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Changing security threat perceptions in Central Asia

KIRILL NOURZHANOV*

This article discusses the current process of securitisation in Central Asia and identifies its convoluted and faulty nature as a factor impeding collective security action in the region. It uses the Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) as an explanatory tool and posits that security discourse in — and about — the five former Soviet republics is dominated by geopolitical grand strategy on the one hand and by particularist concerns about lack of democracy or transnational threats on the other. Issues of conventional security involving two or more states, such as territorial disputes or resource management, are pushed aside and rarely securitised at the official level. The article outlines conceptual and institutional reasons for this bias, and argues that unless inter-state tensions are properly analysed, debated and addressed, the prospects for security and stability in the region will remain grim.

Dealing with threats in Central Asia

After gaining independence in 1991, five former Soviet Central Asian republics formed a distinct security complex. Faced with a multitude of military, societal, environmental and transnational threats, they have rarely managed to counter them in a cooperative and efficient manner. Despite their verbal commitment to the global fight against terrorism, their recent track record in this area is also unimpressive.

This article will address the question of why a cooperative security system has failed to materialise in Central Asia over the past 16 years. It will argue that the absence of a realistic and objective threat assessment process has been a major factor. Security thinking in the region has been dominated by a focus on regime survival in individual countries on the one hand, and on the forceful imposition of the global security agenda on the other. This leaves little room for dealing with long-running inter-state tensions. Without resolving border issues, territorial disputes and conflicts over natural resources at the regional level, Central Asia will not have internal peace and stability nor be able to play a useful role in the international effort to defeat terrorism.

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The article will critically evaluate the attempts of political leaders and the intelligence communities across Central Asia to identify and prioritise threats in a complex security environment. It will also refer to an alternative vision generated by independent Central Asian security experts as a different way to construct the hierarchy of threats.

Central Asia as a regional security complex

For centuries Central Asia has been evolving as a deeply integrated geopolitical space. Common ethnic, religious, economic and cultural ties have been augmented by a shared political history, first as part of the Russian Empire and then as an organic element of the USSR throughout the greater part of the 20th century. Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in December 1991, the five newly independent states of Central Asia have pursued very different strategies of nation building and post-communist development. At the same time, and somewhat paradoxically, they have discovered that they are still tied to each other. One may use an analogy of a rather dysfunctional family where, despite not having much love lost among them, all members feel obliged to stay in touch. Security dilemmas have bonded the states into a new regionalism that has supplanted the old fraternity of socialist republics.

Before 1991 the central Soviet government underwrote the external and internal security of Central Asia. Its abrupt withdrawal from the scene created a vacuum which quickly exposed the vulnerability of the region to all manner of threats. The 1992 civil war in Tajikistan and the Aral Sea environmental disaster were two early examples of how problems in one country spill across national borders and affect everyone in the neighbourhood. The tumultuous decade of the 1990s established without any doubt that contemporary Central Asia constituted a Regional Security Complex (RSC), i.e. 'a group of states whose primary security concerns link together sufficiently closely that their national securities cannot be reasonably considered apart from one another' (Buzan 1983: 106).

Barry Buzan's RSC theory (RSCT) is a powerful conceptual tool to explore the situation in Central Asia today. Its focus on three levels of analysis (domestically generated vulnerabilities; state-to-state relations; and the role of external powers in the region) and five sectoral dimensions (military, political, economic, societal and environmental) is capable of producing a dynamic and comprehensive picture of regional security (Peimani 1998). The theory's insistence on regional factors being given their proper weight in security analysis is particularly important in the case of Central Asia, which suffers from a set of two extreme approaches by outsider observers. First, there is a long-standing tradition of 'grand strategy' over-emphasising the role of the great powers. Second, there is a tendency to focus on a particular domestic issue in one or two countries which, when viewed through the Euro-American prism,

‘must have’ security implications, and then to make sweeping generalisations for the rest of the region. Instability arising from a ‘lack of democracy’ is one such theme that often obsesses experts in the West. A brief examination of these security narratives emanating from the outside is important, because they potentially affect the threat assessment inside Central Asia, in conceptual, semantic and operational terms.

The lingering shadow of imperial geopolitics

The recurring idiom of the ‘Great Game’ is the best example of reducing security issues in Central Asia to geostrategy. From its inception during the Napoleonic wars, the Great Game ascribed the region’s lack of stability primarily to machinations of imperialist rivals (Edwards 2003). The local societies were portrayed as naïve and backward, and incapable of sorting out their affairs on their own without a civilising mission from the outside. Little has changed — today’s ‘Great Gamers’ maintain that Central Asia consists of states and societies whose identity, integrity and very survival are at risk. The reasoning of a prominent US author, S. Frederick Starr, is typical: the region will either come under the hegemony of an outside rival power (‘Russia being the most likely candidate’), or it could lapse into chaos (Starr 1996: 80). He is echoed by a Russian expert: ‘[Central Asia] will be the black hole... From the economic and political point of view, the situation is absolutely hopeless’ (Erasov 1994: 11). The 19th century stereotypes are actively revived, recycled and put to good use — Central Asians must be directed, enlightened and protected from themselves and from expansionist encroachment by a friendly foreign nation: ‘The US is indeed the “indispensable nation,” unmatched in terms of the four key dimensions of power — military, economic, technological, and cultural... The question is implicit: who better to guide the way than the United States?’ (Kunzweiler 1998: 29–30).

