

6. Identity, Security, and Development Policies. The Drivers behind Cooperation in Central Asia

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Central Asia – i.e. the area encompassing the five former Soviet “*Stans*” of Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan – has been dubbed “the region that isn’t”¹, an area whose post-Soviet development has been shaped by the persistent inconsistency or failure of regional cooperation schemes. As a matter of fact, the Central Asian Republics (CARs) have not managed to put forward efficient durable and inclusive formats for institutional cooperation, either in the security or economic realms and, in comparison with other regional environments, the area is one of the less integrated in both strategic and economic terms. Therefore, while Central Asia can be viewed as a region in purely geographic or cultural terms, apparently it does not behave as such in institutional ones.

The lack of inclusive formats for regional integration is all the more blatant in consideration of the evident proliferation of regional mechanisms for cooperation, which, consistently with a wider trend unfolding in the whole post-Soviet space, did not bring any concrete result in terms of integration, justifying the theory of a merely “ephemeral regionalism”². The weakness – if

¹ B. Kausikan, F. Starr and Y. Cheng, “Central Asia: All Together Now”, *The American Interest*, 16 June 2017.

² In proposing this label, Wirminghaus highlights that between 1991 and 2010 a total of 36 initiatives of cooperation came into being in the former Soviet Union area, 28 just in the first decade after USSR dissolution. N. Wirminghaus, “Ephemeral regionalism: The proliferation of (failed) regional integration initiatives in post-soviet Eurasia”, in T. Börzel et al. (Eds.), *Roads to Regionalism*:

not the absence – of a Central Asian regionalist path appears blatant also because the area seems to possess all the basic material and immaterial features that, according to the mainstream literature on regionalism, are conducive to the establishment of regional frameworks for cooperation and integration, in geographical as well as in cultural and economic terms. At the time of independence from the Soviet Union, and largely as a consequence of its institutional peculiarities, the CARs were indeed bound together by the legacy of the previous economic system, based upon functional specialization and interdependence between its Republics³. Moreover, their productive apparatuses were interconnected not only in terms of economic specializations, but also in terms of infrastructural networks, which, notwithstanding their eminently Russo-centric nature, were critically important for a region shaped by a land-locked condition and by its peripheral location with respect to the main Eurasian trade channels⁴.

Genesis, Design, and Effects of Regional Organizations, London - New York, Routledge, 2012, p. 25.

³ In 1991, intra-USSR economic exchange between the Central Asian Socialist Republics and the other SSRs (excepting Russia, given its international exports of energy and raw materials) accounted for a quota of the total turnover between 87% and 99.5%. I. Burakovsky, “Economic Integration and Security in the Post-Soviet Space”, in R. Legvold and C. Wallander (Eds.), *Swords and Sustenance. The Economics of Security in Belarus and Ukraine*, Cambridge and London, MIT Press, 2004, p. 164.

⁴ Although only Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan are strictly land-locked – with the latter being one of only two countries in the world (the other being Luxembourg) that are “doubly land-locked” – nevertheless the Caspian littoral states also share the main features of land-lockness. As far as Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan are concerned, access through the basin to the Volga River does not exclude them from the aforesaid category. Indeed, as Glassner noted, the category includes those states “which have access to the sea via internationalized navigable rivers [...]. Such states [...] consider themselves land-locked and are here considered land-locked because they do not exercise ‘sovereign’ control over their aqueous highways to the sea”. I. Glassner, *Access to the Sea for Developing Land-Locked States*, The Hague, Martinus Nijhoff, 1970, p. 2.

Besides economic and physical incentives to cooperation, the CARs were also bound together in security terms, given the prevailing transnational character of the threats to regional stability. First and foremost, the arbitrary Soviet drawing of Socialist Republics' borders inherited by the CARs left them the perilous legacy of latent ethno-territorial tensions resulting from the widespread presence of minorities ethnically akin to neighboring states' "titular" nationality (see tab. no.1), as well as from sovereignty disputes over contested territories⁵. Secondly, the environmental hazards resulting from the Soviet over-exploitation of the Aral Sea for agricultural purposes further bound Central Asian states together, the more so as a consequence of their reliance on shared water resources.

TABLE I - CARs' ETHNIC COMPOSITION IN 1989: TITULAR NATIONALITIES AND MINORITIES AKIN TO NEIGHBORING SSRs

	Kazakhstan	Kyrgyzstan	Tajikistan	Turkmenistan	Uzbekistan
Kazakhs	39.6%	0.8%	0.2%	2.4%	4.0%
Kyrgyz	--	52.3%	1.2%	--	0.8%
Tajiks	--	0.7%	62.2%	--	4.7%
Turkmen	0.1%	--	0.3%	72.0%	0.6%
Uzbeks	2.0%	12.9%	23.5%	8.9%	71.3%
Russians	37.8%	21.5%	7.6%	9.4%	8.3%
Population	16,46,000	4,258,000	5,093,000	3,523,000	19,810,000

Source: T. Atabaki and S. Mehendale (eds.), *Central Asia and the Caucasus: Transnationalism and Diaspora*, London, Routledge, 2005, p. 5.

While the above-mentioned factors naturally resulted in the wide range of scholars' attention to and debate about regional integration trends and dynamics, interest in Central Asia grew

⁵ For an overview of the consequence of Soviet border-drawing legacy, see: International Crisis Group, *Central Asia: Border disputes and conflict potential*, ICG Asia Report No. 33, Osh and Brussels, International Crisis Group, 2002.

also as a consequence of the significant role the area came to play in the post-bipolar environment, as a consequence of its peculiar geopolitical features. The latter, indeed, not only influenced local actors' opportunity-risk perceptions and their attitudes towards inter-state cooperation, but also shaped a seeming competition for regional influence among major powers that generated abundant literature regarding the so-called "New Great Game".

The main geopolitical feature of the area is its precise geographical location in the heart of the Eurasian landmass, which made Central Asia, at different times, a conduit for exchanges of ideas and commerce among the world's main civilizations and empires or, alternatively, a friction point among them – i.e. a "land bridge role" best epitomized by the Silk Route *epos*, or a ground for confrontation as was the case at the time of the XIX century Russian-British "Great Game". Ever since the dissolution of the USSR, the geostrategic value of an area occupying a pivotal position between the main Eurasian security chessboards resurfaced from the ashes of strict Soviet rule, re-igniting a competition for influence involving not only neighboring powers, but also global actors, first and foremost the United States and to a lesser extent the European Union.

