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**THE REGIONALIST PROJECT IN CENTRAL ASIA:
UNWILLING PLAYMATES**

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The Regionalist Project in Central Asia: unwilling playmates ¹

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Introduction

Throughout the last decade, the states of Central Asia have been engaged in countless projects and organisational structures aimed at fostering regional cooperation. At first these initiatives were meant to smooth out the disruptive effects of the dissolution of the USSR on their economic and social infrastructure. However, as conflictual tendencies between the states gained momentum, a regional cooperation approach became fashionable with external actors, since the international community saw it as the quickest road to peace and as a means of preventing state fragility and crisis.

Few initiatives survived the decade. Nevertheless, the paradigm of ‘regionalism’ - implying that cooperation which leads to closer integration is the answer to the region’s multiple problems - only grew stronger and still continues to influence policy approaches today. Adherents of regionalism regard it as a ‘good’ that both states and non-state actors desire and encourage and they cite its many positive qualities: it can consolidate state-building and democratisation, create and lock in norms and values, make states and international institutions more accountable and help to manage the negative effects of globalisation. From such a perspective, regionalism is both desirable and necessary and is well suited to address questions of regional governance. It has large, if untapped, potential and ‘it is hard to escape the conclusion that overall it is a picture of growing empowerment.’²

The example of the European Union (EU) has inspired the regionalism approach to development and conflict resolution among the donor community. From this perspective, two concepts are key: integration and cooperation. The UNDP Human Development Report defines integration as two interrelated concepts – the cross-border integration of economic and social activities, and the cross-border integration of institutions. Regional cooperation refers to a more informal interaction among countries and to a relatively low degree of institutional integration associated with a limited integration of activities. It involves agreements among partners that are less binding, and hence less predictable and secure, but which also require fewer sacrifices in terms of giving up national sovereignty.³ Fawcett defines regionalism as a policy whereby states and non-state actors cooperate and coordinate strategy, with the aim of pursuing and promoting common goals in one or more areas of concern.⁴

¹ The current paper draws upon research done by the author for *Central Asia: a Strategic Framework for Peacebuilding*, (London: International Alert, 2006). The author would like to gratefully acknowledge the contributions of Dan Smith and Marc Berhendt.

² Louise Fawcett, ‘Exploring Regional Domains: a Comparative History of Regionalism’, *International Affairs*, no. 80 vol. 3, 2004, pp. 429 – 446, p. 441.

³ Johannes Linn et al., *Bringing Down Barriers: Regional Cooperation for Human Development and Human Security*, UNDP Central Asia Human Development Report, New York and Bratislava: UNDP RBEC, 2005, p.23.

⁴ Fawcett, (2004), p. 433.

This paper presents a critique of the above thinking on regionalism and of policy approaches based upon it, considering them ill-suited to the realities of Central Asia and too influenced by normative idealism. Nor does it see regional cooperation only in positive terms, positing that it can serve equally to reinforce adverse tendencies as well as to counterbalance them.

The paper comprises three sections. Firstly it introduces the states of Central Asia and outlines their rather dismal record on regionalism. It then assesses the donor-driven promotion of regional cooperation, describing the mismatch between the interests of national players and external strategists. Finally, it proceeds to outline the roles of regional organisations and the increasing perception of geopolitics behind their development. The paper argues that:

- A region cannot be prescribed from outside without genuine incentives coming from within, and regional organisations can only do so much in fostering this.
- The resolution of bi-lateral political problems is a precondition for the advancement of regionalism rather than a means to achieve it. It is unrealistic to expect regional cooperation to become a conflict prevention tool.
- In reality, regional cooperation is more likely to take place on an *ad hoc* basis over areas of common concern, concentrating on challenges and on a negative agenda, rather than pro-actively advancing some positive vision.

Background to Central Asia and its Record of Regionalism

*The States of Central Asia*⁵

Central Asia comprises five countries – Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan - and is bordered by Russia in the north, China in the east, Afghanistan and Iran in the south and the Caspian Sea to the west. It is home to some fifty million people. The current states acquired their independence in 1991 as a result of the collapse of the Soviet Union, where they had constituted its Union Republics.

Uzbekistan is the most populous country, with 26 million people, and is located in the heart of the region. As it borders all Central Asian states, including Afghanistan, it is vital for communication and transportation. Uzbekistan with its GDP of US\$ 13.7 billion in 2005⁶ has rich energy reserves, especially in gas, but since it has a problem with transporting them to paying customers, its economy is largely based on cotton. Turkic-speaking Uzbeks are the largest ethnic group in Central Asia. Tashkent is the capital and president Islam Karimov was the last Communist Party chief of the Soviet Uzbekistan.

Kazakhstan has the largest territory, but its scarce population is in decline. It is the richest state due to its vast energy reserves and mining industry. With a GDP of US\$56.1 billion, it is a fast-growing economy and an important connector between Europe and China. Its capital is Astana and president Nursultan Nazarbayev was the last Communist Party chief of Soviet Kazakhstan.

⁵ This is a summary version, see more in Anna Matveeva, *EU stakes in Central Asia*, Chaillot Paper no. 91, Paris: EU Institute for Security Studies, July 2006.

⁶ Source for all GDP figures is 'World Development Indicators Database,' Washington D.C.: The World Bank, April 2006, <http://devdata.worldbank.org>

The three other states are much smaller. Turkmenistan with its 4.9 million population and a GDP of US\$ 6.8 billion possesses vast gas reserves (the fourth largest in the world) but depends on Russia for exports. The capital is Ashgabat and as the country is largely a desert, its small population lives in a few oases. It was a subject to the bizarre rule of an enigmatic Turkmenbashi (Saparmurat Niyazov, who died in December 2006) who turned the country into an isolated dictatorship.

Kyrgyzstan is the smallest country and is located on the borders of China and Kazakhstan but ethnically closely related to the latter. Kyrgyzstan has few natural resources and a GDP of US\$ 2.4 billion, but has been considered by the international community as a 'bastion of democracy'. In March 2005, street protests about flawed parliamentary elections deposed President Askar Akayev from power and brought in a coalition of his former ministers to rule the country.

Tajikistan is the poorest country of the former Soviet Union with a US\$ 2.3 billion GDP and has a population of around seven million.⁷ Its capital is Dushanbe and Tajiks are the only Persian-speakers among the predominantly Turkic peoples of Central Asia. The country experienced a brutal civil war between regional coalitions from 1992-1997, which claimed the lives of over 150,000 people. The situation has since stabilised and in fact Tajikistan is a rare example of the successful rebuilding of a state after collapse. However, the economy is still struggling since the hydro-power complex has been severely undermined and cotton is the main cash crop.

Falling Apart

In their fifteen years of independence the states in Central Asia have developed as closed political entities, often hostile to their neighbours. Borders have been sealed and in the case of Uzbekistan's border with Tajikistan, mined, while transport infrastructure from the Soviet period has suffered severe disruption. The states have begun to build alternative roads to avoid passing through the territory of an unfriendly neighbour. The trend towards separation rather than integration has thus become established, reinforced by competition for the same markets and for the attention of external players. Much of the former economic interdependency, and the social and cultural interaction of the Soviet period, has turned into isolation.