The persistence and recrudescence of the geopolitical zero-sum game approach to security in Central Asia can be explained partially by the background of those engaged in politically significant interpretation of the region. Many are seasoned cold war warriors who often mechanically transpose familiar concepts onto unknown terrain. For Zbigniew Brzezinski (1997: 199), as for Lord Curzon and Prince Gorchakov a hundred years previously, Central Asia is simply part of the ‘grand chessboard’, and its peoples are but pawns in the game to uphold ‘a benign American hegemony’. In 1994 his counterpart in the Kremlin, Evgenii Primakov (then chief of Russia’s Foreign Intelligence Service) commissioned a report entitled *Russia–CIS: Does the Position of the West Need Correction?*. In this document, and for the first time, Central Asia was referred to as ‘the soft underbelly of Russia’, a zone of Moscow’s vital interests to be resolutely defended against the West regardless of the locals’ wishes (see SVR 1995).

More than a decade later little seems to have changed. The Kremlin and the White House continue to espouse what Ariel Cohen (2004: 84) has called a quasi-imperialist outlook in dealing with Central Asian security. Interestingly, a recent monograph on Russia's policy in Central Asia repeatedly draws parallels between President Vladimir Putin and Alexander Gorchakov, the architect and ideologue of Russian expansion in the region in the 19th century (Jonson 2004).

The prism of adversarial geopolitics tends to affect the analysis of current threats in Central Asia. Even when authors discuss so topical an issue as Islamic radicalism, they cannot escape the Great Game mindset: in a 1999 article, which became a classic in the conspiracy theory genre, a Moscow-based journalist claimed that Washington was striving to install Islamic regimes in Central Asia in order to 'bolster its influence on the Moslem subjects of the Russian Federation. It may succeed in breaking them away from Russia and effectively ensure Russia's territorial disintegration' (Gafarly 1999). The editor-in-chief of *US News and World Report* did not want to be upstaged and invented 'the spectre stalking Eurasia' — a Russia-led anti-Western alliance comprising Central Asia, Iran, Iraq, Syria and Saudi Arabia (Zuckerman 1999). Following 9/11 and the US campaign in Afghanistan, a prominent Russian author predicted that the Americans would quickly come to terms with the Taliban and direct their extremist energy to Central Asia and further north, to Russia itself (Plastun 2002: 616).

Astonishingly, even the stalwarts of the Copenhagen School, including Barry Buzan himself, seem to have succumbed to the simplistic charms of geostrategy. While insisting that 'one of the purposes of RSCT is to combat the tendency to overstress the role of the great powers, and to ensure that the local factors are given their proper weight in security analysis', they relegate Central Asia to a methodologically ill-defined 'subcomplex' in a security compact structured around Russia and dominated by it (Buzan and Wæver 2003: 46–47).

Obsession with liberal democracy

When it comes to the analysis of political security at the level of individual countries, the lack of democracy is by far the most common negative factor mentioned in external writing about Central Asia. It is posited as the source of all evil, sapping the legitimacy, stability and effectiveness of states. Anti-government militancy, especially in the form of Islamic terrorism, merely 'manifests a society's response to the accumulated injustices of severely authoritarian rule' (McGlinchey 2005: 340).

The belief in the axiomatic benefits of democracy for security is so ingrained among the politicians and mainstream IR authors in the West that they rarely bother to test it against the particular social, historical, religious and ethnic realities in Central Asia.¹ Jeffersonian democracy is considered a universal cure

for all manner of threats and a passport to prosperity, hence the local people *must* desire it. They are reported to ‘want to be safe, neither the pawns of geopolitical strategies nor the prisoners of more powerful nations. They want stability — real stability, not one enforced at gunpoint. Traditionally, these goals have been met best by democracies’ (Pilon 1998: 101).

When theoretical expectations generated in the West about the universal craving for liberal freedoms find little empirical corroboration on the ground, the evidence is ignored, or worse still, misinterpreted and manipulated. A very thorough sociological survey conducted under the auspices of the US Institute of Peace in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan in 1993 showed popular levels of support for Western democracy at between 11.5 and 17.2 percent, with the absolute majority choosing the indigenous super-presidentialism as best suited to provide law and order (Lubin 1995: 219–20). A 2000 study of public opinion in Kazakhstan revealed that only 21.3 percent of the population believed that democracy can resolve the country’s social problems, while 44 percent did not trust it (Kadyrzhanov 2001: 43). Pilon (1998: 97) cites similar figures, yet concludes nonchalantly that ‘democracy is important to Central Asians’ and enjoins the United States to continue efforts at fostering it.