The second, equally important Central Asian geopolitical factor is the availability of a significant raw materials base, first and foremost in terms of hydrocarbon reserves. While unevenly distributed across the region, all in all sub-regional proven reserves of oil and gas account respectively for 1.9% and 17.8% of the world's proven reserves⁶. Given the magnitude of these regional

⁶ The regional oil reserves are concentrated mainly in Kazakhstan (30 thousand million barrels) and to a lesser extent in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan (0,6 thousand millions each). With reserves inferior on a world-scale only to Russian, Iranian and Qatari ones (17,5 Trillion cubic metres), Turkmenistan is regional power-house in terms of gas reserves, while Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan possess only limited yet significant reserves (1,1 and 1 respectively). Meanwhile, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan are not endowed with hydrocarbon resources. Bp, *BP Statistical Review of World Energy*, June 2017, www.bp.com/statisticalreview

hydrocarbons' reserves, it is hard to overestimate the role the energy sector came to play not only for the CARs' domestic and foreign policy, but also for extra-regional energy-consuming powers' projection toward the area, aimed at expanding and diversifying their supply sources and channels.

Making use of an eclectic analytical perspective integrating constructivist and neo-realist frameworks for analysis, the article aims at appraising how the nexus between identity, security and economic development policies impinged upon the unfolding of regional cooperation schemes, highlighting the reasons why in Central Asia national and regional interests hardly align, leaving room for competition and confrontation among the CARs instead of fostering cooperation and interdependence trends. Moreover, while the appraisal of the various cooperation schemes involving the CARs falls outside the scope of the present article, the latter aims at summarising the regional frameworks' main features, starting from the rationale behind their initiation or their membership. In order to do so, after introducing the peculiar nexus between the post-Soviet nation- and state-building processes and their repercussions on attitudes towards cooperation, the article will focus on regional organisations' recurring and intertwined features, here grouped for convenience under three main headings: the priority of security over economic development; the balancing logic influencing regional leaderships' choices; the prevalence progressively gained by externally-driven frameworks for cooperation.

For the purposes of this article, notwithstanding all the afore-mentioned limitations in strictly behavioral terms, Central Asia is seen and referred to as a "region", in the sense of a compact geographical area that shares important geopolitical, historical, cultural, social and economic bonds – i.e. those factors which generally lead the greater part of scholars as well as the main Euro-Atlantic institutions to identify the CARs as a natural grouping of states.

Identity politics and inter-state relations in Central Asia

The USSR's dissolution initiated in newly independent Central Asian states a complex and multiform transition phase, occurring at the institutional level as well as at political, economic and, no less significantly, identity levels. That is, the need to construct on the ashes of the Soviet social pact a new bond for national belonging and for civic participation overlapped – and, to a great extent, mixed – with the parallel urgency to ensure substance to the abruptly achieved full sovereignty. Therefore, the processes of *state* and *nation* building not only chronologically overlapped, but also obviously nourished each other, in a context made more complex by the profound social, institutional and economic crises left behind by the dissolution of the Soviet state system. While the state-building process was made more complex by the rapidity of the process leading to USSR dissolution, by the local leaderships' lack of previous experience and by the absence of those intellectual and nationalist forces that had guided countries towards independence in other areas of the Union⁷, the nation-building process was strongly influenced by the USSR legacy, influencing both the foreign policy-making process and the resulting attitudes towards a regional integration process.

The spreading of a sense of national belonging throughout Central Asia is a relatively recent phenomenon, initiated during the modernisation process occurring under Russian imperial rule and culminating under the Soviet's⁸. It was primarily the

⁷ See M. Brill Olcott, "Central Asia's Catapult to Independence", *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 71, no. 3, 1992, pp. 108-130; M. Beisinger, *Nationalist Mobilization and the Collapse of the Soviet State*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002.

⁸ As for the main features of Soviet nationality engineering see: F. Hirsch, *Empire of Nations: Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2005; T. Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nation and Nationalism in the Soviet Union*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2001. See also: A. Haugen, *The Establishment of National Republics in Soviet Central Asia*, New York,

latter's peculiar concept of nation that most influenced the way in which post-Soviet leaderships came to understand, portray and pursue the national project. That is, if Hobsbawm's theory that "nations do not make states and nationalisms but the other way round"⁹ holds true, nowhere like in Central Asia does this process appear so evident¹⁰ and, at the same time, nothing proved more influential in fostering ethnic self-consciousness and in setting the parameters for the development of a sense of national affiliation among Central Asian leaderships than the Soviet nationality-based federal system. Accordingly, the nation-building process was shaped by what has been described¹¹ as a three-fold process: the *essentialisation* and *primordialisation* of the nation, i.e. the identification of its essential traits and their representation as linear, continuous and singular; the *historicization* of the nation, pursued through the rediscovery of an ethnic past and through a selective history generating national myths and symbols; the *totalization* of the nation, aimed at the "collectivization" of individuals, which turns relative differences into absolute ones. On this backdrop, Central Asian supranational, civilizational or regional identities proved to be much weaker than the national (and even sub-national) one¹², with

Palgrave Macmillan, 2003.

⁹ E. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780. Programme, myth, reality*, 2nd ed., New York, Cambridge University Press, 1992, p.10. In the same vein, E. Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1983; B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities, Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, 3rd ed., London and New York, Verso, 1996.

¹⁰ W. Van Schendel and E. Zürcher (eds.), *Identity Politics in Central Asia and the Muslim World. Nationalism, Ethnicity and Labour in the Twentieth Century*, London and New York, Tauris, 2001.

¹¹ G. Smith, "Post-colonialism and Borderland Identities", in G. Smith et al. (Eds.), *Nation-Building in the Post-Soviet Borderlands. The Politics of National Identities*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998, pp.15-16.

¹² R.G. Suny, "Provisional Stabilities. The Politics of Identities in Post-Soviet Eurasia", *International Security*, vol. 24, no. 3, 1999-2000, p. 165. As for the influence of sub-national – i.e. local and clan – identities on the post-Soviet

the latter being shaped by the primordial Soviet concept, which contributed to the spreading of an ethno-territorial conception of nationalism hampering inter-state cooperation.

The ethno-territorial concept of the nation more often than not resulted in competing nationalisms, which, by juxtaposing opposing historical narratives, ended up by driving the CARs apart rather than bringing them closer under a common regional identity. Two key elements help clarify how identity, far from being an impetus for regional aggregation, worked on the contrary as a strategic polarisation factor. First and foremost, national identity became a source of legitimation for the possession of a given territory, i.e. for the relationship between a nation and a territory deemed as ancestral. In a region like Central Asia, where the process of boundary-making had been highly arbitrary, the exclusionary concept of the nation naturally resulted in opposing historical narratives and, thus, in tensions between neighboring countries. This is particularly the case with Uzbek and Tajik – and, to a lesser extent, Kyrgyz – ethno-territorial nationalisms, with the latter being the mirror image of the former in building the nation's historicisation process upon the same founding myths¹³. Secondly, the primordialisation and the historicisation of the nation became a source of legitimation not only for the incumbent post-Soviet leaderships, but also for the “historical missions” they had and were interpreters of. Thus, the affirmation of national identity became a privileged tool for regional power competition, as appears particularly manifest in the case of Uzbekistan's hegemonic ambitions (see below).

