

HOW SOUTHERN IS CENTRAL ASIA?

Shairbek Dzhuraev

Postdoctoral fellow at the OSCE Academy in Bishkek

Founder and president of Crossroads Central Asia

His email is shairbek@crossroads-ca.org.

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Does Central Asia¹ belong to the Global South? There is no short answer to this seemingly simple question. The concept of the Global South remains peripheral in Central Asian studies, just as Central Asia is non-existent in the debates on the Global South. However, there is no good reason for such discrepancy to continue. The Global South is relevant to Central Asia in multiple ways. First, the key themes in the studies of Central Asia's state and politics highlight the region's essentially subaltern nature. Second, there is a small but growing regional scholarship that directly addresses many facets of Central Asia's "southernness". Therefore, a more pertinent question is not whether Central Asia is part of the Global South, but in what ways it is so. In other words, how "southern" is Central Asia?

Debating Central Asia's Global South credentials offers a (not so) hidden treasure in at least two ways. First, it will push scholars to rethink, revisit and move beyond the region's notorious "post-Sovietness". If Central Asia is an uneasy fit for the 20th century postcolonial literature, the Global South might offer a more appropriate framework to discuss the dependent and subaltern characteristics in the region's past and present. Second, seeing Central Asia as part of the Global South will shed new light on the richness, nuances and conceptual limits of the latter. This region has something to offer to nearly any strand of the Global South literature, from postcolonial to post-liberal or post-Western. Below, the article proposes several observations on why and how Central Asia – Global South nexus has strong foundations. First, however, comes a brief digression on the mutual peripherality of Central Asia and the Global South.

Central Asia and the Global South: the sources of ambivalence

One apparent reason for the ambivalence about Central Asia's linkage to the Global South is the latter's fuzzy definitions. Thus, a study of democracy in the Global South classified Central Asia as part of the Global North due to its non-belonging to the Third World before 1991 (Pop-Eleches and Robertson 2015). Alternatively, Central Asia is undoubtedly part of the Global South if one defines it as a new name for the developing world as the United Nations or the World Bank appear to do (Clarke 2018). Moreover, a fine-tuned analysis would find Kazakhstan, a middle-upper economy, slightly "less southern" than Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, all in the lower-middle-income basket (The World Bank n.d.). In the language of South-South cooperation, parts of Central Asia will be found in the "south of the South" as a receiving end of relations with the

¹ Central Asia, in this article, refers to five former Soviet republics, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.

behemoths of the Global South, such as China or India. Finally, if one takes "global" as a departure from methodological nationalism, each Central Asian state will certainly have pockets of the North, just as Eriksen (2018) alludes to pockets of the South in parts of Norway.

Definitions aside, there is well-recorded reluctance among political and academic circles in Central Asia to apply the vocabulary of the Global South (Laruelle 2021, 211–12). Comparing Central Asia to Africa's poor and/or postcolonial countries often triggered emotional resistance, reflecting the recent Soviet-time view of the Third World as "others", not "us". The Soviet legacies, such as the high literacy rate, elements of the modern state and European culture, also served to justify how post-Soviet Central Asia was not up to such comparisons. The Russian-speaking Central Asia scholarship remains embedded within the Soviet-time vocabulary and training, another characteristic of the region's insulation from global perspectives of postcolonialism or the Global South.

Central Asians' reluctance about the Global South is not simply a matter of their present-day choice. Five former Soviet republics were part of the "Second World" until 1991. In other words, the 20th-century politics and debate of postcolonialism, the Non-Aligned Movement or the Third World, a critical context for the Global South, were not central for Central Asians. In 1991, Central Asian states were newcomers to now a two-fold world and appeared to fit none. Mostly for the same reasons, Central Asia remained outside the interest of postcolonialism literature (e.g. Moore 2001; Heathershaw 2010).

The paucity of discursive engagement between Central Asia and the Global South, telling in itself, does not foreclose the linkage between the two. As the following sections suggest, the themes raised by the region's comparative politics and international relations literature place the region squarely in the Global South even when not saying so.