Of course, there are perceptive Western experts who are familiar with the distinctive political cultures in the region and caution against the implantation of democratic values, norms and institutions as a security panacea. Gregory Gleason, for example, has examined the traditional patterns of tribal democracy, hierarchy and authoritarianism, and arrived at the conclusion that ‘the imperfections of the domestic political and economic systems *are not* the source of Central Asia’s revolutionary movements’ (2002: 5, *emphasis added*). However, such authors are in a minority. The Central Asians are routinely denied the capacity to make an informed decision about what is best for them, and their reluctance to embrace Western liberalism is attributed to plain ignorance. As S. Frederick Starr (2005: 29) has put it:

The challenge is to spread the understanding that democracy enhances stability and security rather than undermining it. This can be achieved only by treating democratization as a developmental process with numerous prerequisites, many of which are subject to constructive interventions.

The range of ‘constructive interventions’ varies from fairly tame educational programmes and capacity-building assistance in the civic sector to calls for an ambitious Marshall Plan in Central Asia.² Following successful exercises in regime change in Georgia and Ukraine in 2003 and 2004, the most radical champions of democracy have claimed that ‘Washington needs Central Asia’s help in the war on terror but also wants to see the region democratize [sic] through people-powered revolutions’ (DeCorla-Souza 2005: 2). Only an extremely naïve person or a neo-con idealist could have argued that Georgia or Ukraine had become oases of security and stability in the wake of their

‘coloured revolutions’. When the fresh wind of ‘popular democracy’ reached Kyrgyzstan in early 2005, that country quickly turned into a zone of chronic instability and rising Islamic extremism (Nourzhanov 2006).

Patterns and perils of official securitisation

Buzan and Wæver (2003: 423) have assessed the situation in Central Asia as follows: ‘The security issues in the region are legion. All states are domestically vulnerable. The ethnic map points to both internal problems and transnational ties, but they have only occasionally been securitized.’ This comment requires clarification and, perhaps, correction.

The official security discourse, which has the state or the nation as a referent object, thrives across the region. There is no paucity of speech-acts coming from Presidents, governments and think-tanks identifying existential threats. Some of them are quite voluminous and comprehensive; for example, Uzbekistan’s President, Islam Karimov, has published a book in English which broadly covers all five sectors of security *à la* Buzan — military, political, societal, economic and environmental (Karimov 1998). However, it is fair to say that the themes of great power intervention and internal political development dominate narratives of threat generated by Central Asian governments. This is hardly a surprise: they represent a response to the outsider theoretical security paradigms outlined above, which raises serious questions about the substance and motivation behind official Central Asian threat assessments and their target audiences.

Seventeen years after the Soviet Union’s collapse there is little reason to doubt the ability of Central Asian states to maintain their independent identity and their functional integrity within the anarchy of the international political system. They have proved to be exceptionally adroit at the politics of geopolitical pluralism. Turkmenistan has pursued the strategy of positive neutrality underwritten by the United Nations, while others have practised all manner of alliance making, sometimes balancing against Russia, sometimes bandwagoning with it, but always retaining freedom of choice and sovereign rights. Uzbekistan is a good illustration of this point. It was a founding member of the Russia-led Confederation of Independent States (CIS) in 1992, before joining the anti-Russian GUUAM bloc and signing the Declaration of Strategic Partnership with the US in 2002, after which it proceeded to enter the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) set up by Moscow. Far from being a docile pawn in the presumptive Great Game Mark II, the regime of Islam Karimov has been actively manoeuvring and altering the idiom of threat in order to maximise its strategic rent (Ipek 2007: 100–101).

Russia, China, the US and half a dozen other powers have interests in Central Asia (see Davis and Azizian, 2006). None of them is in a position to exercise hegemony or even has a good reason to do so. Why, then, do regional leaders

securitise relations with these countries, framing them in the language of threat? In the early 1990s the imperatives of nation building may have played a role. Ethno-nationalist mobilisation in Central Asia invariably involved creating an image of a strong enemy that made life difficult for the local population. As Islam Karimov (1998: 34) once put it, 'for citizens of Uzbekistan the vital issues are the extent to which the elements of great-power chauvinism and aggressive nationalism are powerful today in relation to our country and what real dangers to our security this phenomenon offers'. Ideas of imperialist penetration and encirclement may have resonated among a domestic constituency in the early days of independence, and bolstering a siege mentality definitely helped the incumbent regimes to solidify their rule. However, at present the alarmist geopolitical discourse is aimed almost exclusively at an external audience.