The indirectly proportional relationship between the development of an ethno-territorially based nationalism and a positive attitude toward inter-state cooperation seems to be validated, in

transition see Collins, *Clan Politics and Regime Transition in Central Asia*, Cambridge and New York, Cambridge University Press, 2006.

¹³ S. Abashin, “Nation-construction in post-Soviet Central Asia”, in M. Bassin and C. Kelly (Eds.), *Soviet and post-Soviet identities*, Cambridge and New York, Cambridge University Press, 2012, pp. 163-164.

an opposite perspective, also by the Kazakh case. Chiefly by virtue of the peculiar ethnic composition of Kazakhstan – where in 1991 Kazakhs were only a minority of the whole population (see Table 1) – the newly independent republic developed a civic-based understanding of the nation. Therefore, in a *de facto* bi-national Russian-Kazakh state, the “Kazakhisation” of the country has coexisted with the promotion of a “multinational state in which all the “Kazakhstanis” would have equal civic rights and opportunities”¹⁴. The Kazakhstan leadership’s legitimation strategies were therefore chiefly *output-based* rather than *input-based*¹⁵, i.e. less dependent on founding myths than on performance, intended in terms of domestic economic development as well as in terms of foreign policy behaviour and international recognition. The latter, supported by an export-led development strategy¹⁶, naturally resulted in a more positive attitude not only towards participation in international *fora*, but also towards regional cooperation and integration, with a view to enhancing and exploiting its comparatively greater economic strength to advance a leadership role in Central Asia. Astana’s preference for a cooperation – and, potentially, integration – path revolving around economic and trade arrangements resulted in the formation of the rare frameworks involving exclusively Central Asian actors. Such was the case, in particular, for the Central Asian Economic Cooperation (CAEC) established in 1994 by Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan (joined by Tajikistan in 1998) and re-launched as the Central Asian Cooperation Organization (CACO) in 2002. Such initiatives, however, fell victim to intra-regional power competition with

¹⁴ R.G. Suny (1999-2000), p. 174. See also: A. Del Sordi, “Legitimation and the Party of Power in Kazakhstan”, in M. Brusis, J. Ahrens and M. Schulze Wessel (Eds.), *Politics and legitimacy in post-Soviet Eurasia*, Houndmills and Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, pp. 72-96.

¹⁵ C. von Soest and J. Grauvogel, “Comparing Legitimation Strategies in Post-Soviet Countries”, in M. Brusis et al. (2016), pp. 18-46.

¹⁶ G. Gleason, *Markets and Politics in Central Asia. Structural reform and political change*, London - New York, Taylor & Francis, 2003, pp. 52-53.

Uzbekistan (see below), progressively shifting Kazakh preferences for cooperation from a purely regional perspective to a supra-regional one that included Russia. In doing so, Astana *de facto* ceased to perceive itself as a constituent part of a Central Asian region, instead considering “Russia to be an integral part of any region or sub-region to which it belongs”¹⁷. Consistently with this trend, CACO – the only remaining purely Central Asian organisation – merged with the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsEC) and ceased to exist in 2005.

In a broader view, supranational, civilisational or regional identities in no case proved to be viable drivers for enhancing inter-state cooperation among Central Asian states as well as between the latter and extra-regional kin states. This trend apparently emerged in relation to the two key common identity features of the CARs¹⁸, which in the aftermath of the USSR’s dissolution many scholars and practitioners predicted – or, rather, feared – would have superseded the discredited Soviet social pact. The reference here goes, on the one hand, to the ethno-linguistic Turkic matrix shared by most of the CARs – with the only exception of Tajikistan – and, on the other, to religious affiliation with Islam. Indeed, since Russian imperial times to date Islam has been the main shared source of identification for Central Asian peoples and, after gaining independence, the CARs almost naturally sought to reaffirm their belonging to the *Ummah*¹⁹. However, while this attitude drove them to join the main international institutions of the Islamic community – namely, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, which they all joined between 1992 and 1996 – it did not count as an

¹⁷ A. Bohr, “Regionalism in Central Asia: New Geopolitics, Old Regional Order”, *International Affairs*, vol. 80, no. 3, 2004, p. 493.

¹⁸ K. Gharabaghi, “New Regionalisms in Central Asia in the 1990s”, in L. Swatuk and T. Shaw (Eds.), *The South at the End of the Twentieth Century*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 1994, p. 142.

¹⁹ M. Laruelle and S. Peyrouse, *Regional Organisations in Central Asia: Patterns of Interaction, Dilemmas of Efficiency*, Working paper no.10, Institute for Public Policy and Administration, 2012, p. 16.

incentive to develop intra-regional or supra-regional alignment based upon shared religious faith. This has chiefly to do with the peculiar nature of Central Asian Islam, which bears an inclusive cultural and even spatial identity rather than a strictly religious one²⁰. At the same time, this once again calls into question the relationship between state- and nation-building processes since post-Soviet leaderships almost unanimously perceived the risk associated with Islamism – in terms of both foreign influence and the rise of a non-state source of political loyalty²¹ – and, consequentially, downgraded the contribution given by religion to national identity and adopted rigid mechanisms to subordinate Islam and its clergy to the state apparatus.

Cultural kinship did not account for a steady cooperation incentive even in the case of the shared ethno-linguistic Turkic bonds. While the Turkic CARs joined the Turkey-sponsored framework for dialogue and cultural promotion²², they did not subscribe to Ankara's attempt to found upon ethno-linguistic kinship a political-diplomatic platform or alignment with a more or less latent pan-Turkic spirit. In doing so, they demonstrated that, as the nexus between identity and foreign policy came to the fore, the latter had a natural priority over the former. In the specific case, the refusal to subscribe to a highly politicized initiative first and foremost exposed the CARs' reluctance to curtail room for diplomatic maneuver – i.e. channeling

²⁰ R.G. Suny (1999-2000), p. 166.

²¹ P. Kubicek, "Regionalism, nationalism and Realpolitik in Central Asia", *Europe-Asia Studies*, vol. 49, no. 4, 1997, p. 647.

²² Cooperation among Turkic CARs and Turkey developed within the framework of the "Heads of State Summit of Turkish Speaking Countries", launched in 1992 and supported by the establishment of the Joint Administration of Turkic Arts and Culture (TÜRKSÖY, 1993). In 2008, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, along with Turkey and Azerbaijan, signed an agreement establishing the Parliamentary Assembly of Turkic-speaking Countries (TÜRKPAA). Finally, in 2010 the Cooperation Council of Turkic Speaking Countries was established as the umbrella organization for the cooperation mechanisms developed among the four above-mentioned countries.

foreign relations through Ankara – as well as to antagonize two of their most influential neighbors, Russia and Iran, which viewed Turkey’s regional initiatives with suspicion²³.