Disruptions to the management of water and energy have been particularly painfully felt, causing experts to identify them as sources of potential conflict.⁸ The Soviet system provided a functioning, if flawed, regulatory mechanism for distribution and compensation within the region, seeking to ensure that nobody fared too badly. It also enforced rules and agreements among the Central Asian republics regarding water, energy and the supply of goods.⁹ However, with the Soviet system gone, these enforcement and arbitration mechanisms have withered away and have not been replaced with suitable international legal frameworks, despite many efforts to work them out. Various regional regulatory institutions, such as the Central Asian Water Forum, have been set up, but so far have had a limited impact. As a

⁷ 'Tajikistan: Country Background Note', US Department of State, <http://www.state.gov>

⁸ *Central Asia: Water and Conflict*, Asia Report no. 30, Osh/ Brussels: International Crisis Group, May 2002.

⁹ In the Soviet days a system of 'compensations' was practiced, where the upstream countries (Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan) provided water and electricity to the downstream countries (Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan), which repaid them with oil, gas, and consumer goods. In the independence period upstream countries have to pay in cash for oil and gas, while continuing to provide water for free, as there are no practical means to deny water to the downstream countries.

result, stronger states can – and do – act largely unchallenged, to the considerable disadvantage of the weaker states. The main hope of the smaller states is that outside powers will intervene on their behalf.

As security concerns, be it drug trafficking or *jihadi* terrorism, loom large, isolationism is viewed by the leaders as a preferred vehicle to prevent the spillover of regional instability. The deceased president of Turkmenistan, Saparmurad Niyazov, who pursued a policy of ‘perpetual neutrality’, was by far the leading exponent of this policy of isolationism. He was followed by the President of Uzbekistan, Islam Karimov, who closed his borders to an influx of refugees from Tajikistan during the civil war and would surely do so again, if turmoil unfolds in Kyrgyzstan. The more liberal Kazakhstan closed its border with Kyrgyzstan following the March 2005 events when President Akayev was ousted from power. Even Tajikistan has grown more cautious about interaction with its northern neighbour, from which it expects future trouble.

Interrupting the Soviet legacy of interdependence, the railway and air links between Central Asian cities have been disrupted and visa regimes with immediate neighbours have been introduced. Trade routes have been complicated by hostile border regimes, aggravated by rampant police corruption *en route* to markets in Russia. The official sources of information provide little coverage of the Central Asian neighbours, unless they are affected by a crisis, and the coverage is mainly adverse. Thus, popular perceptions are often that life next door is infinitely worse than in one’s own country, although it is increasingly hard to make such a case for Kazakhstan which is prospering from an oil boom. Thus, efforts are being made in Uzbekistan to restrict the overland movement of its citizens to their wealthier neighbour.

The lack of regional cooperation is having the worst effect on the smaller, poorer and geographically disadvantaged states of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. These states only have a viable chance of developing if they have access to the world outside. Tajikistan is particularly affected as its only functioning border is with Kyrgyzstan, given the instability in Afghanistan and the hostility from Uzbekistan. Transport routes which have to avoid Uzbekistan drive up the costs of trade and transit. These two countries are therefore keen on regional organisations because they hope these will rectify injustices in their favour.

Obstacles to Cooperation

Compelling obstacles lie on the road to regional cooperation. They include huge power imbalances between countries, a quest to entrench sovereignty, political grievances among the leaderships and mutual suspicion of security threats emanating from neighbours. Although it is apparent that states lose out in economic terms from impediments to regional interaction, the ruling elites do not see the relaxation of restrictive regimes as a viable alternative. Political power and security considerations come first. The leadership groups are not ready to engage in regional cooperation before their own statehood is firmly entrenched. They largely regard their neighbours with suspicion and, to judge by the growing list of disputes and tensions among the Central Asian states, it would appear that the greatest threat to the region’s security and stability comes not from Afghanistan, Russia or Islamist groups but from within the region itself.¹⁰

¹⁰ Annette Bohr, ‘Regionalism in Central Asia: New Geopolitics, Old Regional Order’, *International Affairs*, vol. 80, no. 3, May 2004, pp. 485 – 502, p. 501.

Although there has been hardly any inter-state conflict, hostility and numerous intra-regional disputes have become a characteristic of the independence period. The wider security threats tend to upset what are already strained inter-state relations. The response to regional threats has been to erect as many barriers as possible and from the rulers' perspective, closed borders appear as the most suitable defences. Moreover, the rise of Islamism in the Ferghana Valley, where the borders of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan meet, has led to more cross-border violence. An example of this was the 1999 Batken incident when fighters from the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) crossed into Kyrgyzstan's Batken province from Tajikistan, took hostages and engaged in fighting with the Kyrgyz troops before launching attacks on Uzbekistan, which was their ultimate target. More recently in May 2006, an armed group of young Central Asians staged an attack from Tajikistan on the Tajik and Kyrgyz border posts, killing troops and seizing weapons and ammunition. Thirteen personnel, including a Kyrgyz colonel, died during the raid and the subsequent chase in the mountains. Security officials claimed that the attack was carried out by a well-trained Islamist unit. In such circumstances the states are very much aware that weak national armies have little to offer against determined militants. From Uzbekistan's viewpoint, the mining of border areas appears to be an easier and more cost-effective deterrent in combating these threats when compared to security cooperation with its neighbours.

Inter-state resentments are fuelled by recent history which consists of border disputes, obstructions to trade and transit and, typically, a downgrading of the standing of minorities from the neighbouring state's ethnic origin (e.g. Uzbeks in Kyrgyzstan, Tajiks in Uzbekistan). The most extreme example of this was the civil war in Tajikistan when Uzbek warplanes bombed villages and shot from the air at Tajik refugees fleeing across the border to Afghanistan. Suspicions that a neighbouring state may harbour militants ready to pounce, constitute paramount security concerns. For example, the now deceased Turkmen leader accused Uzbekistan of the November 2002 assassination attempt on him, then raided its embassy in Ashgabat and closed the border for many months. This was accompanied by virulent rhetoric and by policies aimed at assimilating the Uzbek minority in Turkmenistan and resettling it away from the border with its kindred state.

Tajikistan continues to suspect that Uzbekistan provides a safe haven for the rebellious ethnic Uzbek colonel Mahmud Khudaiberdiyev, originally a warlord from Tajikistan, who attacked the north of the country in 1998 from across the border and who is believed to be alive, despite Tashkent's assurances of his demise. Reports of sightings of his armed group in the vicinity of the Tajik – Uzbek border are widespread among Tajikistani security officials.¹¹ In the 1990s Tashkent used to blame Tajikistan for tolerating the IMU bases on its territory and blamed both Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan for the 'Batken events' when the small states failed to stop the IMU traversing through, thus enabling it to launch an attack on Uzbekistan. Although the Kyrgyz – Uzbek relationship is a milder one on the scale of distrust, nevertheless Uzbekistan has accused Kyrgyzstan of hosting training camps for *jihadi* Islamists on its territory. These were allegedly involved in the Andijan events of May 2005 when an Islamist insurgency turned into a popular uprising with hundreds of civilians massacred by government troops.