The President of Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nazarbaev (1997: 236), has referred to Central Asia as a 'belt of expectation', belonging neither to the West, nor to the East. According to him, the choice that the region will eventually make will influence 'not just the balance of power in Asia and Eurasia, but...the global geopolitical balance as well'. This conceptualisation gels very well with the geopolitical way of thinking prominent in Russia and the USA today, as outlined above. By resuscitating the old adage about their pivotal position, feigning dread of foreign involvement, and grossly inflating estimates of mineral wealth, Central Asian leaders have managed to keep Russia, China and the US on their toes and pit them against each other. The *cause célèbre* of Caspian oil is just one example of how local regimes, working in unison with interest groups abroad, have lured the big powers in, reaping substantial material and political benefits (Rasizade 2002). A keen observer of Nazarbaev's foreign policy has praised his Machiavellian manipulation of these powers' contradictions and paranoia, 'thanks to which the President of Kazakhstan had successfully dealt with a few unpleasant situations' (Borisova 2005: 158). It is difficult to say how long the Central Asian geopolitical bluff will continue. The global war on terrorism seems to have given it a fresh impetus, but signs are emerging that the major powers are losing interest, and the region is reverting to its backwater state (see, for example, Hess 2004).

The official discourse on internal and transborder threats also bears marks of externally induced securitisation. While societal pressure for democratic reform is not a major problem for regime survival³, Central Asian leaders go out of their way to voice their concerns about 'human security', 'civic society', 'transparent government' and other items lifted directly from Western democratic manuals. A lengthy quote from a book by Askar Akaev (2001:157), former President of Kyrgyzstan, gives a good sample:

Freedom, democracy, and a respect for human rights are the main principles that will secure Kyrgyzstan's sustainable development in the twenty-first century. A society filled with fear is incapable of implementing reforms and building its own future. Fear paralyses the spirit of discovery, the will to

strive for self-sufficiency, and the hope of winning out over difficulties. Therefore, it is very important to improve public understanding of the principles of democracy.

These profound and politically correct words, of course, had nothing to do with real life or thorough problem analysis by Akaev's government. Their only purpose was to appease the West and secure donor funds conditional on a semblance of liberal reforms. It was only in 2005 that the move to securitise democracy received substance all over Central Asia — in purely negative terms, as a threat to regime survival. In the wake of the 'Tulip Revolution' in Kyrgyzstan and the Andijon uprising in Uzbekistan, democracy promotion has been 'seen as a tool for nefarious goals such as ousting leaders who are out of favour with the West' (Hill and Jones 2006: 122). On the eve of the December 2005 presidential elections in Kazakhstan, Nazarbaev's administration suspected that a fresh 'coloured revolution' might be brewing, with Washington's blessing, in its country. In order to forestall this development, it voiced an uncharacteristically blunt message: 'The ruling elite, acting not in the interests of staying in power but in the interests of ensuring national security and territorial integrity of the state, not only has the right but is obliged to use coercive means at its disposal' (Shaikhutdinov 2005: 35). The revolution never came.

With the exception of ecological issues, non-traditional or transnational security threats entered the official analyses in Central Asia relatively late, in the mid-1990s. The proximity of chaotic Afghanistan was a major catalyst in the articulation of what one Kyrgyz diplomat termed 'Challenges of the New Era': organised crime; trafficking in drugs, humans, and weapons; and Islamic extremism and terrorism (Moldaliev 2001). The tragedy of 9/11 and its aftermath have made the last category particularly salient.

The threat from *jihadi* groups in Central Asia has been real enough (International Crisis Group 2003b); however, it is currently blown out of all proportion in various official documents, legal instruments and state-controlled media, where it is portrayed as *the* menace to peace and stability in the region. In the assessment of Akiner (2004: 91), radicals among the Central Asian Muslims are 'very much a minority, both numerically and in terms of geographic spread...The militant element that espouses violence...involves even smaller numbers of individuals (perhaps hundreds rather than thousands), operating seasonally.' The official securitisation of militant Islam also distorts its origins and support base (placing these outside the region), misrepresents its ideology (militants are fanatics lacking in political conviction), and arbitrarily accuses oppositionists of all stripes of aiding and abetting it (Horsman 2005).

In essence, the official narrative of terrorism in Central Asia is motivated predominantly by the instrumentalist concerns of the ruling regimes, which use it as a pretext for exercising even greater social control. To put it simply, they piggyback on the Western obsession with international terrorism to justify

government repression. The contribution of this discourse and policy to the global fight on terrorism seems problematic. Trisko (2005:386) has called the ongoing repressions in Central Asia 'a short-term coping mechanism', which ultimately may lead to much worse forms of radical Islam.

