Regionalism, regional structures and security management in Central Asia

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Post-Soviet Central Asia emerged in a global environment characterized by the end of the Cold War and the accompanying decentralization of the international system. It owed its new separateness to the dissolution of a metropolitan power, the USSR: a process over which Central Asian leaders had little control and to which they contributed little. The new Central Asian states were shaped by and subject to the security dynamics that subsequently unfolded in the region, but were poorly placed to direct these processes themselves. In particular, the ability of these states to constrain the intrusive influence on security issues of the regional hegemon—Russia—developed only gradually in the 1990s. Central Asian leaders have been hesitant and inconsistent in formulating regional agendas or structures for security cooperation.

In some respects this situation is reminiscent of the first wave of regionalism in the 1960s in the developing world, which often had to contend with the strategic agendas of powerful states. Indeed, in security policy terms the vulnerability of Central Asian states today resembles that of states in the Third World as described by Tow, who identified ‘subregional security’ actors as relatively small or undeveloped nations, often susceptible to intimidation or manipulation by external powers.1

The development of the second wave, or the ‘new regionalism’, beginning in the 1980s, included efforts by many regional or subregional units to create a security consensus in a given area without the backing of a major power. For a variety of reasons the Central Asian states have found this goal particularly difficult to achieve; the attainment of even limited coordination of their security and defence policies as a distinct Central Asian ‘unit’ has been an uphill struggle. Security coordination under the influence of at least one dominant power has been more common. Various regional and macroregional entities have been

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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. They have been diverse, usually uncoordinated and unconsolidated, and sometimes in competition with one another. This article examines the security dimension of such regional structures (both those involving and those excluding major powers), and their capacity to address the security requirements of the Central Asian states and Azerbaijan.² It also analyses the interaction between these efforts and the policies of major powers engaged in the region.

Constraints on security-related regionalism in Central Asia

Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union there have been important systemic reasons why Central Asian states have been so hesitant in developing projects and processes to modify the provision of security in their region. First, the overbearing (albeit fluctuating) influence of Russia as a regional hegemon in Central Asia and its interest in promoting supranational structures have preserved at least some of the effects of the superpower ‘overlay’ of the Cold War period. In this article it is argued that the Russian role as regional hegemon has been more of a constraint on regionalism (except on sponsored, dominant–state or hegemonic regionalism) than the role of the United States as global hegemon. However, Neil MacFarlane argues convincingly that this could be changing, with American power since 11 September 2001 increasingly shaping the emerging regional order in Central Asia.³ This observation leads to the second and related systemic constraint on the development of regional security projects here: the existence of competitive dynamics between major powers.

However, a neo-realist focus on power political competition and on the region as viewed from outside can provide only a partial explanation of the constraints on security-related regionalism in Central Asia. A variety of intra-regional and state-level factors have affected the propensity for regionalism in security (and other fields), even if there is scant evidence of the ‘bottom-up’

² ‘Central Asia’ in this article is taken to comprise the five CIS Central Asian states: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Security policy is defined here narrowly as relating to inter- and intrastate threat environments that create the potential for conflict rather than in the broad sense of human security. Nor are economic, energy or environmental aspects of security analysed in any detail. For analysis of efforts at region-building in a variety of functional fields of cooperation in the post-Soviet states, including aspects of ‘soft security’, see Renata Dwan and Oleksandr Pavliuk, eds, Building security in the new states of Eurasia: subregional cooperation in the former Soviet space (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2000). This volume includes background research for the current article in Roy Allison, ‘Subregional cooperation and security in the CIS’, pp. 149–76. See also Renata Dwan, ed., Building security in Europe’s new borderlands: subregional cooperation in the wider Europe (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1999).

conditions necessary for developing ‘soft regionalism’ (except in the negative dysfunctional sense of criminal and illegal transnational networks). These other factors are identified by writers who position Central Asia and the Caucasus as regions of a kind comparable to the Middle East, the Balkans and South Asia: regions with little space for manoeuvre in decision-making, caught up in internal or regional conflicts, often with relatively weak or dependent economies, and characterized by strong nationalism and an emphasis on sovereignty.

If we accept the salience of these factors alongside higher-level systemic constraints, it is hardly surprising that regionalization—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. Its absence has not prevented western states, international organizations and NGOs from commitment to a normative agenda of promoting self-sustaining and deepening processes for regional security cooperation in Central Asia, with the ultimate aim of fostering a regional security community through the inculcation of common values. But the evidence to date, confirmed by analysis in this article and others in this issue of International Affairs, suggests that this goal is a remote prospect, if indeed it proves to be achievable at all.

Indeed, analysts who interpret regionalization as a response to the polarizing and peripheralizing pressures of economic globalization have argued that Central Asia is one of a number of regions lying in a peripheral zone in the world system. Such zones are beset by political turbulence and economic stagnation, and are caught in a vicious circle of conflict, domestic unrest and under-development. According to this argument, while there is an incentive for such a region to organize to avert the threat of marginalization, the regional arrangements that develop are fragile and ineffective.

If Central Asia (or Central Eurasia) is defined as such a peripheral zone this casts doubt on the usefulness of comparisons between regional processes and structures in the region and those in more advanced parts of this and other continents, including most of the ‘transitional states’ of post-Cold War eastern

4 See Annette Bohr, ‘Regionalism in Central Asia: new geopolitics, old regional order’, in this issue of International Affairs.