Problems do not end with security issues, however, as the economy and the environment also readily become battlefields. Uzbekistan continues to be a problematic country for the economic development of the region, because its leadership is inclined to keep control over

¹¹ Author's interviews with security officials in Tajikistan, Dushanbe and Khujand, 2004 – 2005.

the flow of natural resources, most importantly water which is a scarce commodity in Central Asia. At the moment, the construction of the Rogun electricity generation plant in Tajikistan, which would give Dushanbe more energy security and provide it with leverage over downstream water flow, is causing grievance to Uzbekistan and Tashkent is making efforts to obstruct the project by citing environmental and water management concerns. Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan frequently argue about trade and investment opportunities, as Tashkent has tended to act obstructively *vis-à-vis* the Kazakh business companies. Turkmenistan, in its turn, has hardly allowed any investment from neighbouring states.

There are also ‘soft’ factors, such as the personal relations between presidents, which are full of distrust and disrespect. Before Andijan, competition for regional leadership was one of the factors that poisoned relationship between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. Recently, talk of ‘regional leadership’ has quietly subsided.¹² Kazakhstan, with its growing economy and balanced foreign policy, has most obviously emerged as a winner. In contrast, Islam Karimov, of Uzbekistan, who shifted alliances between the rich Muslim states, the West, Russia and China, while wrecking a number of originally friendly relationships with external powers, eventually came close to becoming a pariah.

Regional Identity

It is questionable whether regionalism can emerge out of a common ‘Central Asian identity’. This approach likens a region to a nation in the sense of an imagined community: states or people that are held together by common experience and identity, by custom and practice. Fawcett notes that ‘alone it does not explain the success or failure of a given regional project. Yet identity invariably looms large at some stage of the regional process’.¹³ However, regional identity is an intangible commodity that is more often used to define oneself as being against something, rather than for it. By stressing cultural affinities, there is the inherent danger of asserting one nation and its culture at the expense of another and of erecting barriers invisible to outsiders. MacFarlane observes that ‘one’s judgements concerning regional identity are often not value – neutral’.¹⁴

Identity politics in young nations is quite likely to drive states apart and to create powerful dividing lines. Rising nationalism and the significance of cultural affiliations, such as rivalries between the Persian and Turkic worlds, are deepest in Uzbek – Tajik relations. The latter’s culture and ethnic (genealogic) lineage is endorsed by Tajik officialdom as being ‘Aryan’¹⁵ and as being a population indigenous to *Ma Wara’ al-Nahr* or *Transoxania* (or ‘beyond the River’, meaning the Amu Darya/Oxus river). Turkic Uzbeks are considered to be newcomers who spread into traditional Persian-speaking areas during the Middle Ages. Tajikistan’s grievances include historical injustices such as the allocation of the ancient Tajik cities of Bukhara and Samarqand to Uzbekistan and the drawing of borders during the Soviet period by the powers in Moscow in such a way that Tajikistan ended up with a predominantly mountainous territory and with little agricultural land. The period of independence added new

¹² Sergei Porter, ‘Visit of Regional Significance’, *Gazeta.kz*, 23 March 2006.

¹³ Fawcett, (2004), p. 442.

¹⁴ Neil MacFarlane, ‘Regional System Formation in the Former Soviet Union’, in Neil MacFarlane (ed.), *Coming Together or Falling Apart? Regionalism in the Former Soviet Union*, Oxford: Centre for International Relations, 1996, p. 3.

¹⁵ Pulat Shozimov, ‘Tajikistan’s ‘year of Aryan civilisation’ and the competition of ideologies’, *Central Asia - Caucasus Analyst* SAIS John Hopkins University, 5 October, 2005, http://www.cacianalyst.org/view_article.php?articleid=3699&SMSESSION=NO

injustices, such as the role of the Uzbek armed forces in the Tajik civil war and the reluctance of officials in Tashkent to acknowledge the true strength of the Tajik minority in Uzbekistan.

Uzbekistan's justification for adverse relations is that Tajikistan harbours terrorists, exports drugs and instability, disadvantages the Uzbek-speaking minority in the distribution of power and resources, and in general is 'anti-Uzbek'. The Uzbek/Tajik inter-state relations are the worst in the region: borders are mined, most transport links have been severed, there are no flights between the two countries and the regime of energy supplies is designed to disadvantage Tajikistan. During 2006 there were extraditions and espionage scandals, underscoring a further downslide.¹⁶ Moreover, there is now less restraint on voicing grievances on both sides, since Moscow can no longer calm down or put a lid on rising passions.

The definition of a 'regional identity' can be enormously contentious and can be used in selective terms – which region does one belong to if there is a choice to be made? As the concept of a region is in itself not well defined, it is possible for a country to be identified as part of a region for some purposes, but not for others.¹⁷ For example, Kazakhstan has problems with a 'Central Asian' identity. Not having been included in the Soviet designation of 'Central Asia' in the past,¹⁸ the country asserts itself as a Eurasian rather than a 'Central Asian' power, especially as nearly half of its population is European in origin. For example, it was the only one to protest against being excluded from the EU's 'New Neighbourhood' Policy and yet being scheduled for inclusion in the EU's new 'Development Cooperation and Economic Cooperation Instrument' from 2007. Astana was visibly disappointed at being grouped together with countries in need of development assistance.¹⁹

Arguably, a relatively early period of independent statehood may be not the best time to promote a regional identity. The prevailing ideology in each state is towards building a nation-state first, on the basis of the titular group, which is no small task given the lack of previous tradition. While a regional Central Asian identity had more mileage in Soviet times when there was a need to emphasise disparity from the rest of the USSR, it hardly resonates nowadays with either elites or the population as a whole.

The Donor-Driven Regionalist Agenda

Multilateral Vision

The initial approach of the Western policy community was to regard Central Asia as an integrated region with a high degree of commonality and interdependence, i.e. as a coherent economic and security complex. After the dissolution of the USSR and in a break with the Soviet pattern, all five 'stans' came to be regarded as constituting a distinct region. This perception was shared by donor governments, international organisations, media and academic observers. There was a consequent tendency to see cooperation in economic and social spheres as being the answer to many problems of trade, development and social interaction. This seemed at the time to be a reasonable paradigm, given the recent experience

¹⁶ See, for instance, 'Central Asia: are Uzbek-Tajik relations at a new low?', *Central Asia Report*, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Reports, vol. 6, no. 19, 26 June 2006.

¹⁷ Stephen Page, 'Central Asia's Future: a Region or Re-integration with Russia?', in MacFarlane (1996), p. 137.

¹⁸ In the Soviet Union it was 'Kazakhstan and Central Asia'.