Narcotics trafficking offers another good example of security newspeak designated for external consumption and having little to do with the governments' real threat perceptions. Central Asian leaders routinely refer to this phenomenon in apocalyptic terms. Addressing the United Nations in 2000, the president of Tajikistan called it 'a universal evil' that 'threatens not only security and stability in the country, but to a certain extent, becomes a serious obstacle on the way of developing Tajikistan's statehood' (Rahmonov 2000: 4–5). Such statements enhance the regimes' international standing and credibility, and attract funds and police and military equipment that may or may not be used to combat the problem. At the same time, drug-trafficking is now a booming sector of growth that powers the economies of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan (Williams 2003: 83–6). Ruling elites in those countries are actively involved in the narcotics business; quite often top-ranking officials in charge of law-enforcement agencies and their political masters double as drug barons (Marat 2006).

Coming back to the remark by Buzan and Wæver about insufficient securitisation, it is plausible to say that the official security narrative in Central Asia is quite robust and covers a broad range of issues. It must be noted, however, that:

- it is heavily influenced by themes, concepts, and terminology coming from abroad (externally induced securitisation);
- its domestic audience is limited;
- the verbalisation of certain threats does not necessarily mean that the regimes perceive them as such;
- interactions among individual states in the region are almost never securitised.

As a result, the discursively produced picture of threats and challenges is skewed, incomplete and does not offer reasonable guidelines for cooperative action.

Political and historical constraints

The absence of analysis of regional patterns of amity and enmity in official security thinking in Central Asia is puzzling, given that all five states have long since recognised that they constitute a distinct RSC.⁴ On occasions they have even formed alliances to uphold peace and to deal with various threats together. However, the Central Asian Union (1994) and the Central Asia Cooperation Organisation (2002) turned out to be virtual entities, paralysed by mutual

mistrust and acrimony. It took the collective pressure of China and Russia within the framework of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) to start a process of multilateralising and confidence building in the region, although how successful this rapprochement will be remains very much in doubt (Maksutov 2006).

External commentators on the SCO and CSTO routinely examine their viability, efficiency and prospects at the systemic level, focusing mostly on the dynamics of Sino-Russian relations or competition with the West (Marat 2007; Lanteigne 2006/2007). Circumstances complicating collective action by the Central Asian members of these entities are frequently glossed over.

In the meantime, conventional security problems rooted in border disputes, competition over water and mineral resources, ubiquitous enclaves and ethnic minorities, generate conflict potential in the region and are perceived as existential threats by the majority of the local population.⁵ One of the very few comprehensive studies available on the subject arrived at the following conclusions: 1) relations among the countries of Central Asia are far from showing mutual understanding on the whole range of economic issues; 2) the most acute contradictions are linked to land and water use; and 3) these contradictions have historical roots and are objectively difficult to resolve, hence they are liable to be actualised in the near future in a violent form (Grozin *et al.* 1997: 87).

An investigation by the International Crisis Group reached similar conclusions and pointed to the West's woeful lack of understanding of traditional security threats: 'All this suggests that the international community should approach the issue of resolving Central Asia's complicated tangle of border issues with far more urgency than it has to date' (International Crisis Group 2002: 23).

Central Asian leaders have found themselves in an impossible situation based on the classical prisoner's dilemma. On the one hand, they produce a constant flurry of speech-acts emphasising a common vision of global, extra-regional and transnational threats and the necessity of tackling them collectively. On the other hand, the selfish concern of each individual player about maximising his own benefit undermines the prospects for cooperative action. During his visit to Kyrgyzstan in October 2006 the president of Uzbekistan made yet another statement about 'further strengthening collaboration in fighting international terrorism, religious extremism, and transnational organised crime' (cited in Asrorov 2006). What Islam Karimov didn't mention in his communiqué was the fact that at that moment the two countries were perilously close to an open confrontation over water in the Toktogul Reservoir, the illegal presence of Uzbek troops in the Sokh enclave, disputes over natural gas prices and Uzbek refugees from Andijan (Asrorov 2006). It is safe to say that whatever anti-terrorist collaboration between the two countries may ensue, it will be half-hearted at best.

Uzbekistan has border disputes with all other Central Asian countries. Land grab by stealth appears to be Tashkent's preferred tactic. A typical occurrence took place in 2001 when 35 families of Uzbek squatters established themselves on 700 hectares of Tajik territory, upon which the regular army moved in and claimed Uzbek sovereignty (Aziia-plius 2002). There are massive difficulties in Kyrgyz–Tajik and Kazakh–Turkmen relations as well. Hardly a week passes without an exchange of fire by national police forces or border guards, or civilians dying while crossing heavily mined frontiers.