6 Erika Weinthal, ‘International organizations, Western norms and the construction of regional security in Central Asia: fact or fiction?’, in Gabriel Gorodetsky and Werner Weidfeld, eds, Regional security in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union: Europe and the Middle East (Bonn: Europa Union, 2002); Neil MacFarlane, Western engagement in the Caucasus and Central Asia (London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1999), pp. 58–69. It is not by chance that the most comprehensive study on security communities in different regions contains no chapter on Central Asia or the south Caucasus: see Emanuel Adler and Michael Barnett, eds, Security communities (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

and Central Europe, which in systemic terms could be viewed as lying in a separate ‘intermediate zone’. Nevertheless, the relatively successful experience of regionalism in Eastern and Central Europe has given rise to greater western political expectations about the prospects for a security dimension to regional and subregional processes and structures further east and south among former Soviet states. In respect of Central Asia such optimism may be misguided or at least premature.

Those committed to ‘transition studies’ or convinced by the normative expectations of various international organizations, including the OSCE, have found it easy to regard Central Asia as just part of the larger reconfiguration of a post-communist ‘security space’. From East and Central European experience in the 1990s, such a ‘subregion’ could be defined as a geographically and/or historically reasonably coherent area within the OSCE space as a whole (which covers all the European and Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) countries, including the Central Asian states). But there are problems with applying this interpretation of subregional to Central Asia. First, the security processes and groupings that involve the Central Asian states are not confined to subsets of OSCE concerns, states or areas: for example, they spill over to China and Afghanistan. Second, important fractures exist between Central Asian countries. Third, the continued pervasive Russian influence in Central Asia is a distinctive feature no longer experienced in Central Europe, which has been subjected instead to the normative pull of the European Union and NATO, and now for many states actual inclusion in these organizations.

A further difference between the European and the Central Asian experience becomes clear if one understands that an important part of the mission of several larger post–Cold War subregional groupings in Europe has been to civilize power relationships and to relativize ‘dividing lines’, particularly between East and West. This objective has meant that these groupings could

8 For the OSCE’s approach to regional and subregional cooperation in this part of Europe, see Monika Wohlfeld, ‘The OSCE and regional cooperation in Europe’, in Calleya, ed., Regionalism in the post-Cold War world, pp. 99–112. The OSCE has made some efforts to coordinate the activities of regional and subregional groupings on a pan-regional basis, including the former Soviet region, on functional issues. See the report on the ‘OSCE meeting with regional and subregional organizations and initiatives on preventing and combating terrorism’, OSCE SEC.GAL/166/02, 20 Sept. 2002.
10 This is reflected, for example, in the participants list of the ‘OSCE meeting with regional and subregional organizations and initiatives on preventing and combating terrorism’ held on 6 Sept. 2002: see OSCE SEC.GAL/166/02, 20 Sept. 2002, pp. 10–13. New ‘subregional cooperation groups’ in Central Europe are analysed in Andrew Cottee, Subregional cooperation in the new Europe: building security, prosperity and solidarity from the Barents to the Black Sea (London: Macmillan, 1999). See also Ian Kearns, ‘Subregionalism in Central Europe’, in Glenn Hook and Ian Kearns, eds, Subregionalism and world order (Macmillan: Basingstoke, 1999), pp. 21–40.
11 China is a member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. In December 2002 post-Taleban Afghanistan was invited to become an observer in the Central Asia Cooperation Organization. For an original discussion of the need for regional cooperation in relation to contemporary Afghanistan see Barnett R. Rubin and Andrea Armstrong, ‘Regional issues in the reconstruction of Afghanistan’, World Policy Journal 10: 1, Spring 2003, pp. 31–40.
12 For a detailed analysis of the role of regionalism for a country close to but not part of this Central European experience see Roman Wolczuk, Ukraine’s foreign and security policy 1991–2000 (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003).
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and should include major military powers like Russia. By comparison the definitions of dividing lines in Central Asia between Russia and its southern neighbours, which mostly maintain close relations with Moscow, are less obvious, and although Russia has participated in a number of the groupings in this region it has consistently sought to integrate the region on its own terms. Moreover, in the Central Asian region at large the competitive dynamics between major powers in the security field are reflected in sensitivity to Russian inclusion in or exclusion from regional groupings.

If we accept that Central Asia falls in a peripheral zone in the world system we cannot expect regional groups within it to contribute significantly to the evolving architecture of regionalization. In the past, one pillar of this architecture has been the hope that regional groups could increasingly act as security providers within their respective areas and contribute to task-sharing or subsidiarity promoted by the United Nations. But the principal non-UN peace support operation in Central Asia, in Tajikistan, was (like others in the south Caucasus) essentially a Russian affair, and failed to prevent five years of civil war. In response to core external security concerns the Central Asian states have, as shown below, tended to bandwagon either with Russia, under the mantle of the CIS, or—increasingly since 11 September 2001—with the United States. Serious security challenges within Central Asia itself have hardly been addressed at all on an exclusively regional basis (that is, without the involvement of major external powers). This admittedly short-lived experience since the end of the USSR supports earlier research, based on different case-studies, that regionalism is not a promising approach to conflict mitigation and containment in most circumstances outside Europe. The analysis of regional frameworks in this article confirms that they are unlikely to be principal actors in serious security crises in the future within Central Asia.