¹⁹ Kazakhstan's Foreign Ministry has expressed interest in the ENP. It has also proposed to develop Kazakhstan's bilateral foreign policy with EU member states through the broader framework of its policies towards the EU, http://europa.eu.int/comm/external_relations/kazakhstan/intro/index.htm

of belonging to a single geopolitical state and the artificiality of the newly created state borders. As Brauer observes, visiting European delegations continue to be puzzled at why there is so little cooperation between the five countries, while in their opinion it seems self-evident that they could be much stronger politically and more attractive economically as a region than as individual states. A typical recommendation is to form a union based on a regional cooperation paradigm.²⁰

Multilateral and bilateral donors that have promoted regional cooperation in Central Asia include the EU, UNDP, the government of Japan²¹ and the Asia Development Bank (ADB), among others. The ADB has been particularly consistent in promoting cooperation and closer integration. It has been the driving force behind the Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC)²² which also engages the other main international finance institutions. The World Bank has been more cautious, having pursued a regional framework with national programming but not a regional programme as such. There is no shortage of aid-driven projects in security cooperation, such as those pursued by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), the EU Programmes on Border Management in Central Asia (BOMCA), the Central Asia Anti-Drug Proliferation Programme (CADAP) and the National Drug Information Network Initiative (NADIN).

What constitutes the ‘regional cooperation’ approach adopted by donors can be interpreted in different ways:

- *Integrationalist*: treating the region as an integrated whole
- *Catalyst*: giving impetus and providing leadership, using the EU as an example
- *Cross-cutting*: working on the same issue in parallel in each country
- *Connecting*: giving priority to regional infrastructure projects such as TRACECA²³
- *Regulatory*: developing regional regulatory framework mechanisms to resolve common problems, such as water and energy
- *Cross-border*: working on solutions to cross-border problems
- *Resource Concentration*: the establishment of training and education facilities on a regional basis rather than in each country individually

The international donors and multilateral organisations tend to regard regional cooperation in normative terms and to see its advantages as follows: (a) it allows for rational sharing of resources, notably water and energy, (b) it facilitates the flow of goods, and (c) it drives construction of the infrastructure necessary for development. In addition, there are political benefits, for example that regionalism would bring about dispute resolution and alleviate problems in inter-state tensions and that a regional identity in general is a ‘good thing’.

²⁰ Birgit Brauer, ‘Central Asia: the Great Game Revisited’, in Erich Reiter and Peter Hazda (eds.), *The Impact of Asian Powers on Global Development*, Vienna: Physica-Verlag, 2004, pp. 41 – 52, p. 50.

²¹ ‘Japan and five Central Asian nations prepare for a second round of policy dialogue among their foreign ministers in August’, *Malaysian National News Agency*, Tokyo, 4 July 2005.

²² The nine member states of CAREC are: Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Mongolia, Russia, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. There are also six multilateral institutions: the Asian Development Bank, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, the Islamic Development Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and the United Nations Development Programme.

²³ Transport Corridor Europe Caucasus Asia (TRACECA) envisions construction of a vast east-west corridor linking the EU to the South Caucasus and Central Asia via the Black Sea and Caspian Sea with technical aid and infrastructure rehabilitation projects to facilitate trade and transit from east to west, rather than south – north, as was the predominant case during the USSR.

The UNDP is a strong advocate of the regional cooperation approach, making the case that since many problems affect more than one state, they have to be solved jointly.²⁴ Its Regional Human Development Report argues the case for regional cooperation, on the basis of economic and social rationality. It demonstrates the considerable economic and security gains which are to be had from regional cooperation, and implies that there is a sizeable amount of international political and financial muscle behind it, the intention being to provide those among the Central Asian elites who are already in favour of cooperation with powerful evidence to impress upon their leaderships.

The European Commission (EC) also adheres to a regional cooperation approach. Its Technical Assistance to the Commonwealth of Independent States' Indicative Programme (TACIS IP) states that 'regional cooperation is the most effective, if not the only, way to deal with problems like terrorism, drugs, water, energy and environment degradation'.²⁵ However, from the perspective of Tashkent or Ashgabat, quite the opposite is true. The Commission's intention to 'create a comprehensive regional perspective, notably through the compatibility of reforms and convergence of the legal harmonisation processes in each country',²⁶ is well-meaning but is more embedded in Brussels' strategising than in Central Asian realities.

Critique of the Multilateral Perspective

The International Crisis Group (ICG) takes a critical view of the Commission-driven regional strategy. It notes the persistent EU tendency to approach Central Asia as a single region and to devote much energy to enhancing regional cooperation. However, regional initiatives backed by the EU have by and large failed, as the parties demonstrated a remarkable lack of the requisite political will. However, many EU representatives remain bullish about regional integration, citing the EU's own experience. The ICG concludes that

.... insistence on a regional approach ignores that the five states have taken very different political and economic routes since independence and have different needs and priorities...to approach regional cooperation issues without taking account of political realities would yield nothing.²⁷

For the promoters of the regional approach it has been fashionable to generate examples which, with adaptation and given a longer timeframe, could serve as models for Central Asia. The UNDP cites the example of the Stability Pact for South-Eastern Europe as the most relevant model, one which was established to overcome the legacy of regional conflict and create a framework agreement on international cooperation. Key features include strong leadership from the EU as an outside sponsor, the prospect of eventual EU membership and a huge financial commitment from the international community.²⁸ EU thinking has often been that since the Baltic states could successfully cooperate on a regional basis and present a united front at international fora, the same, by extension, applies to the other post-Soviet regions, *i.e.* Central Asia.²⁹ However, stark differences with the Baltics prevail, for example

²⁴ UNDP (2005) pp. 45 – 46 and Chapter 7.

²⁵ European Commission's TACIS *Central Asia Indicative Programme for 2005 – 2006*, Brussels, 2004, p. 6, available at <http://ec.europa.eu>

²⁶ TACIS, (2004), p.8.

²⁷ *International Crisis Group, Central Asia: What Role For The European Union?*, Asia Report no. 113, Bishkek/ Brussels: International Crisis Group, 10 April 2006.

²⁸ UNDP (2005), p. 24 – 25.

²⁹ Author's interviews with officials at the European Commission and European Council, Brussels, March 2006.

the absence of the common incentive of European integration, the competition between states for the same markets in Russia, and numerous inter-state disputes with each other. Furthermore, European politicians cannot hold out the same leverage of EU membership as they did in Eastern Europe. External threats, such as instability in Afghanistan, are not powerful enough to create negative incentives to unite against a common enemy.

Moreover, the position of Uzbekistan, which is both physically and metaphorically at the heart of Central Asia, has been the greatest impediment and one which no international effort could seriously challenge.³⁰ Its leadership has been the main obstacle to cooperation. Regional strategists cannot decide how to deal with the country's reluctance to play the regional game. While it was not a great loss to allow Turkmenistan to isolate itself, given its location on the periphery of Central Asia, Uzbekistan's role is far more central. However, begging Uzbekistan to play is not a policy and European ambitions so far have arrived at deadlock.

The US approach in Central Asia is different and derives from the concrete political goal of statebuilding in Afghanistan. MacFarlane notes that in general American policy-makers display considerable ambivalence towards regional cooperation. Their actions reflect a preference for bilateral relationships because these are perceived to generate influence more reliably.³¹ At the same time, there is one pragmatic focus for regional cooperation: it is needed primarily to stabilise Afghanistan, which remains far from a functioning state and is a responsibility which the US cannot easily shy away from. Therefore, the US is pushing to open up trade and economic relations between Afghanistan and Central Asia, particularly with Tajikistan, even though such a prospect is not very attractive for the latter. The official US line is that 'the opening of Afghanistan has transformed it from an obstacle separating Central from South Asia into a bridge connecting the two. Our goal is to revive ancient ties between South and Central Asia and to create new links in the areas of trade, transport, democracy, energy and communications.'³²

To support this design, USAID intends to launch a US\$3.3 million initiative to foster the regional electricity market linking Afghanistan, Pakistan and India to hydroelectric and other power plants in Central Asia. Reality, however, is less convincing. Central Asian states regard their southern neighbour with fear and as a source of drugs and terrorist networks threatening their territories, rather than as a potential market for their goods. Nor are they inspired by Afghan-style 'democracy'.