The analysis of the nexus between the nation-building and the foreign policy-making processes occurring in the CARs in the aftermath of 1991 shows two crucial and interconnected trends. First and foremost, the regional unifying factors in religious or cultural terms neither presided over nor facilitated inter-state cooperation, at either the regional or supranational level. Quite on the contrary, the ethno-territorial matrix of post-Soviet nation-building supported regional hegemonic projects and feeded inter-state tensions, running counter to integration and fostering centrifugal forces. Second – as will be seen in the next paragraph – the confusion, widespread among the CARs’ leaderships, between the recognition and the promotion of a regional identity, on the one hand, and the pursuit of a regionalist agenda with supranational features potentially limiting countries’ sovereignty on the other, led local actors to deny the very existence of any shared Central Asian identity and to perceive nation-building and region-building as largely contradictory pursuits²⁴.

The “security-first” approach to cooperation

Security needs have been paramount for the CARs. Securing their newly acquired independence from the multi-faceted domestic and external threats endangering state structures superseded the other urgencies inscribed in the post-Soviet transition period, including the economic. In turn, the “security-first” approach to the state-building process has had manifest repercussions on the leaderships’ preferences towards inter-state relations and cooperation.

²³ For a wider account, P. Robins, *Suits and Uniforms: Turkish Foreign Policy since the Cold War*, London, Hurst, 2003, pp.270-293.

²⁴ M. Laruelle and S. Peyrouse, (2012); P. Kubicek (1997).

First and foremost, the security-first approach resulted in the CARs' reluctance to renounce sovereign prerogatives to supra-national authorities in order to multilaterally tackle the regional and trans-national issues which would have required a deeper degree of coordination. Therefore the CARs' preferences naturally went to loose forms of cooperation, which did not endanger national sovereignty and which were consistent with one of the main motivations behind the CARs' participation in cooperation mechanisms, at both the regional and supra-regional levels. The reference here is to the *legitimation* and *recognition* strategies pursued through membership in multilateral organisations, which can be seen as the main drivers behind the creation and the (seemingly paradoxical) conservation of the various regional and supra-regional frameworks lacking concrete substance or implementation strategies – thereby supporting the idea of mere “ink-on-paper” or “virtual” integration unfolding in the region²⁵. These kinds of cooperation frameworks – similar to the ones recently labeled “Rhetorical Integration” mechanisms²⁶ – served chiefly as proxies for international recognition and were thus useful to “sovereignty-boost” strategies and needs²⁷, particularly felt by nascent or weak states, as the CARs used to be especially during the 1990s. As such, they pursue mainly *expressive* goals, whose “utility is derived from action itself, regardless of whether it leads to any specific outcome”²⁸.

²⁵ See respectively: A. Libman, “Regionalisation and regionalism in the post-Soviet space: Current status and implications for institutional development”, *Europe-Asia Studies*, vol. 59 no. 3, 2007, pp. 401-430; R. Allison, “Virtual regionalism, regional structures and regime security in Central Asia”, *Central Asian Survey*, vol. 27, no. 2, 2008, pp. 185-202.

²⁶ E. Vinokurov and A. Libman, *Re-Evaluating Regional Organizations. Behind the Smokescreen of Official Mandates*, Basingstoke - New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, pp. 21-23.

²⁷ F. Söderbaum, “Modes of Regional Governance in Africa: Neoliberalism, Sovereignty-boosting and Shadow Networks”, *Global Governance*, Vol. 10, No. 4, 2004, pp 419-436.

²⁸ E. Vinokurov and A. Libman (2017), p.16.

From this logic stems the CARs participation in most of the regional arrangements, especially the ones joined in the first decade following independence – including the above-mentioned ones based upon supranational Islamic or Turkic identities.

The post-Soviet legitimization strategies unfolding in the Central Asian states had another yet significant repercussion on the CARs' attitudes toward and expectations from regional cooperation. Despite the obvious differences among the Central Asian states, a common feature of the regional state-building processes was a concept of national interest which, building upon traditional social structures and the contingent difficulties of the post-Soviet transition, naturally prioritised political stability and social order²⁹. This output-based legitimization strategy typically mixed with an opposite yet connected input-based one, resulting from the circumstance that the CARs' post-Soviet leaderships generally portrayed and legitimised themselves as the embodiment of the nation and the national will³⁰. This combination, in turn, had direct and deep repercussions on the concept and boundaries of the national security paradigm. In a regional environment where the state and the nation almost totally coincide, the personalism-based legitimization strategies made national leaderships the natural linchpin between them. Therefore, the security of the state came to overlap with the security of regimes portraying themselves as the guarantors of stability and social order. Apart from the consequences on the domestic level, on the external plane the widespread tendency to participate in Rhetorical Integration frameworks resulted not merely from sovereignty-boost aims, but also from more specific "regime-boost" objectives.³¹

²⁹ D. Lewis, "Central Asia: Contested Peace", in O. Richmond et al. (eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Disciplinary and Regional Approaches to Peace*, Basingstoke and New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, pp.387-397.

³⁰ C. von Soest and J. Grauvogel (2016), pp.33-34.

³¹ E. Vinokurov and A. Libman (2017), p.22; See also: K. Collins, "Economic and Security Regionalism among Patrimonial Authoritarian Regimes: The Case of Central Asia", *Europe-Asia Studies*, vol.61, no.2 (2009), pp.249-281; R. Allison (2008).

The security-first approach is also crucial to understanding the drivers behind the evolution of sub-regional cooperation in economic terms. The typical economic trade-off between “guns or butter”, between security needs and a commitment to people’s well-being was solved by the CARs leaderships’ prioritising the former over the latter, thereby avoiding the risk associated with the reduction in national autonomy inscribed by definition in economic integration paths. At the same time, some authors have argued that it was not only the security of the states that hindered the economic cooperation path, but also the understanding of security as regime security, which negatively affected local leaderships’ attitudes toward economic liberalisation which, in turn, is a logical premise for economic regionalism³².

Apart from the lack of market-oriented reforms, the Central Asian states’ prioritisation of security over development emerged from two main trends. The first, particularly visible in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, results from the tendency to build economic development upon the myth of “self-sufficiency”, which led to a lukewarm propensity toward cooperation and, instead, to the extensive use of protectionist measures and limitations to the free movement of goods and persons³³. Secondly, intra-regional competition and mistrust between the CARs hindered cooperation, even where it appeared to be pursuable in a *win-win* perspective. As a matter of fact, while regional economic integration was certainly obstructed by objective factors resulting from peculiarities in the national productive apparatuses,³⁴ it was definitely hindered by subjective ones, having to do with the CARs’ risk-opportunity perceptions resulting from the security-first mindset. As a confirmation of the security-first approach, inter-state cooperation

³² K. Collins (2009).

³³ G. Gleason (2003).