Responses to Russian hegemony: bandwagoning and balancing

As indicated above, a neo-realist approach to regionalism has its limitations and analytically it may lead to rather crude similarities of analysis with the politics of alliance formation. But for Central Asia it is helpful in alerting us to the fact that regionalism has often merely provided a power platform for a particular state: interstate cooperation has indeed sometimes been driven by the pursuit of power and security, just as alliances have. It also helps to crystallize some core


motivations driving the security dimension of the various incipient regionalist frameworks in Central Asia and to highlight distinctions between them.16

From this perspective, accommodation or bandwagoning with the regional hegemon (Russia, despite its declining influence in Central Asia for much of the 1990s, until a period of possible reassertion since 2002) provides at least a partial interpretation of Central Asian participation in various CIS structures. This results in a kind of hegemon-sponsored regionalism. At present some Central Asian states may also be seeking support against Uzbekistan from the CIS framework or other regional frameworks that exclude this strong, even intimidating regional player. A weaker form of accommodation could also help to explain Central Asian countries’ policies towards the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), since China constitutes a potential future hegemon and borders on three Central Asian states. However, some evidence that regional hegemons, by their nature, avoid deep commitments to institutions that limit their freedom of action suggests a crucial in-built weakness of such macroregional frameworks. Russia in the CIS region, like the United States on a global scale, is reluctant to abandon its unilateralism, which makes it difficult to take seriously its apparently multilateral initiatives.

Another response to the proximity of actual or potential hegemonic power is that of balancing, which may foster regional cooperation on politico-security issues. The GUUAM grouping (see below), for example, despite its disparate membership, may be driven in significant measure by an effort at regional balancing against Russia. But the main interactions in GUUAM are between states west of the Caspian Sea, and this grouping has no equivalent further east among exclusively Central Asian states. Russia and China have at times sought to use the SCO as a macroregional balancing mechanism—against the United States—though Central Asian states are more interested in the existence of a balance between Russia and China in this body. In Central Asia relationships to offset deep Russian influence have for the most part depended on powers further afield, rather than on weaker and often fractious neighbouring states. In this region, in essence, ‘friends of Russia look for balancing relationships lest friendships become too stifling; countries hoping to stay too slippery for the Russian grasp know themselves too weak to play this game in isolation’.17

By the late 1990s Central Asian countries were beginning more actively to explore ways to balance their relations with Russia to some extent through bilateral relationships with the United States and other strong extraregional powers. But it was only after 11 September 2001 that real opportunities of this kind opened up for the Central Asian states. However, it is possible that the growing projection of American global hegemonic power into the Central Asian


17 Bremmer and Bailes, ‘Subregionalism in the newly independent states’, p. 141.
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region, transforming the United States in the future into a regional hegemon alongside Russia, could result in some Central Asian states recasting their priorities and seeking to balance the US presence by upgrading their commitments to Russian-sponsored security frameworks—frameworks that Russia is already seeking to reinforce.

Especially before September 11 the huge disparities in power between Russia and the Central Asian states, as well as the significant infrastructural legacy of the USSR centred on Moscow, compelled Central Asian leaders to accommodate Russia to a greater or lesser extent. But the preoccupation of local governments with regime security has also been an important factor encouraging Central Asian states to bandwagon with Russia. This concern has been sufficiently strong for them to be prepared to delegate some of their decision-making prerogatives to accommodate Russian preponderance. Russia has been willing to make military and financial contributions to the domestic political survival of rulers and ruling coalitions, irrespective of their political complexion or of normative concerns. Indeed, one can argue that ‘those governmental patterns of association that have made a positive contribution to the domestic survival of post-Soviet governments have been more likely to endure’. This imperative of regime survival is reflected in the structure of coalitions among these authoritarian governments and has been built into the evolving Russian relationship with them.18 The CIS in particular, which has operated more as a talking shop than an organization determining and implementing policy, has enabled Central Asian states to accommodate Russia without thereby challenging the existence of incumbent regimes.

Integration in abeyance: CIS security structures

The CIS framework has generated more unfulfilled agreements and rhetoric on security policy issues in Central Asia than any other ostensibly multilateral structure. Its lack of an implementation mechanism has been a crucial weakness.19 The security policy basis of the CIS derives from the 1992 Tashkent Collective Security Treaty (CST) and its various institutional offshoots.20 But during the 1990s the CIS never came close to developing into a genuinely collective multinational entity. Nor did it assume a supranational identity and mission, which was never its intention from the outset.21 Its capacity as a

19 Essentially ‘[The CIS] has developed as an organisation with free and non-mandatory resolutions, where cooperation has diverse formats, and there is no system of state responsibility for carrying out the obligations that states have assumed’: Mariam Arunova, ‘The CIS: summing up the past decade, and future prospects’, Central Asia and the Caucasus 13: 3, 2002, p. 9.
security provider was restricted by its failure to identify common adversaries outside the CIS zone (except Taliban-controlled Afghanistan) and by its lack from the outset of a mandate (under the CST or otherwise) to address conflicts between or within CIS member states.

Russian peace enforcement in CIS conflicts during 1992–4 could not be convincingly transformed into ‘CIS peacekeeping’, although controversially Russia sought to use the CIS structure to provide ex post facto legitimacy to what were initially unilateral Russian interventions. In one case, in Tajikistan, a CIS mandate was agreed for ‘collective peacekeeping forces’, which included military units from Russia as well as other Central Asian states. But the operations of these forces (which had a CIS designation during 1993–2000) distorted the idea of collective action: the dominant Russian force grouping was at times an active participant in the Tajik civil war and engaged in standard military operations. The abuse of peacekeeping practice this represented may differ little from the way regional hegemons have acted in conflicts on other continents. However, the experience in Tajikistan failed to promote regionalism in a broader sense and is not viewed by the local states as offering a model for future military cooperation.

Nor did the CIS fulfil Moscow’s hopes in the 1990s of a Russian-sponsored and Russian-controlled process of progressive military–security integration (or, given the Soviet legacy, reintegration). In brief, the variations in the geographical location, resources and threat perceptions of the Central Asian states made them resist Russian efforts to pool their interests or other than limited aspects of their sovereignty in the realization of security-related ‘CIS integration’.