On a less ambitious scale, cross-border activities have often been presented by intervening agencies as steps towards regional cooperation and such projects have gained prominence in the Ferghana Valley. They have been promoted by USAID, the Swiss Development and Cooperation Office (SDC), UNDP and international NGOs such as Acted (*Agence d'Aide à la Coopération Technique et au Développement*) among others. In an ideal form they were meant to involve all three states but more often had to implement bilateral projects. While cross-border work, such as the regulation of shuttle trade or local resource-sharing disputes, is important for the communities concerned, it does not resolve wider issues of border and trade

³⁰ Author's experience working as UNDP Peace and Development Adviser for Central Asia, 2003 – 2004.

³¹ Neil MacFarlane, 'The United States and regionalism in Central Asia', *International Affairs*, vol. 80, no. 3, 2004, pp. 447 – 461, p. 449.

³² Richard Boucher, US assistant secretary of state for South and Central Asian affairs, in written testimony on 26 April 2006, cited in Joshua Kucera, 'Washington Seeks To Steer Central Asian States Toward South Asian Allies', *Eurasia Insight*, 28 April 2006,.

regimes. Therefore, such projects are best viewed in their own right rather than as advancing a regional cooperation paradigm. The link between cross-border interaction and regional cooperation cannot be taken for granted; the necessity of sharing cross-border assets can bring states together to address them, but may also evoke hostile reactions and suspicious attitudes.³³

Thus, the donor belief in regional cooperation may have gone too far. The question is whether a region can be constructed, given the right incentives, and whether regional cooperation can be organised by outsiders.³⁴ The crucial impediment to the regional cooperation approach is the attitude of the political leaderships in Central Asia, who tend to see regional cooperation as a donor-driven agenda in which they have little stake. The issue for international donors is how much a regional cooperation approach reflects the thinking of the Central Asian governments themselves and whether there are real partners for it.

Therefore, re-thinking is needed concerning:

- the tendency to view Central Asia as an integrated region where the same problems require the same solutions
- investment in structures meant for regional cooperation, which often leads to competition for 'leadership'
- the efforts to solve the sharing of resources (water and energy) and infrastructural problems in a regional format, unless there are viable chances of success
- the assumption that solving a practical issue leads to a general improvement in the wider political relations: opening a physical bridge does not necessarily mean creating a metaphorical bridge towards peace

Regional Organisations in Central Asia

'Old Hands': the OSCE and the CIS

The states of Central Asia acquired membership of the Organisation of Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) by default when, as former constituent parts of the USSR, membership was offered to all Soviet successor states.³⁵ The organisation unites fifty-five states, including the USA and Canada, the EU states, the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and South-Eastern Europe. It makes decisions by building consensus among its members and the bulk of its budget comes from the EU where its institutions are located. The states of Central Asia host OSCE field missions which operate with the consent of national governments. Having started as an organisation intended for the East - West security dialogue, it broadened its agenda considerably after the fall of Communism to embrace a 'human dimension'. Since the early 1990s, Central Asia has been subject to a diverse OSCE assistance portfolio, ranging from electoral monitoring and the protection of minority rights, to the environment, economic development, border management and small arms control.

The recent trend among Central Asian states has been a growing dissatisfaction with the organisation and the tendency has been to join forces to rebuff OSCE interference in politics. Even the most pro-Western President, Nursultan Nazarbayev of Kazakhstan, announced that

³³ Neil MacFarlane, (2004), p. 447.

³⁴ Anna Matveeva, *Central Asia: a Strategic Framework for Peacebuilding*, London: International Alert, 2006.

³⁵ Strictly speaking, they had to voluntarily confirm their wish to become OSCE participating states in 1992, but it is unclear whether they fully comprehended the consequences at that stage.

'Kazakhstan is no longer a state that can be ordered about and told what to do. We know what we have to do. We shouldn't run after foreign recommendations with our pants down.'³⁶ Others have been even more defiant in their criticism of the OSCE's electoral monitoring and have sought to impose a government veto over which projects it can implement. Restrictions on the number of international personnel in missions have also become progressively more severe. Covertly, pressure has been known to be applied to OSCE national staff in missions.³⁷ This creates the danger that the region could become an 'enclave of reaction'.³⁸ Despite numerous enmities in other spheres, there is a growing unity among Central Asian regimes when it comes to resisting OSCE pressure in the promotion of democracy. This forms part of a larger agenda of discrediting the Bush Administration's vision of spreading democracy as a stabilising mechanism in potential conflict areas.

A concerted push against the OSCE presence and its electoral monitoring and human rights' work, has conveyed a sense of a shared political agenda, where a 'victory' for one country encourages the others to take bolder steps *vis-à-vis* the 'unwanted partner'. The OSCE Centre in Uzbekistan was downgraded to an OSCE Project Coordinator's Office in July 2006,³⁹ inspiring Tajikistan to try to do the same. The OSCE Centre in Ashgabat faced allegations from the Turkmen authorities that its Human Dimension Officer, Benjamin Moreau, was engaged in illegal activities. The OSCE in Kyrgyzstan has also been losing ground,⁴⁰ while efforts are made to confine its operations to purely economic and social projects.

As a result of these setbacks, the role of the OSCE has diminished when compared to its heyday in the 1990s. In Central Asia it is hard for the OSCE to develop a political strategy because the participating states have incoherent ideas of what they expect the organisation to do, except for Russia which has the negative agenda of blocking other actors from entering the region. The drive to micro-manage projects from Vienna, where its headquarters are located, coupled with the bureaucracy of the OSCE management and the refusal of Central Asian governments to expand international staff numbers in the missions, has meant that much of what the missions do has become project-driven activity, with the heavy administrative burden that this entails. The combination of mounting restrictions in Central Asia and an existential crisis within the organisation itself, due to combined Russian – Belorussian scheming, has resulted in a narrowing down of the mandates of OSCE offices. In such circumstances it is difficult to be strategic and the organisation has been diverted away from politics and more towards projects .

Kazakhstan has ambitions for a larger role within the OSCE and in 2003 it announced a bid for the chairmanship in 2009. The bid is being actively advanced by President Nazarbaev's leadership, based on the assumption that Kazakhstan has a positive experience of being a multi-ethnic state and also has a functioning economy to promote. In December 2006 the OSCE was unable to reach a consensus on the bid, as the US, the UK and Ireland were against Kazakhstani chairmanship. It was therefore decided to postpone the decision until December

³⁶ Nursultan Nazarbayev in remarks at the Kazakhstan Civic Party meeting on November 10, 2006, reported by Bruce Pannier, "Kazakhstan: President Tells West – We Don't Need Your Advice", Radio Free Europe/ Radio Liberty, 15 November, 2006, available at www.rferl.org.