The visible manifestation of tensions in the region is an uncontrollable arms race. In 2007 alone military spending in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan was set to rise by 48 percent (RBK Daily 2007). The bulk of the money would be spent on heavy weapons, fixed-wing planes and navy vessels, which is hard to explain by the demands of a fight against terrorism alone. Remarkably the danger of intra-regional armed conflict is not seriously analysed in any official document. The current Military Doctrine of Kazakhstan (2000), which talks about the tantalisingly abstract 'probability of diminished regional security as a result of excessive increase in qualitative and quantitative military might by certain states' (Voennaia doktrina Respubliki Kazakhstan 2000), may be regarded as a very partial exception that proves the rule.

There are several reasons for non-securitisation of conventional threats at the official level. An honest and open discussion of problems is politically difficult. None of the Central Asian nations is fully consolidated. The incumbent ruling elites have an almost atavistic fear that raising issues of territories and minorities will lead to an endless spiral of secessionism and irredentism. In 1995 a governor of Osh province in Southern Kyrgyzstan published a set of proposals aimed at a fair and transparent delimitation of borders with Uzbekistan (Mambetaliev 2000: 30). He was immediately dismissed by the then president, Askar Akaev, following threats by Islam Karimov to activate the Uzbek fifth column in Osh. For Akaev the partial loss of sovereignty over his territory seemed a better choice than a repetition of the 1990 ethnic conflict.

A lot of current disputes are intractable from the historical, economic and legal points of view. The majority of them stem from the national–territorial delimitation of Central Asia performed by Soviet authorities in 1924–36. The creation of the Soviet republics in the region was based on a very complex logic, which sometimes did not take into account the ethno-linguistic realities on the ground (Hirsch 2000). Land swaps and leases were frequent after 1936; the juridical status of these territories is deeply opaque; sometimes even correct maps are unavailable.

The lack of political will to securitise these issues and their sheer complexity are compounded by the absence of pressure from the West, where concerns about democracy and containment of Russia take precedence. As Olcott (2005: 208) has remarked, 'too much good will between Central Asia leaders could be bad for political reform and stability, particularly if combined with advice from Russia'. Writing in a similar vein, Cornell (2003: 7) confidently stated:

What major challenges are likely to arise in Central Asia and the Caucasus in the coming years? Three general challenges are the role and policies of the regional players surrounding the region; the weakness of all states in both regions; and the burgeoning transnational crime wave, especially narcotics trafficking.

This incomplete and yet fairly typical Western threat analysis is seen as an indulgence by the Central Asian political elites, who parrot it with minor modifications. A Tajik Deputy Foreign Minister has published an article where he enumerated 11 threats to peace and security in Central Asia, in no particular order, seemingly picked at random, without a sense of hierarchy or interconnectedness, ending it with a paean to the 'era of freedom, democracy, and free entrepreneurship' (Sattorov 2005). This is what passes for a holistic review of a complex security situation in Central Asia today.

Institutional problems and the intelligence community

The quality of official narratives of threat perception and reduction all over Central Asia suffers from serious institutional weaknesses. There is no meaningful public debate; even where the media are allowed to discuss security and foreign policy issues, this discussion does not affect the actors of securitisation, who prefer to rely exclusively on government agencies. Uzbekistan formally abolished press censorship in 2002, yet the administration of the President carefully monitors all publications and 'recommends' that nominally independent editors-in-chief avoid certain topics. One of the permanent taboos is the neighbouring republics:

It is not recommended to write about Tajikistan for two reasons. First, Tajiks constitute a substantial proportion of the population of Uzbekistan. Publications on 'Tajikistan, Tajiks' inevitably lead to the problem of the status of the Tajik language. And second, the leaders of both states are on bad terms with each other (Morfius 2005).

The regime of secrecy is all-pervasive and suffocating. With the exception of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, even the most basic programmatic documents dealing with defence and national security are classified. It may appear to an uncharitable mind that one purpose of this is to conceal their glaring inadequacy. More often than not these documents are rehashed versions of Russian or other foreign originals. A good example is the Concept of Information Security of Tajikistan, enacted by President Rahmonov's decree in November 2003 and eventually published in open sources (*Kontseptsiia informatsionnoi bezopasnosti Respubliki Tajikistan* 2003). Among other things, it identifies the reliance of government agencies on imported electronic hardware and espionage in the (non-existent) hi-tech sector of Tajik industry as pressing security threats. These *faux pas* are easily explained by the fact that

the Concept is just a slightly paraphrased rendition of the Russian information security concepts of 1995 and 1999.