This situation has not fundamentally changed since September 11: a thin layer of multilateralism still cloaks bilateral agreements between Russia and Central Asian partners. But Russia has used the banner of counterterrorism in an energetic effort to regenerate a CIS ‘collective security system’ in Central Asia and to provide it with some institutional shape. During 2001–3 Moscow tried to characterize the CIS Collective Security Council (based on the CST) as an active regional security organization. But most of the work of this body was declaratory, and in the new environment Moscow’s ambitions for it were

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constrained by Russia’s need to share security responsibilities in Central Asia related to counterterrorism with western states and even China. This has also influenced the capacity of a CIS Antiterrorism Centre, located in Bishkek but headed by a Russian Federal Security Service general, which has confined its tasks to the exchange of information and analysis and has become one of several uncoordinated regional anti-terrorist structures in Central Asia.27

In May 2002 Russia agreed with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan (as well as Belarus and Armenia) to create a Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO).28 At its launch a year later the CSTO was assigned an ambitious role: to address new threats and challenges through a joint military command located in Moscow, a rapid reaction force for Central Asia, a common air defence system and ‘coordinated action’ in foreign, security and defence policy. As the dominant state in the CSTO, Russia is clearly hoping to use it as a macroregional platform to support its standing as a ‘security manager’ for Central Asia and to confirm recognition for the CSTO as, at least, a coequal security actor in the region with NATO.29 This could be the basis for an effort at competitive regionalism with the transregional NATO Partnership for Peace (PfP). An effort has been made to boost the institutional profile of the CSTO, which has proclaimed the formation of a political cooperation directorate (to foster concurrent foreign policy positions and coordinate international activities of member states), a military cooperation directorate and a directorate to tackle common challenges and threats; but these bodies are understaffed and underfinanced, and have achieved little so far.30

In reality the CSTO cannot develop region-wide operational plans for Central Asia because both Uzbekistan, the core regional state, and Turkmenistan have opted out of them (though in principle the CSTO is open to new member states). This raises the possibility that some in the Russian leadership view the new initiative as a deterrent against interstate conflict between Central Asian states—for example, between Uzbekistan and other CSTO member states. However, if this function becomes obvious then it is likely to alienate Uzbekistan and fracture the region further. Moreover, if deterrence fails then Russia would face the unprecedented challenge of entanglement in regional wars within Central Asia.

The role of the CSTO in even limited operations is questionable. Given the history of Russian involvement in Tajikistan and Russia’s brutal conduct of low-

27 A programme of work for the ATC in the period to 2005 was discussed in October 2003 at a meeting of security service chiefs of CIS countries (with Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan attending only as observers), which also discussed a draft CIS document on combating terrorism and extremism. See Inside Central Asia, 2 Nov. 2003, p. 7. For a rather optimistic and detailed survey of the accomplishments of the ATC see Voenno-promyshlenny kurer, no. 6, 18 Feb. 2004, p. 8.


29 This is implied in a call issued by the Russian Secretary General of the CSTO in November 2003 for closer ties with NATO to ensure regional and international security. BBC Monitoring, Inside Central Asia, 23 Nov. 2003, pp. 10–11.

intensity warfare in Chechnya, even those Central Asian member states that have signed up to the CSTO probably doubt the Russian capacity for effective and impartial military intervention in the region. This puts in doubt possible peacekeeping activities, or even major counternarcotics operations under the CSTO. A decision in December 2003 to create ‘CSTO special forces’ to counter new threats is unlikely to resolve this dilemma. The main attraction of the CSTO framework for Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan may simply be the Russian offer to sell military equipment bilaterally to its partner states at the prices and on the terms at which they are available to the Russian armed forces.31 The Central Asian states may also derive limited benefits from joint military and counterterrorist exercises under the CSTO format, which succeeded previous Russian-sponsored ‘CIS’ exercises in Central Asia during 2001–3.

Moscow has revived hopes for military integration between Russian and Central Asian armed forces around the core of a CSTO rapid reaction force under a united headquarters. But significant integration is unlikely given the burgeoning ties between Central Asian and western military establishments, and the fact that the rapid reaction force still comprises only a blueprint of earmarked national units. The CSTO member states agreed at first that each would assign a reinforced battalion, in permanent combat readiness, to the force. In December 2003 they opted to increase the assigned forces to two battalions each from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Russia and three from Tajikistan.32 Despite this notional equality in contributions, Russia is the dominant military and financial sponsor of this force, which if deployed would also operate under a Russian commander. Russian preponderance is indicated by its decision to open a new air base at Kant in Kyrgyzstan with great fanfare in October 2003. Moscow claims that the strategic purpose of the base is to provide air support for a CSTO rapid reaction force and that it forms a component of this force. But Russia funds the base, which in its structure and personnel is in fact part of the Russian Urals Air Force and Air Defence Army headquartered in Ekaterinburg, and not the rapid reaction force.33

The rapid reaction force concept shows Russian interest in developing sub-CIS security groupings under Russian leadership and guidance. For Moscow the force also offers some hope that Central Asian states may eventually agree to establish a ‘CIS regional command structure’ for their region—a concept, advocated by Russian leaders for many years, which is a spin-off of early Russian proposals in the 1990s for joint CIS forces. But the states in the southern tier of the CIS look askance at the idea of a regionally defined but Russian-dominated defence community. When Russia carried out large-scale military exercises in and around the Caspian Sea in August 2002, with the limited partici-

31 ‘The creation of a defence union in the framework of the CIS will not succeed’, Nezavisimaya gazeta, 16 June 2003.
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Patiation of Kazakh naval vessels, Russian officials mooted the idea of Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan participating in a so-called ‘Caspian grouping’. However, the Kazakh defence minister was quick to reject the idea of creating ‘a military grouping, similar to the Collective Rapid Reaction Forces, in the Caspian with Russia’. Overall, it is unlikely that cooperation under the CSTO will do much to foster a regional security identity or to address the most pressing challenges for regional security management.