³⁷ Author's interview with an international staff at the OSCE Office in Uzbekistan, Tashkent, June 2005.

³⁸ Richard Falk, 'The Post Westphalia Enigma', in Bjorn Hetne and Bertil Oden (eds.) *Global Governance in the 21st century: Alternative Perspectives On World Order*, Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 2002, p. 177.

³⁹ Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe Permanent Council, 617th Plenary Meeting, Decision no. 734, recorded in PC Journal No. 617, Agenda item 1, 30 June 2006.

⁴⁰ Dmitry Kosyrev, 'OSCE in Kyrgyzstan: assistance or the limitation of sovereignty?' *RIA Novosti*, 12 April 2005, <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/news/2005/04/mil-050412-rianovosti03.htm>

2007. It appears that, if Kazakhstan's ambitions are not satisfied, it is capable of producing a considerable spoiling effect upon the organisation's prospects, since its bid is enthusiastically backed by the states 'east of Vienna'. This may be a turning point for the OSCE: either it satisfies Kazakhstani ambitions but becomes more of a 'security cooperation' forum and moves away from its role in democracy promotion and electoral observation, or it rejects Astana's bid and runs the risk of becoming largely irrelevant in the CIS countries.

The other regional organisation worth mentioning is the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). This was established in 1992 on Russia's initiative and played the role of a 'civilised divorce' mechanism for the former Soviet republics after the break up of the USSR. It unites the twelve Soviet successor states apart from the Baltic ones. The CIS takes few decisions and its statements are of declaratory nature, but its summits and ministerial meetings serve as important venues for political networking. In the 1990s Russia used the CIS to legitimise its peacekeeping operations in Tajikistan and Abkhazia, Georgia, via a peacekeeping mandate.

New Players

Outside the development and multilateral community, regional initiatives are more pragmatic: regionalism is a project that, like democratisation, can attract aid and development funds, or can provide a veneer of respectability and legitimacy to traditional state endeavour.⁴¹

In the 1990s the Central Asian states tried to resolve some of the regional problems by setting up multilateral fora. Regional cooperation organisations and schemes were numerous, but they never really took off. The first prominent regional initiative was the Central Asian Cooperation Organisation (CACO) set up in 1994 as a Customs Union on an initiative from Kazakhstan. CACO united Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, but, in Bohr's view, failed to develop an effective structure for the coordination of economic, trade or security policy and its resolutions remained of a declaratory nature.⁴² In practice, it was not easy to tell the difference between security and economic organisations, because too few practical outcomes existed to allow an assessment of what they actually did. Roy Allison remarked in 2004 that:

...regionalism – 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.⁴³

An interesting question is whether the construction of regionalism can ever come from within the region, as the states continue to depart further from their common Soviet root. Kazakhstan, as the most stable and prosperous, is an obvious candidate to drive such an agenda. Officially, President Nazarbayev is the greatest of the regionalists and in spring 2005 he once again called for a unified Central Asia. However, in its practical policy Kazakhstan increasingly looks north towards Russia and Europe, as it becomes a wealthier country and seeks closer integration with European structures. It is less enthusiastic about dealing with the problems of its neighbours to the South who are seen as sources of tension and instability and Kazakhstan's aspirations towards a 'united Central Asia' did not preclude it disadvantaging

⁴¹ Fawcett, (2004), p. 439.

⁴² Bohr (2004), p. 486.

⁴³ Roy Allison, 'Regionalism and Security in Central Asia', *International Affairs*, vol. 80, no. 3, May 2004, pp. 463 – 484, p. 465.

its poorer neighbour Kyrgyzstan with respect to energy and trade issues when it suited its own interests.

Whether, given its economic fortunes, Kazakhstan can emerge as a leader and as a stabilising force for the region remains to be seen. There is no doubt that its political economy is increasingly important for the regional dynamic; strong economic performance allowed the accumulation of capital in search of investment,⁴⁴ while Central Asia is an obvious place to look for opportunities. Between 1999 and 2004, Kazakhstan's trade with other Central Asia states increased threefold. Such activism and outreach, in the official Kazakhstani view, makes it the 'recognised regional leader.'⁴⁵ Moreover, Kazakhstan's power is overtaking its poorer neighbour and Kazakh investments in the Kyrgyz economy have doubled since 2004, reaching US\$200 million in 2006.⁴⁶

Yet it appears unlikely that Kazakhstan will emerge as a real sponsor of integration or drive forward the construction of regionalism. Its ability to play a larger political role in Central Asia beyond its own interests is limited, as is its appetite to act as a broker between unfriendly neighbours. Bohr notes that 'Kazakhstan does not view itself as part of any exclusive Central Asian regional formation; rather, it considers Russia to be an integral part of any region or subregion to which it belongs.'⁴⁷

Russia and China have recently developed a keen interest in regional cooperation. Nascent indigenous structures were eventually overtaken by Russia and China when both powers consolidated their regional policies. As is often the case, stronger states have been instrumental in the creation and maintenance of regional organisations, which are aimed at fulfilling their own agendas. Seen at its most negative, regionalism can be viewed as an instrument for the assertion of hegemonic control.⁴⁸ At the same time, regional organisations can convey more transparency and accountability compared to bilateral dealings with a stronger state. As one Central Asian diplomat remarked: 'with the Chinese in the room, the Russians cannot resort to their usual tricks'.⁴⁹

Despite its distrust of regional structures, possibly influenced by the miserable fate of the CIS,⁵⁰ Moscow recently paid attention to getting the regional format off the ground in Central Asia. It regards regional cooperation in less altruistic terms than the donor community. Firstly, since Russian companies are investing in energy complexes in the region, it needs the states of Central Asia to open up their infrastructure (pipeline systems, electricity grids and roads) to allow transit to Russia. Moscow has to broker better relations between Central Asian leaders, which is necessary if it wants to get large regional infrastructure projects going.

⁴⁴ Sergei Blagov, 'Energy Partnership between Russia and Kazakhstan: Meeting the Reality', *Eurasianet*: 19 January 2006, www.eurasianet.org.

⁴⁵ Julie Corwin 'Central/South Asia: Forum Examines Regional Trade Prospects', A *EurasiaNet* Partner Post from RFE/RL, 9 April 2006, www.eurasianet.org

⁴⁶ The trade volume between the two countries reached \$61.8 million, a 10.4% increase over to the same period in 2005, in Marat Yermukanov, 'Bishkek Courts Astana For Big Investment', *Eurasianet* 13 July 2006, www.eurasianet.org

⁴⁷ Bohr, (2004), p. 493.

⁴⁸ James H. Mittelman and Richard Falk, 'Hegemony: the relevance of regionalism?', in Bjorn Hettne, Andreas Inotai and Osvaldo Sunkel (eds.), *National Perspectives on New Regionalism in the North* London: Macmillan, 1999, p. 175.

⁴⁹ Quote by Martha Brill Olcott, 'The Great Game's new players', *Current History*, vol. 104, no. 684, October 2005, pp. 331 – 335, p. 335.

⁵⁰ Pavel K. Baev, 'An informal farewell to the dysfunctional Commonwealth', *The Jamestown Foundation Monitor*, vol. 3, no. 142, 24 July, 2006.