³⁴ R. Pomfret, “Regional integration in Central Asia”, *Economic Change and Restructuring*, vol.42, no.1, 2009, pp.47-68.

was not pursued even in those important sectors where the CARs displayed a significant level of complementarity, namely in the exploitation of regional natural resources. Indeed the CARs benefiting from the availability of hydrocarbons – and in particular Uzbekistan – are also the poorest in terms of water resources, while the countries benefiting from hydropower resources – i.e. Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan – possess no indigenous oil and gas reserves. However, the logic of a mutually benefiting exchange between energy and water never worked, hampered by the use of resources – especially on the Uzbek side – as a tool for confrontation and coercion rather than cooperation. Moreover, as far as Turkmenistan is concerned, the rationale behind the search for self-sufficiency in economic terms seemingly operated also in strategic ones. That is, the resolve to preserve the country's territorial integrity and to guarantee its security led to a policy of “positive neutrality” which *de facto* resulted in a self-imposed isolation from cooperation at both economic and strategic levels, hampering in turn the development of inclusive regional frameworks.

On this backdrop, it is not surprising that the only economic integration paths involving some of the CARs which accomplished any result – i.e. the successive Russian-led initiatives heading towards Eurasian Union – were non-inclusive trans-regional projects, focusing on a limited number of highly complementary economies.³⁵ Consistently with the above-mentioned vision of regional cooperation, Kazakhstan, which inherited a national economy deeply ingrained with the Russian, has traditionally been a staunch supporter of and participant in the

³⁵ The reference is, in particular, to the 2003 Single Economic Space (SES) and to the Customs Union (CU), involving Kazakhstan but excluding Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, “non-preferential trade partners” – as they were labelled by Bohr (2004, p.493) – which instead had been founding members of the Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsEC), in whose framework both the SES and the CU were proposed. Kyrgyzstan, however, entered the CU in January 2015, with a view to joining the Eurasian Economic Union, the latest step in the Eurasian integration project.

Eurasian integration project, whose current stage – namely the Eurasian Economic Union – also involves Kyrgyzstan.

The multi-layered power competition in and over Central Asia

An apparent paradox seen in the evolution of Central Asian cooperation is that, notwithstanding the paramount importance the CARs give to security considerations, and in spite of the characteristic trans-national nature of regional threats, the security-first approach did not result in the creation of sound multilateral mechanisms for cooperation. This was the consequence of a complex mixture of objective limitations and subjective factors, having to do with regional actors' perceptions and attitudes. That is, the CARs' leaderships lacked both the capabilities and the common will to set up effective multilateral frameworks for security cooperation.

Lack of capabilities points first and foremost to the CARs' inability to control the regional security dynamics unfolding with the dissolution of the Soviet Union and shaped, over time, also by the competitive engagement of external powers.³⁶ The trans-regional nature of Central Asian dynamics and the relative weakness of its member states concurred in conceptualization of the area, from a security perspective, as a "weak sub-complex" within the post-Soviet *Regional Security Complex*, centred on Russian hegemony.³⁷ The lack of the CARs' common will and vision has, instead, mainly to do with the intra-regional competition for hegemony or dominance. From this perspective, the dynamics of regional cooperation closely resemble the neo-realist dynamics of alliances, both being shaped by the pursuit of

³⁶ R. Allison, "Regionalism, regional structures and security management in Central Asia", *International Affairs*, vol.80, no.3, 2004, pp.463-483.

³⁷ B. Buzan and O. Wæver, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003, pp. 423, 428–429.

power and security.³⁸ In the peculiar Central Asian sub-complex, these dynamics are naturally multi-layered, with power relations impinging upon a triple yet interconnected level of competition – i.e. regional, supra-regional and global. That is, power competition at the regional level coexists with and is part of power competition at the supra-regional, involving major neighboring powers like Russia and China.³⁹ The latter level, in turn, takes shape within a wider, multi-regional competition for power with the global hegemon – the US – shaping multi-leveled yet overlapping interactions.

Intra-regional competition for influence emerged primarily from the Astana-Tashkent dualism, which, with rare exceptions, is considered by scholars to have been a key impediment to integration projects in Central Asia.⁴⁰ Uzbekistan considers itself, and is widely considered by the literature, to be the region's "natural hegemon", in terms of both material power resources and historical legitimating factors.⁴¹ Consequently, it has traditionally pursued a regional cooperation agenda simultaneously pursuing an hegemonic regionalism centered "around

³⁸ R. Allison (2004).

³⁹ For the sake of brevity, we do not mention other, non-regional actors – namely Japan, Turkey, India and Iran – whose projections towards Central Asia result in the widening of the CARs alignment options.

⁴⁰ M. Laruelle and S. Peyrouse, (2012); A. Bohr (2004). For an opposite point of view, F. Tolipov et al., *Five States and/or One Region? National-Regional Dualism in Central Asia*, Friedrich Ebert Foundation, Almaty, 2016, pp.22-24.

⁴¹ Uzbekistan's power resources result from a mix of geographic, ethno-demographic and cultural factors. Geographically, it lies at the core of the region, sharing a border with all the CARs while lacking a common border with Russia. At the same time, it is the most populous and one of the ethnically most homogeneous Central Asian country, while Uzbek minorities are present in each of the CARs (see tab.1). Finally, the historicization of the nation made the country heir of Central Asian key historical cultural centers, like Samarkand and Bukhara. See, e.g., S. Cornell, "Uzbekistan: A regional player in Eurasian geopolitics?", *European Security*, vol.9, no.2, 2000, pp.115-140.

the Tashkent metropolis”⁴² and balancing strategies *vis-à-vis* Russian hegemony in the regional sub-complex. Conversely, and as already seen, Kazakhstan traditionally advanced its dominant regional role – which in purely economic terms grew steadily as a result of the exploitation of its energy potential – by virtue of its strategic entente with Russia, stemming from the deep links between the two countries and as a counterweight to Uzbek regional policies. Therefore, although both countries nominally pursue “multi-vectoral” foreign policy strategies,⁴³ the understanding of the formula is quite different in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan and, due to the peculiarities of regional cooperation, in any case these were conducive to integration patterns in Central Asia.

While the already-mentioned self-imposed Turkmen isolationism has cut off Ashgabat from regional interactions, power competition and power asymmetry within the Central Asian region also contributes to explaining the attitudes toward cooperation of the weakest CARs in terms of power resources, namely Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. That is, their participation in regional frameworks for cooperation resulted primarily from an attempt to constrain the influence of more powerful countries and, in particular, to counterbalance the perceived threat coming from Uzbekistan. Thus, Dushanbe and Bishkek’s participation in regional organizations has been consistent with strategies of allying with Russia, hegemon within the wider post-Soviet Regional Security Complex, or with Kazakhstan, by virtue of the perceived formation of a Moscow-Astana axis.⁴⁴ On this backdrop, power competition ended up by also hindering cooperation in the economic sector, already weakened by the above-mentioned protectionist attitudes. Besides

⁴² A. Bohr, *Uzbekistan: Politics and Foreign Policy*, London, Royal Institute for International Affairs, 1998, p.50.