Fractured efforts to create a security consensus

Russian domination through CIS security arrangements has been unacceptable to Central Asian leaders, despite their appreciation of the CIS as an instrument for low-cost accommodation of the regional hegemon. But this article has already questioned the motivation and capacity of Central Asian leaders to create a regional security consensus among themselves and to institutionalize interstate cooperation on that basis, particularly in ways that exclude major powers. This deficiency renders futile any search for evidence of the deeper integration that would suggest that the Central Asian countries are set on the path towards an eventual security community. However, they have made some efforts to form a common regional platform (mostly without the participation of isolationist Turkmenistan) to address security concerns. These have had limited success, but this should perhaps be measured against the slow progress of the first wave of regionalism in the 1960s.

The Central Asian Union (which became the Central Asian Economic Union, CAEC, in 1998), composed of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, was established in 1994 as an economic union. In December 1995 it decided to form a joint Council of Defence Ministers to consider issues of regional security and the coordination of military exercises, air defence and defence supplies. But little such coordination followed except for the creation of a tripartite peacekeeping battalion, Centrasbat, located in the south of Kazakhstan on the border with Uzbekistan. This unit, trained in the framework of the NATO PfP programme, has taken part in a series of joint peacekeeping exercises in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan with troops from various armed forces, including those of the United States, Russia and Turkey. But it has never actually been used, either in Tajikistan (which joined the CAEC in 1998) or to counter threats from Afghanistan, and its functions have remained in question.

A core precondition, if not a sufficient one, for the Central Asian states to develop a military–security dimension to regionalism and establish common structures on this basis is a perception of common defence challenges. This was absent in the 1990s, despite some anxiety about the consolidation of Taleban rule in Afghanistan. Turkmenistan also remained outside all forms of

35 Ibid., 29 April–5 May 1996.
cooperation that were perceived as impinging on its self-declared permanent neutrality. The threat posed by Islamist insurgents of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) during summer 1999 and 2000 superficially created a common sense of regional threat. But this consensus soon collapsed in recriminations and accusations among the states affected in the volatile region of the Ferghana valley.

Before the effects of September 11 were felt in Central Asia, the leaders of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan agreed to cooperate over fighting terrorism, extremism and transborder organized crime, in activities ranging from intelligence-sharing and covert operations to the use of armed forces. A coordinating centre was also envisaged for the defence, interior and security agencies of Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan in Khujand in Tajikistan. But the underlying suspicions between the Central Asian states, particularly between Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, quickly resurfaced whenever joint military action was considered. At a summit in Bishkek in August 2000 the four presidents abandoned all pretence at self-sufficiency, proceeded to call on Russia to join the anti-terrorism agreements they had signed four months previously and appealed to the CIS Collective Security Council to map out action to counter the terrorist threat.

In December 2001 the CAEC was transformed by its members into the Central Asian Cooperation Organization (CACO) and the CAEC Council of Ministers of Defence was dissolved, which further reduced the ability of the member states to develop any joint regional defence and security identity. A statement of the four countries on the transformation of the CAEC spoke of the need to broaden understanding on forming a single security zone and to draw up joint action on maintaining peace and stability in the region. But this has remained a rhetorical goal. In December 2002 Afghanistan was invited to join the CACO as an observer, and in July 2003 the body pledged to cooperate in fighting terrorism, religious extremism and drug trafficking. No substantive measures on a multilateral level have followed. CACO seems neutered by its ‘need to balance relations with the main players in the region’.

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 assets, as for example in the proposal for a Central Asian Nuclear Weapons Free Zone (CANWFZ). This was initially proposed by Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, and serious debate on the issue began with the February 1997 Almaty Declaration of the five Central Asian heads of state. It is envisaged that this zone will comprise all five states and require commitments by them, as well as some sort of security assurances by the nuclear-weapon states, especially neighbouring Russia and China, which have been

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involved in the discussion process in a more informal manner. However, the relationship of this proposal to the 1992 Tashkent Collective Security Treaty and other bilateral agreements, which in theory offer the Central Asian states concerned a Russian nuclear umbrella, remains problematic. Despite this, in September 2002 the five Central Asian states reached agreement on the zone, and its text is under consideration by the five nuclear powers.

This initiative is unlikely to progress beyond its current blueprint stage so long as Russian and American priority in strengthening controls on non-proliferation and nuclear terrorism in Central Asia seems to be outweighed by their wish to retain flexibility in nuclear policy. The process of arriving at a consensus over the zone confirms at least that Central Asian leaders can set aside interstate frictions to think in terms of a regional security agenda in specific fields. But the realization of the zone, like the development of an effective response to Islamic insurgency, is still a function of relations of dependence between these states and major powers.

Lukewarm efforts at regional balancing

The epicentre of efforts in the security field to balance Russian hegemonic influence in the CIS zone lies to the west rather than the east of the Caspian Sea. The GUAM grouping, founded in October 1997 through agreements between Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan and Moldova, initially explored options for defence cooperation between Ukraine and the states of the south Caucasus. In pursuing joint initiatives, it is suggested, these states sought to increase their capabilities, and this has allowed them to some extent to offset Russian influence in the CIS space. But by 2001 it was clear that the grouping was not evolving organizationally into a kind of ‘anti-CIS’, as some Russian commentators had previously forecast.