Secondly, since security threats, such as drugs and *jihadism*, transcend national borders, good relations between security officials are needed in order to allow joint operations and the exchange of information. Thirdly, it would certainly do no harm if Central Asians were to rally behind Moscow's external agenda, such as driving GUUAM⁵¹ or the OSCE out of the region.

At the moment, Central Asia is the only region which could be united around initiatives led by Russia. In both the South Caucasus and the Western CIS, political obstacles and pro-Western aspirations are too powerful for Russia to generate an integrated following. To back up its designs, Moscow has concrete incentives on offer, such as investment and security guarantees. Thus, Russia-led regional fora have gained momentum, giving way to amorphous CIS structures. Regionalism for Russia fulfils two functions: one is to solve economic and security issues; the other is to demonstrate, whenever needed, that it can rally forces behind its cause. Whether the latter dimension will receive a boost depends on how the West reacts to it: playing up "Great Game" rhetoric could turn it into a self-fulfilling prophecy whereas, if left to its own devices, Russia may feel less need to take such route.

The Eurasian Economic Community (Eurasec)⁵² appears to be the most promising organisation. It originally included Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Belarus, Armenia and Tajikistan, *i.e.* a select club of CIS members, with membership of GUAM being an alternative to it. After Andijan, President Karimov opted out of GUUAM (which thus lost one 'U') and in January 2006 Uzbekistan joined Eurasec. Tashkent's decision was based upon its withdrawal from the US – Uzbek alliance and the erosion of the strategic partnership with the USA.⁵³ In October 2005 Eurasec merged with the Central Asian Cooperation Organisation (CACO). The primary goals of Eurasec are the establishment of common labour and capital markets, free intercommunity trade, and trade policy harmonisation. A Eurasec bank has been created to provide loans for the members-states. Recently, Eurasec moved to establish a joint geopolitical stance, having prepared a Concept of International Affairs which is meant to reflect the six presidents' common interests.⁵⁴

Nevertheless, brokering the notoriously bad relationships between Central Asian rulers can prove an uphill task and is likely to create obstacles for Moscow-driven projects. Uzbekistan continues to be a problematic country, despite its *rapprochement* with Russia. This strengthened relationship has caused apprehension among its weaker neighbours who suffer from Tashkent's adverse policies. For example, if the Tajik/Uzbek disputes, in which both sides turn to Russia for resolution, are any indication of problems to come, Moscow risks getting bogged down in counterproductive arguments and being torn in different directions by Central Asian lobbyists.

The CIS Collective Security Treaty Organisation (the CSTO, or the Tashkent Treaty) groups together Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Armenia. It has been largely dormant since Uzbekistan opted out in 1999, and the perpetually neutral Turkmenistan has remained outside the grouping. In June 2006 Tashkent rejoined the CSTO. Both President Putin and President Karimov have hinted at a convergent Eurasec and CSTO agenda.

⁵¹ GUUAM stood for Georgia, Ukraine, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, Moldova.

⁵² On Eurasec see at <http://www.evrazes.com>

⁵³ Gregory Gleason, 'The Uzbek Expulsion of US Forces and Realignment in Central Asia', *Problems of Post-Communism*, vol. 53, no. 2, March – April 2006, pp. 49 – 61, p. 56.

⁵⁴ *Eurasec Press Service*, 4 July 2006, www.evrazec.com

Various CSTO structures and committees have been established, including anti-terrorism, drug-trafficking and responses to conventional security threats, but so far they remain empty shells waiting to be filled with substance. Recently, Moscow sought to breathe new life into the CSTO by promoting it as a regional security organisation, since the issue of Caspian security rates high on the agenda in Moscow's intensifying efforts to create a cooperative structure.⁵⁵ In August 2006, a CSTO joint military exercise on the Caspian shore in Kazakhstan engaged 2,500 troops from Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. These were meant to lay the ground for the formation of a CASFOR joint operational group.

The promotion of the CSTO may reflect the politics of the moment, but it is doubtful that it can go far in operational terms. A major obstacle to multilateral security cooperation is the obligation to share information with other members. Since intra-regional relations are characterised by a high degree of distrust, the states may be prepared to exchange intelligence "favours" with Moscow on a bilateral basis but not with each other.

The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) includes Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. China plays a pivotal role, hosting the headquarters, carrying the bulk of administrative expenses and providing a major contribution to the SCO development fund to finance investment projects. It had become a vehicle for promoting a Russian - Chinese alliance in Central Asia but the US military presence in the region has prompted Beijing to focus on alternative bilateral and multilateral initiatives towards Central Asia.⁵⁶ Cooperation in the security sphere is making progress and includes peace mission exercises. For example, in March 2006 Uzbekistan hosted the 'Vostok Anti-terror 2006' joint exercise under the SCO aegis. The exercise scenario involved special forces and other agencies countering an attempt by terrorists to attack state facilities.⁵⁷

It is envisaged that the SCO will play a larger role than just addressing security challenges in the region. It intends to facilitate trade relations within the group and to bring new road and rail links, as well as investment in energy projects. Russia and China have also concluded bilateral deals to invest in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. The economic dimension has also been advancing, for example by bringing Chinese investment into infrastructure projects which Western investors and donor agencies have been reluctant to get involved in. The SCO established a Business Council for this purpose⁵⁸ and China's Export and Import Bank manages China's \$900 million soft loan via the SCO umbrella. The ADB has also established a degree of cooperation with the SCO and with Eurasec.

Expectations of what Eurasec and the SCO are about to deliver are high in the most disadvantaged state of Tajikistan,⁵⁹ for example improvements in relations with Uzbekistan, more investment and improved links with China. However, Uzbekistan has failed to fulfil its obligations to ratify four Eurasec agreements to which it had committed itself as a condition of membership, most importantly the abolishment of a visa regime with Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, causing President Rahmonov to complain bitterly at the June 2006 Eurasec

⁵⁵ R. McDermott, "Nazarbayev's Caspian Security Deals: what can Moscow offer?", *Jamestown Foundation Monitor*, vol. 3, no. 124, 27 June 2006.

⁵⁶ Brill Olcott, (2005).

⁵⁷ www.uzreport.com, 9 March, 2006.

⁵⁸ Dmitry Mezentsev, 'Business Council of Shanghai Cooperation Organisation', 3 March 2006

http://www.interfax.ru/r/B/0/0.html?id_issue=11473859

⁵⁹ Author's interviews with local analysts Lidya Isamova and Faredun Hodizoda in Dushanbe, May 2006.

summit.⁶⁰ Nevertheless, Eurasec has enabled some progress in Uzbek – Kyrgyz relations, such as the relaxation of visa and border regimes.