⁴³ See: N. Contessi (2015) “Foreign and Security Policy Diversification in Eurasia: Issue Splitting, Co-alignment, and Relational Power”, *Problems of Post-Communism*, vol.62, no.5, 2015, pp.299-311.

⁴⁴ See, e.g., A. Bohr (2004), p.492.

TAB. 2 - SELECTED COOPERATION SCHEMES INVOLVING CENTRAL ASIAN COUNTRIES

Year	Organization	Areas covered	Members (CARs + Others)
1991	Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS)	Multi-purpose	Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan (associated since 2005), Tajikistan, Uzbekistan + Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Moldova, Russia, Ukraine.
1997	Central Asian Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC)	Economy	Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan + Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, China, Mongolia, Pakistan.
2000-2014	Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsEC)	Economy	Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan (2006–2008) + Russia, Belarus.
2001	Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)	Multi-purpose	Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan + China, India (2017), Pakistan (2017), Russia.
2002	Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO)	Security	Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan (2006–2012) + Armenia, Belarus, Russia.
2002-2005	Central Asian Cooperation Organization (CACO) – fmr Central Asian Economic Cooperation	Economy	Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan.
2006	Eurasian Development Bank (EDB)	Finance	Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan (2011), Tajikistan (2009) + Armenia (2009), Belarus (2010).
2009	Turkic Council	Culture	Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan + Azerbaijan, Turkey.
2011	CIS Free Trade Area	Economy	Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan + Armenia, Belarus, Russia, Moldova, Ukraine.
2015	Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) – fmr. Customs Union and Common Economic Space	Economy	Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan (2015) + Russia, Belarus, Armenia (2015).

the failed Kazakhstani attempt to involve Uzbekistan in regional agreements, power competition also prevented upstream and downstream water-resource countries – i.e. Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, on the one side, Uzbekistan, on the other – to develop consistent frameworks for cooperation fostering functional interdependence.⁴⁵

In the absence of shared risk-opportunity perceptions and goals, the CARs manifested a certain degree of convergence only on practical and identifiable security benefits.⁴⁶ This was the case, for example of the negotiation on border demarcation between Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan which led to the establishment of the Shanghai Group in 1996, as well as of the Central Asian Nuclear Weapon Free Zone (CANWFZ), signed in 2006 by the heads of state of the CARs, thereby committed to not producing, acquiring, testing, stocking or possessing nuclear arms.⁴⁷ In both cases, however, the involvement of external actors, namely China and Russia – i.e. respectively as part of the agreement or as mere facilitator of the negotiations – played a crucial role in defusing traditional reciprocal suspicions between the CARs.

The chiefly “instrumental” nature of Central Asian regionalism – i.e. its being respondent to power competition rather than to integration aims – also presided over the phenomenon of “revolving-door” membership in regional organizations, shaped first and foremost by Uzbekistan. Tashkent, the “regional chameleon”,⁴⁸ in fact pursued a seemingly unintelli-

⁴⁵ The only exception to this rule is the International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea (IFAS), established in 1993 on international community’s pressure and on Kazakhstan’s initiative. IFAS, which brings together all the CARs, has long remained dormant and is still highly ineffective, having acquired a trans-national dimension based upon shared rules of operation only with its “3rd Aral Sea Basin Programme” (2011-2015). At the time of writing, negotiations are still underway for the approval of the 4th Programme.

⁴⁶ R. Allison (2004), p.482.

⁴⁷ M. Laruelle and S. Peyrouse, (2012), p.8.

⁴⁸ A. Bohr (2004), p.499.

gible “pendulum politics” between different and sometimes opposing arrangements, guided by balancing needs that were changing along with regional circumstances – i.e. along with the shifting power balance between the CARs as well as with the degree of competitive engagement in the region by external powers. As a consequence, while the resolve to balance Russia led Uzbekistan to withdraw from the CST and to simultaneously join the “Western-minded” and US-supported GUAM in 1999, in the aftermath of the Andijan events and in the face of consequently growing Western criticism, Tashkent made another U-turn, leaving the latter in 2005 and re-joining the former in 2006, only to withdraw once again in 2012, mainly as a reaction to perceived Russian interference in its sovereign prerogatives.⁴⁹

The different balancing needs – coupled with the already mentioned tendency to support purely declarative mechanisms for cooperation – led to the typically variable geometry characterizing the numerous regional and supra-regional frameworks for cooperation (See tab. no.2), a set of “spaghetti-bowl”⁵⁰ arrangements which more often than not tended to replicate analogous functions and prerogatives, though largely unfulfilled.

The externally driven nature of Central Asian cooperation

Resulting primarily from the different and often incompatible priorities of the CARs, the primacy of supra-regional frameworks for cooperation in Central Asia emerges first and foremost from their longevity and relative effectiveness. While not presiding over regional integration, nevertheless organizations like the CIS, the CSTO, or the SCO showed an elevated degree

⁴⁹ See M. Laruelle, *Factoring the Regional Impact of Uzbekistan's Withdrawal from the CSTO*, The German Marshall Fund of the United States, On Wider Europe, no.24, 2012.

⁵⁰ R. Pomfret (2009), p.51.

of resilience and accomplished significant results, although more often than not different from their respective statutory goals – e.g. in terms of sovereignty- or regime-boost effects or in those of *socialization*.⁵¹

Recognizing the primacy of externally driven frameworks for cooperation does not imply portraying the CARs as mere “pawns” of a power competition unfolding among major powers. Contrary to the stereotypical image of the CARs as passive actors within “New Great Game”, they managed to impose “local rules” on international players.⁵² That is, the geopolitical competition centered on Central Asia left the CARs with significant room for maneuver between external powers, enabling them to pursue, according to respective priorities, *balancing* strategies toward different actors at different times, as well as to employ *pick-and-choose* strategies and *aligning-for-profit* policies – in terms of attracting foreign aid or investments as well as in terms of *rent-seeking* activities.⁵³ On this backdrop, the CARs’ “international agency” clearly benefited from systemic shifts impinging upon regional dynamics. This was particularly the case in the aftermath of 9/11 and the launch of the Enduring Freedom Operation by the US’ Bush Administration, which widened Central Asian states’ ability to extract benefits from

⁵¹ As for the need to evaluate the efficacy of organization taking into account participants’ *expectations* rather than declared outputs see: E. Vinokurov and A. Libman (2017); J. Linn and O. Pidufala, *Lessons for Central Asia. Experience with Regional Economic Cooperation*, ADB, Manila, 2009.

⁵² For a recent scholarly contribution dispelling the assumption of CARs as mere passive pawns in the context of regional competition among great powers, see A. Cooley, *Great Games, Local Rules: The New Great Power Contest in Central Asia*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2012. In the same vein, S. Cummings (2013).