Non-modern non-democracies: comparative politics of post-1991 Central Asia

Thirty years after 1991, what does comparative politics of Central Asia tell us about the state, society and politics in the region? A thorough review of comparative politics literature is hardly possible in this article. However, the *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Central Asia*, fresh from the print in September 2021, offers a fitting entry point. As co-editors (Isaacs and Marat 2021, 2–3) map the regional scholarship in the introduction to the volume, three themes top their list: nation-building, democratization and the "informal-formal paradigm." A brief look into each of these themes suggests Central Asian studies is hardly anything other than a study of a deeply "southern" part of the world.

The prominence of nation-building in regional scholarship is not surprising. In 1991, Central Asian Soviet republics "catapulted" into the world of nation-states. The landing was safe for most of them, at least compared to the republics of the former Yugoslavia. However, having formal elements of a state in place, Central Asia, it turned out, lacked nations. There were no polities, let alone nation-states, called Kazakhstan or Uzbekistan, before the Soviet Union's "creation of nations" of Kazakhs and Uzbeks (Roy 2000). Thus, in 1991 Central Asian leaders faced the task of

building a nation "from scratch," as Huskey (2003) wrote about Kyrgyzstan. The process was novel and painful, as Tajikistan's descent into civil war in 1992 reminds.

Another dominant theme in Central Asian politics is that of democratization. The 'end of history' paradigm of the early 1990s was hardly a choice of Central Asian leaders or societies. But all relevant parties agreed, back then, that Central Asia was part of the democratic transition. The developments on the ground gave little indication of such a transition. Competitive elections, political pluralism and freedom of expression remained non-existent in most of Central Asia, as seen in the annual measurement of the US-based Freedom House. Anderson's (1999) singling out Kyrgyzstan as an 'island of democracy' was a telling verdict on the region's democratic progress. Reflecting the "end of transition paradigm" (Carothers 2002), explaining Central Asia's non-democracies became a more relevant task (e.g. McGlinchey 2011; Levitsky and Way 2002; Lewis 2021).

Central Asia's travails with nation and democracy-building brought formal-informal to prominence as an appropriate framework of analysis. A particularly relevant starting point was a routine discrepancy between how policies are declared and executed. Democratic and modern state elements were adopted only to accommodate, intertwine with, or get subverted by, informal practices and actors such as clans, localism or clientelism of different forms (e.g. Schatz 2004; Collins 2004; Huskey and Hill 2013; Radnitz 2010; Hale 2014). An undue assumption of democratization in the region is the first problem leading to "informal" as a problem (Juraev 2008). Furthermore, informal is easier defined by what it is not, and unsurprisingly, it came under challenge as "oversimplified" or "normative" (Isaacs 2014; Ismailbekova 2021).

The above topics by no means exhaust the regional scholarship on politics. However, they have a shared context: non-modern, undemocratic Central Asia. The lack of history of modern statehood is critical to understanding current Central Asia, but only if the model of a "modern state," with roots outside Central Asia, serves as a point of reference. Similarly, in the study of Central Asian politics, the formal-informal binary invariably correlates with the standards of the modern Weberian state and its deviations. In its turn, the assumption of Central Asian states being part of another democratic wave had little to do with developments in Central Asia. The shift to explaining authoritarianism in the region only underscores the continuing centrality of the golden standard of a political regime. Central Asia's Soviet or pre-Soviet past may occasionally feature in the above themes as part of the explanation (e.g. Dzhuraev 2012; Fumagalli 2016). But far more importantly, Central Asia's subalternity has been the context for such scholarship, not a mere variable.

International non(agency) of Central Asian states

The Global South, by most of its definitions, is central to international relations. This is not immediately obvious in the field's mainstream theories of the 20th century. For the neorealist theory, relations and events between states stem from their concern about survival and differences in relative power capabilities. The constructivist approach (Wendt 1999) challenges some of neorealism's taken-for-granted assumptions, pointing to "social," and thus, changeable, roots of states' preferences. However, these grand theories remain agnostic to the roots of power

imbalances, leaving the latter to more critically oriented approaches. What does the international relations literature in Central Asia reflect, then, on the region's "southernness" at the global level?