Politically, the SCO is capable of engaging in anti-Western rhetoric, taking joint positions on the US military deployment in Central Asia.⁶¹ Opposition to the US military presence – the US used to have two military bases in the region - was articulated via the SCO. At the request of Uzbekistan, the timeframe for the presence of the US bases was included in a July 2005 SCO declaration which called for the withdrawal of US military contingents from Central Asian countries.⁶² In a year's time president Karimov stated at the June 2006 SCO summit that 'we have a common aim to counter resolutely external attempts to impose Western methods of democratisation and public development on our countries.'⁶³

The SCO is an expression of political commitment from Russia and China to Central Asia bound together by a shared set of security interests and perceived risks,⁶⁴ but not necessarily an exclusive vow to work together. Moscow is not interested in seriously discussing security issues with Beijing, especially in the SCO.⁶⁵ In this respect, transformation of the SCO into a closely-knit strategic partnership, such as a Warsaw Pact, is unlikely. Nevertheless, it reflects the real interests of both powers in Central Asia, which could become the driving force in the development of the SCO. However, despite much rhetoric, too little activity on the ground has taken place to be able to assess which way the organisation will develop.

One school of thought is a sceptical one, arguing that prospects for the evolution of the Sino-Russian relationship into anything resembling an alliance are very limited. There is ambivalence in Russian policy towards China: is China a friend to be supported and strengthened, or is it a threat to be contained?⁶⁶

There is also an alarmist perspective: the US diplomats and experts who previously tended to dismiss the SCO and were surprised by the speed of its rise, are looking for flaws in the organisation that can potentially be exploited.⁶⁷ In Stephen Blank's view,

...to the chagrin of American diplomats, the SCO has quickly emerged as a force to be reckoned with in Central Asia. In political terms, China sees the SCO as a catalyst for the establishment of a new pan-Asian order, in which American military power and calls for democratisation are either excluded, or are negligible.⁶⁸

⁶⁰ www.interfax.ru, 23 June 2006.

⁶¹ The SCO adopted a joint declaration to combat terrorism and speed up strategic cooperation in a veiled allusion to the growing role of the US, in 'Central Asia summit declares war on terror,' *Indo-Asian News Service*, 5 July, 2005.

⁶² See 'Statement of Uzbek Foreign Ministry on Khanabad airfield', *www.uzreport.com* 8 July 2005; and 'US Military Presence In Central Asia Defined By Russia-China Cooperation', Bishkek: *KABAR News Agency*, 7 July 2005.

⁶³ Reported in *Jamestown Foundation Monitor*, vol. 3, no. 118, 19 June, 2006.

⁶⁴ Martha Brill Olcott of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace at a congressional hearing of the Helsinki Commission, quoted in *Eurasia Insight*, 1 October 2006, www.eurasianet.org.

⁶⁵ Vyacheslav Nikonov, President of Polity Foundation, in remarks at Wilton Park conference, February 2007.

⁶⁶ Neil Macfarlane, 'The 'R' in BRICs: is Russia an emerging power?', *International Affairs*, no. 82, no. 1, 2006, pp. 41 – 57, p. 55.

⁶⁷ Ariel Cohen, 'Washington ponders ways to counter the rise of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation' *EurasiaNet Commentary*, 15 June 2006, and Stephen Blank 'The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation: Cracks Behind The Façade', *EurasiaNet Commentary*, *Eurasia Insight*, 21 June 2006.

⁶⁸ Stephen Blank, (2006).

This alarmist stance threatens to cause even more frustration between Russia and the West. It is doubtful that the approach of exploiting SCO weaknesses would supply much 'good' for East-West relations, but may instead cause more alienation, creating dividing lines where a spirit of cooperation would be more appropriate. Rather, it may be worth exploring how these structures can be steered in the right direction. Regional structures led by Russia may be the best available vehicles and may have to be given seriously consideration for possible engagement, even if the downside is that the power equation would be in Moscow's favour. If the West cannot find a way of constructive engagement with these structures at an early stage, 'regionalism' in Central Asia could eventually turn into a vehicle for rivalry and opposition to the US and its allies which would be reminiscent of the Cold War.

Conclusion

Regional cooperation means that people and institutions in different countries have to develop the commitment and trust to work together and this situation is nowhere in sight in Central Asia. The agreements that would bring down national barriers imply the need to share a degree of sovereignty with other, often hostile, partners. States do not do this lightly, even in modern Europe, and it may be too much to expect from newcomers to statehood. Sovereignty, especially if fragile, matters, and encroaching on it is always a sensitive issue.

The evidence suggests that there is a vast disparity between the objective assessments of the benefits of regional cooperation, such as those made by the UNDP, the Asian Development Bank or the European Commission, and the subjective assessments of the states in question. From their perspective, considerations of power and security come first, and these can be controlled only at the national level. But it is these subjective assessments that matter most, rational arguments notwithstanding. Thus, it is not worth the international community waving the flag of regional cooperation, especially if that is viewed as a step towards regional integration. It has little resonance in the region as a general principle. However, the end goal can be maintained, while reckoning with the reality of political obstacles to practical projects. Cooperation between two or more states can address specific issues successfully without necessarily advancing a deeper integration or even a general improvement in political relations.

A regional cooperation approach does not have to be promoted as a value in its own right, but only as a tool to solve concrete problems. Artificiality in the approach needs to be avoided, recognising that there are no common incentives and opportunities in Central Asia, compared with, for example, Eastern Europe. Fundamentally, cooperation is important as a means to an end and the international community will do well to stay away from appearing to promote cooperation as an end in itself. It looks too much like a request for newly independent states to give up some of the sovereignty that they cherish.

So far, regional organisations have not played a significant role in Central Asia for a number of reasons. The OSCE, being in theory an organisation of equal member-states, in reality has been a vehicle of stronger, mostly Western countries, while Central Asians became rather passive recipients of OSCE assistance. Eventually, support from Russia encouraged them to realise that they could resist OSCE pressure. At the moment, it is unclear whether the OSCE can be viewed as a regional organisation in Central Asia, capable of pro-active engagement such as peacekeeping interventions, in the same way as the Economic Cooperation Organisation of West African States (ECOWAS) in West Africa for example, or whether it is

too large for such an operational role. It may be more appropriate to regard the OSCE in Central Asia as an extra-regional organisation with a regional mandate.

The role of the CIS has been conditioned by the historical moment when it emerged. Since the legacy of the USSR has now been dealt with, the CIS will need to find another agenda that appeals to its member-states in order to move beyond its current status as a club for high-level political networking.

The organisations which originated from within the region had few incentives behind them. While the weaker states have been the most enthusiastic about the potential benefits these structures might bring, the stronger ones saw them as a matter of prestige and as an opportunity to promote themselves to the role of regional leader, but did not take them seriously as a problem-solving tool. Their commitment to the construction of regionalism has in the end been lukewarm. Since most inter-state relations have been tense, no one state could credibly play a brokering role between neighbours.

Emerging organisations driven by Russia and China, such as Eurasec and the SCO, may have more mileage in future, since they possess a number of advantages: a degree of detachment arising from not being part of Central Asia, and yet not being as remote as the EU-based OSCE; more of a stake in peace and security in a region located on their own borders and therefore a more lasting commitment; resources to back the development of regional infrastructure; and political capital with the ruling establishments. However, their advancement will be prone to many potential pitfalls, either deriving from twists and turns in Sino – Russian relations, or from disputes among the Central Asian states themselves. Both powers would be cautious about applying pressure on Central Asian states, being mindful that things could easily backfire. Therefore, the preservation of the structures for cooperation may become more important than the initiatives and projects they actually carry out.

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