Between spring 1999 and spring 2002 Uzbekistan was also a committed member of the group (then designated as GUUAM), which provided a tentative consultative channel on security issues between the south Caucasus and Central Asia. Uzbekistan’s suspension of its membership in the group in April 2002 reflected its renewed focus on bilateral approaches to security relationships and its generally sceptical view of multilateralism. But it also indicated the failure of the group to develop any substantive defence or security policy


42 For an argument that GUUAM in fact represents evidence that geopolitical pluralism has emerged in the CIS, see Taras Kuzio, ‘Geopolitical pluralism in the CIS: the emergence of GUUAM’, European Security 9: 2, Summer 2000, pp. 81–110.
agreements that addressed Uzbekistan’s priorities.43 Moldova has also shown inconsistent interest in GUUAM. In fact, the core security relationships within the grouping have revolved around a Georgia–Azerbaijan axis and Ukraine’s bilateral links with each of those two countries as a potential supplier of military resources or political support.

In principle GUUAM has an ambitious regionalist security agenda. It aims to establish the conceptual foundations and strategies for cooperative security; to develop new approaches capable of conclusively resolving conflicts in the GUUAM region; to outline the main directions and forms of military-technical cooperation within the GUUAM framework; and to work to strengthen GUUAM’s partnership with NATO. But in fact its meetings have acted more as a venue for consultation than as a precursor to the implementation of policy. Little joint activity has followed pledges by the leaders of the grouping, for example to prevent the accumulation of arms in theatres of conflict, or, when Uzbekistan joined the group, to counter ‘religious extremism’.44 It has also been difficult to sustain defence cooperation among the disparate states of the grouping.45 Military-technical cooperation among the member states of the group has been conducted on a bilateral rather than a multilateral level, like meetings of their defence ministers.

One much-discussed but unrealized initiative has been the plan to create a tripartite Ukrainian–Georgian–Azerbaijani battalion to provide security for the planned TRACECA transit corridor and pipelines for oil export routes from the Caspian Sea to Georgia, the Black Sea, Turkey and Ukraine, or perhaps even to promote conflict resolution on the territory of the GUUAM states. This does not include any role for regional powers. But in principle it could have fitted in with Turkish proposals that the countries of the south Caucasus form joint peacekeeping forces for operations in the Black Sea region under the leadership of Turkey. However, a charter for the GUUAM group agreed at a summit in Yalta in June 2001 made no mention of joint peacekeeping or assistance in the management of regional conflicts.46 The idea of creating a joint military unit to maintain the security of oil transport corridors was also shelved.

Since September 11 GUUAM’s potential for security cooperation has been reinvigorated, assisted by an American interest in cooperation over issues of border security, the security of transport corridors and terrorism. Perceiving an opportunity, Ukrainian officials have suggested that the states of the group should create a kind of ‘security belt’ around the perimeters of their borders to

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help eradicate terrorism and other non-conventional security challenges. Leaders of the grouping agreed at a July 2003 summit to set up a regional law-enforcement centre to combat terrorism and organized crime. The United States pledged aid to assist its anti-terrorist operations. In the new security environment the states in this grouping could revive their goals of responding to common threats and developing capabilities for peacekeeping operations, perhaps within the framework of the NATO PfP programme. This may be promoted by their common bilateral military ties with the United States and the growing US, NATO and Turkish military engagement in the south Caucasus region and around the Caspian Sea.

With this scenario in mind Moscow tends to interpret GUUAM as a Trojan horse for the projection of US and NATO influence among CIS states. Russian officials have stated explicitly that ‘Russia will continue to counter any attempts to bring a military component into GUUAM activities’. Nevertheless, GUUAM is unlikely to develop a true balancing role against Russia so long as its strongest state, Ukraine, is not convinced that it will eventually be accepted by western powers as part of the Euro-Atlantic security community.

Another nascent form of balancing, engaging the support of a regional power, is expressed in growing security cooperation among Georgia, Azerbaijan and Turkey. This has practical goals, but, by promoting a stronger Turkish role in the south Caucasus, it also acts as a partial counterweight to Russia’s military presence in Georgia and Armenia. In April 2002 a tripartite agreement was signed on regional security with the specific aim of cooperating in combating terrorism and organized crime. Azerbaijani President Heidar Aliyev talked grandly of the need to ‘form a new security system by our common initiatives’. But so far only a thin veneer of multilateralism covers bilateral military agreements signed by Aliyev with Georgia and Turkey in the spirit of the April 2002 accord.

Overall, active efforts by the GUUAM subgroup of CIS states to balance Russian security preponderance have been diluted by the disparate objectives and capacities and the geographical dispersal of the countries involved. The GUUAM grouping has not worked effectively as a basis for significant self-sustaining regional security cooperation and has failed to project a regional security identity. But it has enabled limited functional multilateral cooperation between some of its members in other fields, such as energy policy, and some coordination on defence issues. For Russia it has also raised the spectre of growing geopolitical pluralism in the CIS zone.

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50 Ibid., no. 425, 6–12 May 2002.
Attempts at macroregional balancing

In Central Asia the most inclusive and prominent regional, or more properly macroregional, consultative framework with a security dimension is the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO: termed the Shanghai Five until July 2000 and then the Shanghai Forum until June 2001). Its membership includes Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, as well as Uzbekistan since June 2001. On one level this grouping has been interpreted in the past as a potential balancing mechanism developed by China and Russia to counteract American hegemony at a strategic level. This is suggested by the founding document of the SCO, which defines the promotion of multipolarity as a core institutional objective, and by some evidence of Russian–Chinese collusion, at least during 1999–2000, to use the Shanghai Five/Forum to address the two states’ wider strategic concerns about US policy. However, this motivation has caused apprehension among the Central Asian member states and is a role that Uzbekistan has opposed since it entered the SCO in 2001.