⁵³ See, A. Bohr (2004); E. Kavalski, “Partnership or rivalry between the EU, India and China in Central Asia”, *European Law Journal*, vol.13, no.6, 2007, pp.839-856; S. Schiek, “The Afghanistan Conflict As a Power Resource for Central Asia?”, in Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy at the University of Hamburg (ed.), *OSCE Yearbook 2014*, Baden-Baden, Nomos, 2015, pp.301-313.

great powers' interest in and projection toward the area.⁵⁴ However, as far as regional cooperation is concerned, the resultant broadening of alignment options run counter to the development of regional arrangements not only by decreasing the CARs' interest in multilateral initiatives, but also by increasing intra-regional competition for distributive gains.⁵⁵ Moreover, in a region shaped by deep power competition, the US' power projection – pursued eminently on a bilateral base – ended up in widening the power asymmetry between the CARs to the benefit of its main strategic interlocutors, chiefly Uzbekistan.⁵⁶

The main reason for the relative success of the externally driven cooperation frameworks, and particularly of the Russian- and Chinese-led, has been their declarative, non-invasive nature. It primarily resulted from the legitimation and “defensive” goals characterizing Moscow's and Beijing's initiatives, aimed at legitimately enhancing their regional power status and at projecting respective foreign policy culture abroad, so that “their narrative of regionalism in fact sometimes corresponds more to a hidden bilateralism and a strategy for an anti-American multipolarity”.⁵⁷

Yet during the 90s the Russian-led initiatives showed the typical shortcomings of a so-called “holding-together” regionalism – i.e. a cooperation path taking shape among states that previously belonged to a common polity.⁵⁸ Apart from the already-mentioned lower propensity to renounce state autonomy

⁵⁴ A good example of this trend is provided by Alexander Cooley's account of the competition between the U.S. and Russia ignited by Kyrgyzstani authorities over the lease of the Manas airbase. See A. Cooley (2012), pp.116-133.

⁵⁵ A. Bohr (2004), p.492.

⁵⁶ As highlighted by Bohr (2004, p.492), Uzbekistan may indeed be considered the “primary beneficiary” of US regional policy. Besides the high benefits extracted in merely economic terms, in strategic ones Tashkent signed with the US a Declaration on Strategic Partnership which committed the latter – though vaguely – to ensure the national security and territorial integrity of the former.

⁵⁷ M. Laruelle and S. Peyrouse, (2012), p.6.

⁵⁸ E. Vinokurov and A. Libman (2017), p.44.

typical of newly independent countries, this had chiefly to do with the politicized nature of the initiatives, which entail a highly symbolic value. Consistently, the membership in or withdrawal from cooperation frameworks like the CIS or the CSTO had more to do with the CARs' bilateral relations with Russia than with the institutional aims of the organizations, the more so as a consequence of their declarative nature.

On this backdrop – and in the wider context of shifting regional dynamics – China's increasing participation in and promotion of cooperation mechanisms in Central Asia made it possible to overcome two key shortcomings of the Russian-led proposals put forward during the 90s. First, by reducing the unidirectional power asymmetry and the politicization inscribed in the latter, the involvement of Beijing allowed the CARs to counterbalance Russian dominance, facilitating the participation of actors traditionally suspicious of Moscow's goals. This seems to be, for instance, the case with Uzbekistan's participation in the SCO. Secondly, China's initiatives – and particularly the institutionalization of the Shanghai cooperation in 2001 – helped identify previously missing common threats. This was the case with the so-called “three evils” threatening the region, namely terrorism, extremism and separatism – a combination of menaces particularly felt across Central Asia after the 1999-2000 campaign of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU)⁵⁹ and traditionally also felt in Russia and China, whose projections towards the region had anti-terror needs among its main drivers.⁶⁰

The peculiar understanding of security in Central Asia – conceived as both state security and regime security – had clear repercussions on the risk-opportunity perceptions of the local

⁵⁹ M. Brill Olcott, *Radical Islamist Mobilization in Central Asia*, Carnegie Moscow Center, November 14, 2000.

⁶⁰ The reference here is to the need to curtail the threat arising from Uyghur separatism, based in the northwestern Xinjiang region and benefiting from strong transnational connections with the CARs, with whom the Uyghur share religious affiliation and the ethno-linguistic Turkic background.

leaderships and, consequentially, on the meaning and breadth of balancing strategies themselves. In the CARs' leaderships view, balancing and alignment strategies are indeed aimed at contrasting not merely external threats to state survival, but also internal threats to regime stability, thus making applicable the concept of *omnibalancing* developed for Third World countries.⁶¹ This consideration is quite important in appraising the parameters of the CARs' security concepts as they have been developing since the beginning of the century, informing attitudes towards security cooperation and, significantly, forging a still in-a-nutshell regional security identity shared by both Russia and China. The peculiar CARs' concept of security and the resulting omnibalancing needs stood as one of the main limits to Western-led sub-regional initiatives for cooperation and as an incentive to enhance cooperation with the neighboring powers. Above all, it was the *regime change* impetus associated with the Bush Doctrine, on the one hand, and the normative essence inscribed in the EU's regional projection, on the other, which openly collided with the CARs' leaderships preferences and perspectives on cooperation. That is, both US and EU regional strategies entailed a degree of – more or less manifest – interference in the CARs' domestic affairs which openly collided with their leaderships' preferences and attitudes towards cooperation, centered upon the pillar of non-interference in sovereign states' domestic affairs. Therefore, widening the concept of a “protective integration” working against Western efforts to impose external values,⁶² it can be argued, as Ziegler did,⁶³ that the CARs' preferences for alignment do not

⁶¹ See C. Ziegler, “Russia, Central Asia, and the Caucasus after the Georgia Conflict”, in R. Kanet (ed.), *Russian Foreign Policy in the 21st Century*, Basingstoke and New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, p.162.

⁶² R. Allison (2008).

⁶³ C. Ziegler, “Sovereignty, Security and Intervention in Central Asia”, in M. Sussex and R. Kanet (eds.), *Russia, Eurasia and the New Geopolitics of Energy. Confrontation and Consolidation*, Basingstoke and New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, pp.91-111.

primarily result from analogies in authoritarian rule, but rather from the shared interpretation of and full respect for state sovereignty, consistent with their post-colonial nature. It is from this perspective that the enhancement of the CARs' security cooperation with Russia and China within CSTO and SCO should be seen in the aftermath of both the "colored revolutions" and the wave of "Arab Springs". Moscow and Beijing's advancement of a "regional ownership" principle founded upon the non-intervention of outside powers in the region, as well as their adherence to the principles of near-absolute sovereignty, non-intervention, and non-interference in states' internal affairs – testified to by the position taken *vis-à-vis* the Andijan unrest in 2004 and the 2010 interethnic Uzbek-Kyrgyz clashes occurring in South Kyrgyzstan – perfectly fit with the CARs' perceptions and attitudes.

