

Central Asia: borders, peoples and connections

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Below: Big Almaty Lake, Kazakhstan. Image reproduced under a Creative Commons license, courtesy of Martin de Lusenet on Flickr.

Central Asia is, in sum, a multi-everything region. Multi-ethnic, multi-linguistic, certainly multi-cultural. Almost any interaction here for centuries has been inter-cultural, inter-civilizational even. Ethnically and culturally diverse, it has for centuries practiced what today is termed ‘intercultural communication’, if not always willingly. Here nomadic and settled (oasis) cultural types communicated, cooperated and clashed. ‘Temporality’ and ‘spatiality’ as analytical concepts are now actively introduced into traditional International Relations theories. However, surprisingly, they are not new for Central Asia. The nexus of two above-mentioned major cultural types has been providing the backdrop for development of this vast area for thousands of years, and temporality and spatiality were the basic principles upon which development there was based.

Considering this and the longtime overall position on the sidelines of global international system, artificial separating of space has not been in great demand in Central Asia. The interconnectivity, cooperation, mutual accommodation and frequent flare-ups were all played out in an area where the concept of borders – artificial managing of spatiality – was a late arrival, introduced by external and often hostile forces. Resources crucial for survival – fresh water, fertile soil and abundant grasslands – were in inconsistent supply. The two socio-cultural organizations reacted differently – nomads explored the vast expanses of the steppe, including the high-altitude meadows that eventually became integral parts of seasonal destinations for some nomadic tribes (Dhungar, Kazakh, Kyrgyz). The ‘oasis mentality’ urged people to stay put and find ways to accommodate if not assimilate newcomers, acclimating to ethnic diversity and, over time, developing elaborate ways to stockpile against hard times. The Emirate of Bukhara, the Khanate of Khiva – flourishing theocracies – developed versatile cities, science and literature. Nomadic societies – ‘non-sedentary polities’, which were more limited in their economic development since they were dependent on biologically restricted means, i.e., their livestock – experimented with more fluid social structures, a more precise configuration of which is still a subject of debate among specialists, especially with new archeological discoveries that present evidence of much more elaborate forms of economic and social relationships that previously thought.

The fabled Silk Road traversed thousands of miles over inhospitable terrain from one populated settled area to another, passing thousands of kilometers (or miles) of steppe or desert with travelers hoping for a respite and recharge at yet another stop where they might have to navigate yet another set of customs utilizing all their practical diplomacy skills. This approach is now undergoing a revival with *Eurasianism* as its philosophical core. While it refers to the original trade route’s experiences in connecting diverse locations and peoples, its modern version has to deal with a multitude of new issues.

Spatial and temporal characteristics of Central Asian life were interrupted in the

modern times with introducing the concept of formal borders. ‘The Great Game’ of the 19th century, waged between the Russian and British empires, brought outside interests – and accompanying military forces – to Central Asia. Suddenly, things that previously mattered little – like formally defined borders – were introduced. This spatial separation was further reinforced by the Russian empire’s expansion into Kazakh steppes and establishment of farming outposts. “For the first time in the history of Central Asia, a sedentary farming civilization pushed into the realm of nomadic culture [in Kazakhstan] and expanded into another farming culture’s realm – in Tashkent and Ferghana oases”.¹

In the early 20th century, newcomers’ presence became formalized with the establishment of a new sociopolitical construction – the Union of the Soviet Socialist Republics – that once again brought major changes to the region’s differing lifestyles. Centuries-old economic and cultural relationships were propelled into the realm of impersonal and detached from tradition (at least in theory) social connections of a new type. Together with uniting and leveling off the cultural differences the Soviet period disrupted intraregional spatial features. The new republics’ borders – even though they were more of symbolic (‘administrative’) nature – cut through established communities and patterns of exchange. For over 70 years there have been three actors in any cross-border exchange – two (or more) local participants and ‘the Union’s center’ serving as a middleman and arbiter. Sometimes this framework functioned reasonably smoothly, if only at keeping problems under control rather than looking for sustainable solutions (i.e., the Ferghana Valley at the junction of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan), but oftentimes decisions were made without paying much attention to ‘local conditions’. This created issues that would come to the fore after the fall of the Soviet Union, and independent republics as actors in the new supra-regional system of international relations would have to start looking for solutions. The Aral Sea ecological disaster provides one example.