The US military presence in Central Asia since autumn 2001 may tempt Moscow and Beijing to try to instrumentalize the SCO as a regional balancing structure against Washington. But this goal will not be accepted by its Central Asian members, keen on exploring the limits of their new bilateral security ties with the United States. In any case, for these regional states the uniqueness of the SCO lies in the opportunity it offers to bandwagon with both Russia and China in a framework where the Chinese presence increasingly offsets any Russian efforts to impose unwanted aspects of its integration agenda on the Central Asian states, while the Russian presence equally provides reassurance about Chinese policies and therefore enables the SCO to act as a vehicle to incorporate Chinese interests in developing joint responses to selected security challenges in Central Asia. In this arrangement the Central Asian member states retain some latitude to advance their own priorities and leave their imprint on the agenda of the SCO.

The SCO has enlarged its initial remit of involving China in military confidence-building measures and mutual demilitarization in border regions in Central Asia to cover coordination among member states on non-traditional security challenges. Since a summit in Bishkek in August 1999 it has maintained an emphasis on collective efforts to combat religious and separatist extremism and the international flow of drugs. The SCO has developed a strong focus on such transborder as well as intrastate security issues, and in June 2001 grandly proclaimed the ‘Shanghai Covenant on the Suppression of


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Terrorism, Separatism and [Religious] Extremism’. But it has not made serious efforts to develop multilateral cooperation over traditional military defence issues. A decision to hold regular meetings of the defence ministers of member states was agreed at the Bishkek summit, but there is little information on the output of any such meetings. Limited Chinese security and defence assistance has been provided to Central Asian countries on a bilateral basis rather than within the SCO framework, and there have been no proposals to create joint SCO standing military units.

On the other hand, the SCO has developed a channel through which Central Asian states can engage with China on the common agenda of counterterrorism, initially in consultations on intelligence and then in military exercises. Consultations have been held since a summit decision of the SCO states in July 2000 to conduct regular meetings of their security services. This summit also approved a Kyrgyz proposal to create a regional anti-terrorist centre based in Bishkek, which has, however, been rather ineffective and has been moved to Tashkent. Its first meeting in this new location was held in October 2003. China has been the main proponent of the anti-terrorist centre and now views it as the core ‘security cooperation branch’ of the SCO. But the capacity of the centre is limited by the unwillingness of the SCO states to exchange hard intelligence material (this is especially necessary between the two states with the strongest intelligence resources, Russia and China). In addition, at least until 2003 Uzbekistan placed little faith in the SCO as a security provider and it still remains sceptical about this role. More broadly, the SCO has failed to overcome its marginalization in the aftermath of September 11, when the Central Asian states chose to enter into bilateral agreements to join US-led anti-terrorist operations in the region.

Despite these deficiencies, in October 2002 China and Kyrgyzstan held bilateral military counterterrorism manoeuvres in their border zone—described by Chinese specialists as the ‘formal start-up of the SCO anti-terror mission’. This was followed the next August by ‘Cooperation 2003’, a SCO joint-command-post exercise combined with field manoeuvres. The first stage of the operation, in Kazakhstan, involved Russian, Kazakh and Kyrgyz troops; the second stage, in the Xinjiang province of China, involved Chinese and Kyrgyz troops. The head of the visiting Chinese delegation in Kazakhstan called on the SCO states ‘to step up military cooperation and mutual trust among their armed forces and boost regional cooperation against terrorism’. But for Uzbekistan at least this poses a dilemma. Despite Tashkent’s focus on internal security issues, it has not been keen on further large-scale SCO anti-terrorist

54 Interview with senior Chinese foreign ministry official, 19 Nov. 2003.
military exercises in the region, perhaps because it does not wish to be caught up in a future struggle to develop the SCO into a counterweight to the US military presence in Central Asia.\textsuperscript{57}

The probability of this kind of struggle should not be overstated. First, since September 11 the Central Asian states have expected and received much more practical assistance in countering regional security threats from new bilateral security programmes, particularly from the United States, than from the SCO. Second, Russia views the CSTO, rather than the SCO, as the natural counterweight to the new US strategic presence. Indeed, Moscow’s engagement in the SCO may be determined by a wish to constrain the growth of China’s influence in Central Asia as much as by a wish to develop a structure for regional balancing against the United States. Over time Russia could even come to accept the American presence as a desirable constraint on the projection of Chinese power westwards. Finally, China’s role in addressing Central Asia’s security challenges in a multilateral format will be limited by the reluctance of Beijing to agree to mutual responsibilities—that is, a security role for other SCO states in China’s troubled Xinjiang province.

These factors should not belie the significant role played by the SCO in enabling Chinese security concerns in Central Asia to be aired in a regional framework. But they confirm that even if the SCO becomes more institutionalized, fleshing out the charter agreed at the St Petersburg summit in June 2002, its potential as a framework for the coordination of regional security remains limited. It is also unlikely that new states will be accepted into the SCO, with the possible exception of Mongolia—an uncontroversial case. If countries like Pakistan, India or Iran were to become affiliated with the SCO, short of full membership, this would further weaken the capacity of this framework to find a common security language except in response to a few pan-regional concerns such as counternarcotics.\textsuperscript{58} The more the SCO expands as a macroregional structure, the less likely it is to have an operational role in security policy, or to correspond with the common concerns out of which a Central Asian security identity might emerge.