The centrality of the above-mentioned principles in shaping the CARs' attitude toward cooperation and toward externally driven initiatives helps to shed light on the latest dynamics shaping the multi-layered search for security and cooperation in Central Asia. While over the last decade the shift in Chinese regional policy from a defensive and reactive stance to a proactive one has widened Beijing's interaction with and economic grip over the CARs, at the same time Russia's aggressive stance in its so-called near abroad backfired on its regional initiatives. Indeed, the four-year-long and still unsolved Ukrainian crisis, besides exerting a negative impact on Moscow's drive towards integration within the Eurasian Economic Union,⁶⁴ impinged upon the CARs' attitudes towards cooperation with Russia, fostering more resolute balancing strategies even by those countries – like, for instance, Kazakhstan⁶⁵ – which were traditionally more inclined to cooperate bilaterally and multilaterally with their northern neighbor.

⁶⁴ See R. Dragneva and K. Wolczuk, *The Eurasian Economic Union Deals, Rules and the Exercise of Power*, Research Paper, London, Chatham House, 2017, pp.11-12.

⁶⁵ See, e.g., D. Tynan, *What does Kazakhstan's new military doctrine reveal about its relations with Russia?*, Eurasianet, December 7, 2017.

In an opposite direction, China's increasing projection toward Central Asia did not come at the expense of Beijing's firm adherence to the key pillars of its "peaceful rise" doctrine, which greatly suited national preferences and perspectives for cooperation in terms of balancing strategies as well as in terms of the economic benefits and development ensured by Beijing's regional investments, directed mainly toward the energy and infrastructure sectors. Driven by economic as well as security interests and pursued mainly by boosting financial, commercial and trade relations, China's projection toward Central Asia has yielded impressive results in the course of the last decade. This trend appears evident in terms of growth in bilateral trade and investment inflows – which received a decisive boost as a result of the CARs' involvement in the development of the overland component of the Belt and Road Initiative and as a consequence of Beijing's strategy of energy procurement from the region. The results accomplished in the energy sector are particularly meaningful, in that they show China's ability to step into a highly politicized realm and, by virtue of flexible, non-invasive and incentive-led policy,⁶⁶ achieve notable outcomes in a relatively limited timeframe – namely the construction of the Kazakhstan-China and Central Asia-China oil and gas pipelines. These infrastructures, besides breaking Russia's quasi-monopoly over the purchase of Central Asian gas, decisively contributed to shifting the region's economic gravitational pole eastward.

Conclusion: The main trends of cooperation in Central Asia

The overlapping of and confusion between the multi-faceted state- and nation-building processes unfolding since 1991 in

⁶⁶ C. Frappi and M. Montanini, *How does China's thirst for oil and gas impact on EU's energy policies? The Africa and Central Asia test cases*, United Nations University, GR:EEN Policy Brief, no.21, 2014.

Central Asia is the single element which most influenced the way in which the CARs came to perceive the risks and opportunities arising from the post-Soviet transition, as well as their attitudes and preferences regarding bilateral and multilateral cooperation. On this backdrop, neither supranational identity commonalities nor the urgent need to re-launch and partially reinvent post-Soviet national economic apparatus were conducive to regional integration and cooperation paths. Instead, identity and economic policies became either the logical premise or a privileged tool for affirmation of the primacy of security in domestic and foreign policy realms.

In a highly competitive environment, shaped by a peculiar multi-layered struggle for power and hegemony, the security-first approach to inter-state relations and the peculiar CAR understanding of the concept of security shaped the way in which cooperation came to be perceived and pursued. That is, balancing and alliance purposes were crucial in shaping the CARs' attitude towards regional cooperation in general and towards participation in single arrangements in particular. At the same time, legitimation and international recognition aims were and are still determinant in shaping the attitudes themselves, as well as socialization goals and the possibility to use cooperation frameworks as mere yet important "talking clubs". In this, Central Asian regionalism thus turned out to be chiefly instrumental. Instrumentality, in turn, has been primarily responsible for the main, often cited characterizations scholars give to Central Asian regionalism and integration – from "virtual" to "ink-on-paper", from "spaghetti-bowl" to "protective".

Intra-regional competition and more or less overt inter-state tensions are key hurdles to the development of a consistent drive toward economic or security cooperation in Central Asia, thereby widening external powers' regional room for maneuver and enhancing their key role in putting forward and leading mechanisms for regional cooperation. It is therefore not by chance that the latter remains chiefly externally driven, even if the scope and breadth of initiatives coming from major

neighboring powers is rapidly changing. Indeed, current dynamics in inter-state cooperation show two apparently opposing yet connected trends. While they manifest the persistent weakness of regionalist trends, at the same time a fresh impetus for the enhancement of inter-state bonds seems to follow China's projection into the area, on the backdrop of growing resistance to Russian initiatives in its "near abroad" unfolding among regional actors. Indeed, thanks to Chinese infrastructural initiatives the CARs are indeed not only increasingly interconnected among themselves, but are also more and more incorporated into a burgeoning trans-regional network that enhances Central Asia's strategic geographic location. Thus, besides having already modified to its own benefit the economic gravitational pole of Central Asia, China's initiatives are fostering a trend toward "regionalization from above", consistent with the declared aim of turning Central Asia's land-locked countries into "land-linked economies". Such a trend seems to be confirmed and enhanced also by the enlargement of the SCO geographical scope, achieved through the engagement of extra-regional actors as members, observers or dialogue partners. On this backdrop, while the regional "reluctant hegemon" stance of China – seemingly unwilling, for the time being, to challenge Russia's traditional upper hand in security terms – doesn't seem to entail significant incompatibilities among the main major powers active in Central Asia, it remains to be seen if and how the security needs associated with infrastructural developments will incentivize a renewed understanding of security cooperation in Central Asia, fostering fresh solutions to the dated issues arising from intra-regional competition and infighting.

While Beijing seems to possess all the potential to act as a "game-changer" to supra-regional cooperation schemes, a fresh boost to enhance inter-state and multilateral cooperation may also arise from within Central Asia. Indeed, if the assumption of the hindering role to cooperation played by intra-regional competition for power and personalism-based policies holds

true, then new impetus to cooperation may result from the leadership change recently occurred in Uzbekistan. As a matter of fact, the succession of Shavkat Mirziyoyev to the “father of the nation” Islam Karimov has the potential to break the regional vicious circle generated by the competition between Tashkent and Astana as well as by the “insecurity spiral” shaping Uzbekistan’s relations with Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. While it is too early to assess the mid- and long-term consequences of the Uzbek leadership change, the latter has already shown its potential⁶⁷ in providing a much-needed regional confidence boost and, simultaneously, in setting a new stage for intra-regional dialogue potentially conducive to the definition of regional solutions to the trans-national issues still affecting Central Asia, primarily in security terms.

⁶⁷ The reference goes to the hosting in Samarkand, in November 2017, of the conference “Central Asia: One Past and a Common Future, Cooperation for Sustainable Development and Mutual Prosperity” under the auspices of the UN and the Uzbek Foreign Ministry, on the one hand, and to the participation to the first consultative meeting of the CARs leaders held in Astana in March 2018 with a view to institutionalize regular meetings to jointly tackle the regional problems.