The contribution of the intelligence community to the security discourse is circumscribed. All successor organisations to the Soviet KGB in the republics have struggled to develop a proper analytical capacity. The Head of the Presidential Administration, Sarybai Kalmurzaev, reprimanded officers of the Kazakh KNB: 'They are conditioned to work through eavesdropping and looking through peepholes. What they should do is analyse the situation and predict the course of events. The protection of security actually means taking preventive measures' (cited in IICAS 2001). Apart from the KNB, there is a number of organisations involved in threat assessment and the development of security recommendations in Kazakhstan: the Centre of Analysis and Strategic Studies under the Presidential Administration; the Kazakh Institute of Strategic Studies under the President; the Institute for the Development of Kazakhstan under the Cabinet of Ministers; the National Agency for Strategic Planning; and several smaller institutions. Having assessed their collective output, a critic has written: 'Only one thing is missing in the activities of all these bodies — the content, the result...What the majority of Kazakh "power" analysts write is either an indigestible product from the "new thinking" era [i.e. the Gorbachev period], or, in the best case, a poor imitation of Russian analogues' (Grozin 1999).

The situation in other, smaller and poorer republics is much worse. The key government security think-tank in Tajikistan, the Centre for Strategic Studies under the President, was created on the basis of the Institute of the History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, retaining not just the old building but a great deal of personnel as well. Such institutions do not encourage independence of thought or initiative in any form or shape. A senior analyst at the Institute for Strategic and Inter-regional Studies under the President of Uzbekistan has recalled that, when in 1998 he wrote a memo about the upcoming incursion of Islamic militants into the Ferghana Valley, he was reprimanded and told 'not to sow panic', because the official line at the time was to deny such a possibility (Musaev 2002).

Intelligence organisations are not in a position to provide political decision makers with unbiased and informed threat assessments because the two communities are too closely connected, often in the most direct sense of the word. In 2005–06, Janybek Bakiev, the younger brother of the president of Kyrgyzstan, served as the First Deputy Chairman of SNB, that country's security service. Nazarbaev's son-in-law, Rahat Aliev, held the position of the First Deputy Chairman of KNB before becoming First Deputy Foreign Minister. Both gentlemen were more concerned about propping up family rule and hunting down opposition than ensuring the long-term national security of their countries.⁶

Interdepartmental squabbles and turf wars are commonplace in the national security establishment across the region. The titanic struggle between Uzbekistan's SNB and the Department of Military Intelligence resulted in the victory of

the former and the dismemberment of the latter in 1996. Attempts by the Minister of Defence, Kadyr Gulomov, to recover the situation led to his arrest in 2006 on charges related to his overly friendly relations with the US military (Fergana.ru 2006). The pathological and debilitating relationship between the two main secret agencies in Turkmenistan under President Niyazov (as well as his successor) is reasonably well documented (International Crisis Group 2003a: 6–11).

Interstate contacts among national security services, such as they are, occur mostly within multilateral blocs such as the SCO, the CIS and the CSTO. The level of these contacts is not high and does not go beyond compiling lists of extremist organisations, occasional extradition of criminals, and participation in war games simulating terrorist attacks. Even here lack of mutual trust can be palpable. In February 2005 the Head of the SCO Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS), Uzbek General Vyacheslav Kasymov, falsely accused Kazakhstan of housing the bank accounts of some terrorist organisations and doing business with the bin Laden family (Agentura.ru 2006). The ensuing scandal between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan lasted for weeks.

An alternative approach to securitisation: back to basics

There appears to be a serious disjuncture in Central Asia between the threat perceptions articulated and transmitted through the official security narrative, and the actual security situation ‘out there’. As Grozin (1999) has summed it up for Kazakhstan, ‘ordinary Kazakhstanis understand the acuteness of their country’s national security problems; however, when it comes to the realization of new realities by Kazakhstan’s power elites, the situation becomes difficult’. Is it possible to overcome this chasm, so that observers of the region — and regional leaders themselves — could receive a more objective picture of threats and start a meaningful discussion about solutions?

A significant second-track dialogue is already taking place. In April 2000 an independent sociological organisation based in Almaty conducted a representative survey of experts from all Central Asian countries except Turkmenistan (APR 2000). Those polled included politicians, security officials, academics, NGO leaders, journalists and other prominent community members. Brought together for the first time, they were asked to evaluate interstate relations in the region. The results, represented in Table 1 and Table 2, were quite revealing.

Only relations between Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan and Tajikistan were assessed as generally positive. The four other dyadic structures were viewed as marred by negativity, the sources of which are illustrated in Table 2.

Territorial and water disputes were identified as top irritants, while the influence of foreign powers occupied the third place. The fact that some

Table 1. Evaluation of bilateral relations in Central Asia

Kazakstan–Kyrgyzstan	2.08
Kazakstan–Tajikistan	0.76
Tajikistan–Uzbekistan	−1.17
Kyrgyzstan–Tajikistan	−1.42
Kyrgyzstan–Uzbekistan	−1.50
Kazakstan–Uzbekistan	−1.52

Note: Highest positive value +4; highest negative value −4.

countries had less authoritarian regimes than others (Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan vs Tajikistan and Uzbekistan) was not regarded as a problem.