The single biggest proposition is the missing or denied agency of Central Asian states in the world of international relations (Dzhuraev 2021). Unlike counterparts in nation-building, democratization or development, the scholars of international relations hardly noticed the emergence of five independent states in 1991. International Relations is known for its preoccupation with big powers, and none of the Central Asian states counted as such. Therefore, closer attention to Central Asia's international relations was primarily a "side effect of geopolitics" (Dzhuraev 2021, 233). Hence the prominence in Central Asia of such concepts as the "grand chessboard," the "great game," or Mackinder's "Heartland." While entertaining for students and politicians, these topics commonly paint Central Asia as little more than a territory.

There are two distinct approaches in the regional scholarship addressing the above "lack of agency" problem in Central Asia's international relations. The first is a recognition that the region's countries have grown in their capacity to act internationally. As Cooley (2012) argues, Central Asian authoritarian regimes learned to set "local rules" of the "great game." Related is the literature that stresses Central Asian rulers' political interests (i.e. "regime interests") as the embodiment of these countries' agency in their foreign policies (e.g. Allison 2008; Anceschi 2010).

The above works represent the much-needed bridging of international relations literature to that of comparative politics. However, the granted international agency remains partial. True, Central Asian states may not be pawns anymore but, perhaps, knights. However, if such an upgrade is only possible when multiple "great gamers" are willing to buy out local rule-setters, such agency remains of an ad hoc nature. Moreover, there is an inherent theoretical asymmetry if Central Asia's international actorness is discussed through a schema of "regime interests of Central Asian rulers vs national interests of other powers." In short, the arguments pertain more to Central Asian subalternity than rediscovering its international agency.

The second approach accepts Central Asia's weak agency and offers a political explanation to it. Thus, Lewis (2015, 75) contends that Russia's influence in Kyrgyzstan is not simply a matter of power exercise but a reflection of legitimacy that such influence enjoys and is nurtured in Kyrgyzstan. Relatedly, Fumagalli (2016) points to domestic political changes in Kyrgyzstan as a precursor of the increased Russian leverage vis-a-vis that of the West in 2010. These arguments add nuance to the exercise of international agency by Central Asia states, even though the result, ironically, is the narrowing of Bishkek's "margins of manoeuvre," in the case of Fumagalli (2016, 371).

The overall message of the above works is Central Asia's international weakness, smallness and dependence. One sign of it is the focus of studies on non-regional powers' international relations, with Central Asia being at best the receiving end and at worst the context (e.g. Kluczevska and Dzhuraev 2020). Another indication is the nature of Central Asian states' international agency, reduced to the regime's parochial political interests or proactive dependence-seeking from the former colonial patron. The literature discussed above is aware of the postcolonial roots of the problem but views it as part of a broader context. This leads us to the final section on Central Asia

scholarship that is directly engaged with the themes of the region's postcolonialism and subalternity.

Maturing regional studies? The rise of critical approaches

The previous sections discussed how regional scholarship demonstrates Central Asia's Global South credentials without expressly saying so. However, there is a considerable body of works that directly engage with the region's subalternity both within and beyond postcolonial vocabulary. Three observations could be offered in this regard.

First, there is a debate on Central Asia's postcolonial nature. The earlier writings rarely went beyond the basic question: whether postcolonialism was relevant to post-Soviet Central Asia. Gammer (2000) brings up a host of compelling similarities between post-Soviet Central Asia and former French colonies in Africa, starting from non-desired independence to the nature of relations with the "mother empire." However, as Kandiyoti (2002) argues, comparing post-Soviet Central Asia to other postcolonial regions may not be helpful and would limit rather than help understand the specifics of the Soviet experience. In contrast, for Moore (2001), "an inflation of the postcolonial" was a worthwhile sacrifice if that was the cost of defining post-Soviet as postcolonial. More works came out recently on different colonial aspects of the Soviet or pre-Soviet experience of Central Asia (Adams 2008; Bisenova and Medeuova 2016; Heathershaw 2010; Kudaibergenova 2016; Tlostanova 2015).