The dissolution of the USSR in 1991 was another traumatic event. The accumulated experience and adjustments made for

‘Soviet’ conditions became irrelevant, and re-establishing communications between neighbors – now newly independent – proved to be a formidable challenge. With economic woes, nationalist and xenophobic flare-ups threatening to engulf the whole area in armed conflict, one of the solutions suggested by Kazakhstan’s first President Nazarbayev in the mid-1990s was the *Eurasian theory*. It was first developed in the early 20th century by an eclectic group of thinkers who explored the links between geographic conditions, ethnic composition and cultural patterns. The doctrine remains contested, and nowadays is prone to political manipulation. However, Mr Nazarbayev proposed it as a platform for “cooperation of the equal partners to reach the shared goals of economic prosperity” within the region. The perceived attempts by Russia – a participant in the Eurasian Economic Union, and seen by many as its ‘anchor’ – to widen the agenda to include issues ‘adjacent’ to purely economic tasks, are treated with suspicion, and at times like this dialogue slows down.

The Eurasian approach is not ideal, but it has been instrumental for tentatively addressing supra-national and state-specific development goals. Successful communication across borders remains crucially important in present-day Central Asia. It is illustrated by the fact that Kazakhstan’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs has a Department of All-Asia Cooperation and a Department of Eurasian Integration. Many a transborder issue in Central Asia has multiple actors and contradicting interests at play, as illustrated by the demarcation of the Caspian Sea borders (tentative agreement reached in 2018 after 26 years of negotiations), so finding a way to balance them is crucially important. This balance is bound to increase in importance as the ‘One Belt-One Road’ strategy is beginning to advance. An unencumbered and transparent flow of goods lauded as a hallmark of the OBOR approach depends a lot on Central Asian inter-state cooperation in building cordial enough relations and the necessary infrastructure for that flow, and addressing the ‘shadowy’ issues of cross-border exchanges. The Republic of Kazakhstan’s Military Doctrine points out “the potential for conflicts in Central Asia due to variety of factors: instability in Afghanistan, tense socio-political situation in the region, unresolved border and water-sharing issues,

economic, religious and other contradictions with the mechanisms for their rectifying still lacking. Drug trafficking and illegal migration have gained transnational character”.

A few recent examples – such as closing down Kazakhstan-Kyrgyzstan border crossing points for a few weeks in the fall of 2018 or continuing tensions on the Kyrgyz-Uzbek border (portions of which remain riddled with land mines) – illustrate the difficulties in finding common ground. According to ‘The Diplomat’, “the regional integration promised by the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) – Nazarbayev’s idea in the first place – is discredited by the perception that relationships between its Central Asian members can turn on a dime”. The Law on ‘State Borders of the Republic of Kazakhstan’ – one of the first ones promulgated in the early days of independence – states that “establishing and maintaining relations with neighboring states, regulating the activities in border areas (including related to water resources) and in the international transborder logistics areas within Kazakhstan’s territory is governed by the security goals of the Republic of Kazakhstan and international security, mutually beneficial all-round cooperation with neighboring states, principles of peaceful, non-violent resolution of border issues”. Four other Central Asian states have something similar in their codes of law. The legal foundation is here, but opening and maintaining a dialogue on cross-border issues requires visionaries, indeed. Considering that, besides their function as formal ‘dividers’, borders may very well be lines that separate what is different, but not incompatible, this task – shared by the whole community of Central Asian states – is bound to increase in importance.

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Notes

- 1 Bogaturov, A. (ed.) 2011. *Mezhdunarodnye Otnosheniya v Tsentral'noi Azii: Sobytiya I Documenty [International Relations in Central Asia: Events and Documents]*, p.28. Moskva: Aspekt Press