, independence, territorial integrity of States and inviolability of State borders, non-aggression, non-interference in internal affairs, non-use of force or threat of its use in international relations, seeking no unilateral military superiority in adjacent areas.’⁴¹

For the Central Asian regional leaders sovereignty

is not merely a feature of the search for national identity. It also characterizes their approach to political power more generally, which helps explain their disinclination to cooperate deeply on a regional basis, except as a form of mutual reinforcement of the political status quo. In essence these leaderships maintain centralized state institutions and focus on political control rather than political negotiation.⁴²

Therefore, it is possible to conclude that regional arrangements, like the SCO, are sought by regional states to allow governments to increase their level of domestic and international legitimacy by pursuing and defending national sovereignty. Sovereignty must therefore be seen as an integral part of state security with a distinguishable ‘legitimacy enhancement’ function to stem ‘three

³⁹ Sajjadpour, p. 197.

⁴⁰ Allison, Roy, ‘Virtual Regionalism, Regional Structures and Regime Security in Central Asia’, *Central Asian Survey*, 27:2 (June 2008), p. 186.

⁴¹ SCO Charter, Article 2, <<http://www.sectSCO.org/EN/show.asp?id=69>> (accessed 10 May 2010).

⁴² Allison, ‘Virtual Regionalism,’ pp. 185–202.

principal domestic challenges: creating a national identity, building effective political institutions, and coping with late economic development.⁴³

Although the state may be an insufficient promoter of security in Central Asia, it still remains the primary agent of security attributed to the choices consciously made by central decision-makers which creates the underlying conditions for defining regional cooperation.

It is important to note that with the hierarchy of the levels and their importance in regional security can vary from issue to issue, but it is critical to remember the domestic roots of the security issues that sprout up on the domestic level that may eventually play a crucial role in explaining the security mechanisms in Central Asia more broadly. These levels will be helpful in developing an analytical framework for thinking about security and regionalism together when addressing sources and solutions to the challenges facing Central Asia.

Conclusion

While states and interstate relations in Central Asia are important, the role of non-state actors should not be understated. This study has been limited to *modernist* type of constructivism that focuses on the state as the major actor which is shaped by inter- and intra-state. Noting the growing influence of new political actors such as non-governmental organisations (NGOs), religious groups and communities which fall outside of state-centric approaches, a group of new non-state actors, such as ethnic diasporas and tribes, business communities and criminal groups do add to the constant shaping and re-shaping of regional security and eventual security integration in Central Asia.

This article argued that the security structure in Central Asia may be studied through three levels (social, state and inter-state) and be explained in terms of the configurations between state capabilities, perceptions and institutions. For example, bringing the trade of natural resources under the umbrella of security in the SCO reflects the regional dynamics of economic relations among member states. Examples of this are seen in a combination of economic relations be it Russia and China, China and Uzbekistan, China and Kazakhstan (etc). This may help find a link between social forces – for example, Tajikistan’s migrant labour force and the flows of Uzbekistan’s or Kazakhstan’s financial capital – in the region and the prevailing international order world order.

The argument of this work is based on Wendt’s assertion that states ‘structures shape actor’s identities and interests, rather than their behaviour.’⁴⁴ Therefore, while evaluating the SCO (as a structure) in the context of security

⁴³ Menon and Spruyt, p. 91.

⁴⁴ Wendt, Alexander, ‘Constructing International Politics,’ *International Security*, 20:1 (Summer 1995). pp. 71–81.

regionalism, it must be treated as having the capacity to affect and transform not only domestic, but also the regional and extra-regional environment through social interactions which are not fixed to the actors' rationality. The key positions in defining the organisational character of the SCO are given to non-material factors of the transitional nature of security; actors' identities and norms and not simply focusing on the organisation's charter.

To some extent the SCO is attempting to project itself as a new regional security community in Central Asia. The SCO seems to prefer the method of diplomatic consultations and negotiations as its main tools in resolving intra- and inter-state disputes. The challenges currently facing the region suggest a need to commit additional energies to reinforcing the SCO since intraregional and international socialisation have been minimal. Through promoting socialisation, such as UN engagement, regional groupings may find some advantages in addressing regional security problems, specifically in the cases of civil war (Tajikistan), Andizhan (Uzbekistan) or Osh (Kyrgyzstan).

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