This is the lesson provided by the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA), modelled on the OSCE’s principle of consensus and including not only Russia and the Central Asian states (minus Turkmenistan) but also China, Turkey, India, Pakistan and other Asian states. Until 2001 CICA issued bland lowest-common-denominator resolutions on strengthening peace, stability and cooperation in Asia; thereafter more emphasis was given to broad, non-traditional security threats.\textsuperscript{59} The last summit meeting of CICA, held in June 2002 in Kazakhstan, an active proponent and initiator of


\textsuperscript{58} A draft SCO agreement on cooperation in counternarcotics was completed in January 2004. See the communiqué of the SCO foreign ministers’ meeting on 15 Jan. 2004, http://mid.ru/ns-rasia.nsf.

\textsuperscript{59} For background see A. Kozhikhov, \textit{Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia} (Almaty: Centre for Foreign Policy and Analysis, 2001).
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this framework, called loftily for action against a panoply of such threats and for the elaboration of confidence-building measures. But it failed to identify the specific, practical contribution CICA could make in pursuit of these ends.60

While Kazakhstan may view CICA as another vehicle helping it to promote its Eurasian self-image and to create a common security platform with Russia and China, as well as major Asian states, Uzbekistan is sceptical towards such an approach, as in the case of the SCO with its more exclusive membership.61

The dialogues conducted in the SCO and CICA show that the Central Asian states involved view themselves as part of macroregions extending to their east and south, a view encouraged by the prevailing discourse on transnational terrorism. But apart from limited coordination over terrorism, these dialogues have done little to address the complex security problems among and within the Central Asian states themselves.

Conclusions

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 planning.

At a more general level, it is not at all clear whether Central Asia even has the attributes of a region in terms of its security interactions. In a recent comprehensive re-examination of security complex theory and its application to world regions, Central Asia was defined as a weak subcomplex in a Russia-centred large regional security complex—a subcomplex ‘whose internal dynamics are still forming and in which the involvement of Russia is strong’.62

From a neo-realist standpoint this Russian factor and the local states’ need to accommodate or offset it helps to explain the longevity of the constantly mutating CIS framework. It also accounts for the attraction of balancing relationships, from GUUAM—not so much a regional structure as a loose inter-

62 Barry Buzan and Ole Waever, Regions and powers: the structure of international security (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 423, 428–9. Of course, a security complex could be centred on conflictual dynamics which would provide no basis for security-related regionalism. But the findings of this study nevertheless confirm the particular influence of Russia in the evolving security subcomplex.
governmental constellation, with limited consultations on security issues—to the attempt to balance Russia and China through a cooperative framework (the SCO) or by reinforcing relations with the United States (partly through the transregional NATO PfP programme, which has not been examined in this article), which also helps explain security dynamics in macroregions around Central Asia. The relative influence of these powers and the extent to which Russia is displaced as the principal security manager in Central Asian and Caspian Sea states will be a strong influence on the durability of the various cooperative initiatives examined in this article.

Where regional projects offer practical, identifiable security benefits—for example, cheap arms through the CSTO or confidence-building measures on joint borders with China through the SCO—they can attract the interest of Central Asian leaders. But otherwise local leaders have given priority in their security and defence policies to building bridges bilaterally with strong states: Russia, the United States, Turkey and China. Indeed, the degree of commitment to multilateralism in a body like the CSTO, or even the SCO, is open to serious question.

New security assistance and defence agreements gained bilaterally have taken priority for Central Asian leaders over multilateral security consultations or the creation of joint military structures that exclude major powers and the assets or guarantees they can provide. Central Asian states have placed little trust in regional formats that are poorly institutionalized and may prove to be ephemeral in a period of rapid geopolitical transition. In contrast, bilateral agreements with strong states can be used to help develop national military forces structured to meet emerging threats (including intrastate ones) or simply to reinforce sovereignty, sometimes at the expense of neighbouring states in a region of contested borders and disputed access to resources.\(^{63}\) Indeed, frictions between Central Asian states, which have the potential to break into open conflict, militate against the likelihood of their cooperating on an exclusively regional basis when serious defence concerns arise.\(^{64}\) Such cooperation to date has tended to be small scale and on secondary rather than core defence issues.

Cooperation among the regional states is more likely to concern issues of internal security than traditional forms of external defence. Security problems in Central Asia are generally more transnational than interstate, and this creates challenges within states as well as between transborder communities. In this context a core issue is the focus of Central Asian rulers on regime security. This is compatible with the definitions of Islamist extremism and terrorism used by officials in the CSTO or SCO. But it raises serious questions about the

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\(^{64}\) For assessments of this conflict potential see Central Asia: border disputes and conflict potential (Osh/Brussels: International Crisis Group Asia Report no. 33, April 2002); Roy Allison, ‘Regional threat perceptions and risks of military conflict’, in Richard M. Auty and India de Soya, eds, Energy, wealth, governance and welfare in the Caucasus and Central Asia (Seattle: University of Washington Press, forthcoming 2004).
commitment of the authoritarian Central Asian leaders to western-inspired processes of regional security cooperation or to even to the security aspect of some new regional initiatives of their own. The latter are likely to be sidelined if they require any real lowering of the threshold of state sovereignty or restriction of the control mechanisms exercised by narrow leadership circles.

This tendency is the more marked since Central Asian regionalism does not even seem to be a priority concern in the bilateral relations of western states in Central Asia since September 11. In fact, as noted by other writers in this issue of *International Affairs*, in prioritizing its bilateral relations with Central Asian states for wider strategic ends the United States itself could become effectively a sponsor for regime security in a country such as Uzbekistan. Local leaders may seize the opportunity of using ties with the United States to balance more openly their bilateral relationships with Russia. But a reinforcement of Russian–American competitive bilateralism would be a recipe for fracture in security-related regionalism in Central Asia, whether that regionalism involves major powers or not, and would spell the end of any hopes for effective cooperation between multilateral structures backed by these powers in regional security management.