Second, if Central Asia scholarship was a little late, or a slight outlier, in the postcolonial discourse of the 20th century, it has been at the forefront of critical "southern" themes of the post-1991. Thus, one finds compelling arguments on how the concepts of democratic transition, liberalism or liberal peace were not only external to Central Asia, as discussed earlier, but also proved unhelpful to understand the region (e.g. Owen et al. 2017). Central Asia's complicated relations with the global centres of power are reflected in the works on the neoliberal global order (e.g. Sanghera and Satybaldieva 2021), the global connectedness of Central Asian elites (e.g. Cooley and Heathershaw 2017) or discrepancies between donors' and local views on good governance (e.g. Kluczevska 2019). These are only snapshots of the literature, which has been lately on the rise (Laruelle 2021).

The final observation concerns the questions of who and how produces knowledge on Central Asia. There are growing calls to address the self-perpetuating dominant position of Western-based academics in regional studies. Marat and Aisarina (2021) speak of that when reminding us that no Central Asian author has ever won the book award from scholarly communities such as the Central Asian Studies Society (CESS). Sultanalieva (2019) writes of "coloniality in knowledge production, where we, the Central Asians, are the source material." Relatedly, McGlinchey (in Lottholz et al. 2020) contends that country rankings such as Freedom House or Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) set "lines of power that privilege the West and subordinate the rest." Fauve (2021) is cautiously optimistic that the increasing number of Central Asian scholars in the West may blur the foreign-local binary in the future. Whether the boundaries would blur or simply shift remains to be seen.

Conclusions

Organizing the world around mega-labels such as the Global South and the Global North is an exercise in intellectual heuristics that should never be taken for granted. Using these concepts requires allowing an unknown number of assumptions about the world. Also, such concepts are more often political than not. However, if social science requires such heuristics in order to produce interesting and potentially valuable insights about the world, they are here to stay and thrive. On that assumption, this article concludes there is a compelling case to view Central Asia as a legitimate and interesting part of the Global South. Three concluding remarks illustrate it.

First, for comparative politics scholars more broadly, viewing Central Asia as part of the Global South will help enrich and sharpen the latter concept. This region, just as others, have its own set of unusual characteristics. For some, Central Asia is still part (albeit "southern") of the Global North. For others, it may be the deep south of the South. Central Asia posed a difficult nut to crack for postcolonial approaches. For some, it may not qualify as a colonial at all, while for others, it is thrice colonial. Recent Central Asia works increasingly speak to broader themes of post-liberal or democracy (Long 2018; Owen et al. 2017; Lottholz et al. 2020), while the works on postcolonial international relations (e.g. Clapham 1996; Lockwood 2015) will prove highly relevant to the region. In short, Central Asia will have value to add to many concepts of what the Global South may (or may not) be.

Second, for Central Asia scholars, applying the lenses of the Global South sheds new light on present-day research topics of the region. The Global South is an inherently political, critical and subversive concept (e.g. Kloß 2017). This opens new avenues to politicize, and depoliticize, some of the most prominent topics of the area studies, such as the nature of political regimes, corruption, the state weakness or external dependence. The Global South lenses will push more scholars to appreciate the historical and political roots of the concepts they use, another sign of a maturing field.

The final point is a little caveat about the limits of critical literature in area studies such as Central Asia. On the one hand, the regional scholarship is increasingly in sync with the Global South in the latter's "subversive" meaning. There is a growing debate on historical and constructed dimensions of the region's, and its scholars', subalternity. This trend will grow as Central Asian studies is relatively young. On the other hand, the most compelling critical works on Central Asia is associated with scholars in privileged positions. They most probably read and write in English and received good training in critical social science (broadly defined). These remain luxuries in most parts of the region. So, just as some see postcolonialism as a product of "hegemonic centres of knowledge production" (Chanady 2008, 418), the Global South may, at least for some time, remain in the vocabulary of a relatively exclusive branch of Central Asian scholarship.

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