Informal expert meetings continued on an *ad hoc* basis until 2005, when a group of universities, independent think-tanks, and media outlets decided to establish a permanent Expert Council with the headquarters in Almaty. Its objectives were defined as follows (APN 2005):

- to monitor events across the region and analyse them with a view to informing national governments;
- to develop security scenarios;
- to mould public opinion through round table discussions and media publications;
- to send analytical materials to international organisations (Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe).

Table 2. Factors leading to inter-state tensions in the Central Asian region (in descending order of importance out of 4)

Factor	Median weight
1. Territorial disputes	3.21
2. Water disputes	3.00
3. Influence of other countries	2.90
4. Personal struggle for regional leadership	2.83
5. Transport routes	2.82
6. Migration issues	2.67
7. Customs barriers	2.57
8. Ethnic tensions	2.39
9. Islamic extremism	2.33
10. Uneven level of economic development	2.30
11. Differences in political systems	1.96
12. Competition for international markets	1.86
13. Competition for foreign investment	1.57

The Council held five round tables during 2005 and 2006 with discussants from Central Asia, Russia, Europe and the US, after which its activities petered out, ostensibly because of a lack of funds. In the meantime the cottage industry of security-watchers in the region has continued to be dominated by grand strategists and democracy cheerleaders. This articulate crowd, buoyed by government, corporate and international NGO sponsorship, acts as a 'lab of mythical and phantasmagoric impressions' about Central Asia (Poujol 2007: 151), stifling alternative insights.

Conclusion

One particular session of the Expert Council in Almaty was dedicated to the hierarchy of security threats in Central Asia. Taking stock of its proceedings, a political scientist from Kazakhstan enjoined his colleagues 'not to focus on the extremes: the PR-savvy global issues or narrow problems of internal security. In fact, the problem of national security is an inalienable component of regional security. There can be no internal security as long as all across Central Asia conflicts or even wars are in the offing' (Kuzmin 2005).

Perhaps this call should be addressed to the political leaders of Central Asia and foreign commentators as well. For too long the discourse of security has been hijacked by the geopolitical perspective and an assortment of formulations from Western critical IR theory focusing on issues that do not necessarily capture the reality of threats on the ground. As Buzan and Wæver (2003: 51) have suggested, security analysis in an RSC ought to unfold on three levels: domestically generated vulnerabilities, state-to-state relations and the role of global powers. Take the mezzo-level out, and the whole construct will become shaky and distorted. An exploration of conventional security with nation-states as objects may sound tedious, *über*-Realist, and unfashionable, yet it provides an indispensable background for any cogent threat assessment in Central Asia.

Notes

1. One recent example of this article of faith came from the US Secretary of State: 'History also teaches us that true stability and true security are only found in democratic regimes. And no calculation of short-term interest should tempt us to undermine this basic conviction. America will encourage all of our friends in Central Asia to undertake democratic reforms' (Rice 2005). The White House has since been taken to task by certain academics for not exercising US 'unilateral hegemonic power' enough to 'sincerely expand the principles of freedom, liberty, prosperity, dignity, and justice' in the region (Crosston 2007: 340).
2. Former US Republican Congressman and 1996 vice presidential candidate Jack Kemp has been an ardent advocate of this idea for a few years now. Chollet and Goldgeier (2005) offer a detailed examination and criticism of the putative new Marshall Plan.
3. A sociological survey in Southern Kazakhstan yielded typical results: only 14.6 percent of those polled believed that the government must accelerate democratic processes in order to

- maintain stability. By comparison, 'educating our youth better' scored 52.2 percent, and 'raising combat preparedness of our rmy' 46.7 percent (COMCON-2 2001).
4. In the words of Islam Karimov (1998: 14.), 'it is erroneous to analyse an internal conflict in any isolated state, and the interrelation between that state and its neighbours, as unrelated phenomena'. His Kazakhstani colleague has been particularly vociferous in advocating a regional approach to security dilemmas, reflected in his voluminous writings on the Central Asian core of the pan-Eurasian security system (see, for instance, Nazarbaev 1996: 78–85, 102–118).
 5. It appears that, while Central Asians are not too perturbed by lack of democracy or the creeping imperialism of great powers, tense and unfriendly borders generated clear and present problems for the majority of the population. In a 2004 public opinion survey organised by the World Bank, almost 60 percent of the respondents said that borders had a negative or very negative impact on their access to family members, friends or business associates (cited in UNDP 2005: 63).
 6. Bakiev had to resign in September 2006 after the SNB organised an unsuccessful provocation against an opposition leader, planting heroin in his baggage. Rahat Aliev and the KNB are reported to have been involved in the assassination of a potential presidential candidate, Altynbek Sarsynbaev, in February 2006. President Nazarbaev has changed the KNB leadership in the wake of this.

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