

## **Beyond the Geopolitical Chessboard: New Ways of Theorizing the International Relations of Central Asia<sup>1</sup>**

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### **Abstract**

For a long time, Central Asia has been seen as a region divided by conflict, insecurity, and competition, lacking comprehensive cooperation between its countries. Writings on the region often focused on the influence of external powers, institutions, and norms they created. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the independence of the Central Asian republics, discursive framing of the region has repeatedly relied on the notion of the Great Game/New Great Game, a competition between major powers for regional influence. This portrayed Central Asian nations as passive participants in international relations, objects of international relations, pawns on a geopolitical chessboard. Now, with the intraregional process of power transition and the internally initiated process of strengthening regional integration through consultative meetings of the heads of state of the Central Asian republics, there have also been changes in the theorizing of regional international relations. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to demonstrate the main emerging ways of re-theorizing Central Asia in this field. To this end, the article will present the primary approaches for reconceptualizing the region, with a particular emphasis on several theoretical frameworks and concepts. These include Buranelli's perspective on Central Asia as an "international society", Dadabaev's advocacy for the "decolonization of Central Asian international relations," Fazendeiro's concept of "power as togetherness", and Dzhuraev's "3-i's model."

### **Keywords:**

geopolitics, New Great Game, IR theories, Central Asia retheorized, "international society", "decolonization of knowledge", "power as togetherness", "3-i's model"

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## **Introduction**

There is no single, universally accepted definition of Central Asia (CA). The understanding of its boundaries has changed over time, influenced by historical-political contexts, regional social circumstances, and the relationships between various rulers, political units, and centres of power. This has resulted in different names for the region, such as Transaxonia, Turkestan, and Central Asia, each reflecting different geographical scopes and highlighting that the concept of Central Asia is more a social and political construct than a fixed geographical area. Nevertheless, the most common definition in the literature defines Central Asia as the territory of the five former Soviet Central Asian republics: Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan (Artman and Diener 2022, 135-140)

Brzezinski (1998) compared Central Asia to the Balkans due to its history of instability and potential for conflict. His analogy suggests that “Eurasian Balkans” (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia, and Afghanistan), with its own complex ethnic structure, unresolved border disputes, and history of Soviet authoritarian rule, has the potential for similar outbreaks of violence. Additionally, the region's strategic location and wealth of natural resources makes it an area of competition for influence by major powers, further raising the risk of instability (Brzezinski 1998, 123-150).

Commonly, Central Asia has been viewed in this manner, as a space divided by conflict, insecurity, instability, cleavages, and rivalry, regardless of how its borders were understood and spatialized (Karabayeva 2021, 25-26).

However, although this view of the Central Asian region is in some aspects grounded in empirical evidence, in relation to the practice of regional international relations, there are completely opposite facts that significantly affect the new dynamics of international relations in the region. This refers primarily to intra-regional changes, especially concerning the transition of power in the Central Asian republics and the initiation of consultative meetings among the heads of state aimed at improving regional connectivity and strengthening regional identity. Such processes have led to changes within the Central Asian region, particularly in the foreign policy behaviour of individual states, thereby impacting wider intra-regional relations.

Importantly, the aforementioned changes at the empirical level in the Central Asian region not only confirm existing theoretical explanations of international relations in the region, which critique the dominant view of the region as a battleground for

great power competition, but also demonstrate that newer approaches to theorizing interstate processes in Central Asia possess significant explanatory potential. The main critiques in this body of literature highlight the overemphasis of systemic IR theories on major global players and external influences, neglecting the agency of Central Asian states, while also critiquing monocausal and structural explanations that diminish regional agency, overlook local norms and institutions, marginalize local perspectives, and perpetuate reductionist views that oversimplify foreign policy dynamics (Buranelli 2019; Dadabaev 2022; Fazendeiro 2020; Dzhuraev 2021).

Recent literature on Central Asia indicates a departure from a purely geopolitical paradigm and concepts such as rivalry, domination, and spheres of influence (New Great Game). Instead, Central Asian states are increasingly recognized as active agents shaping regional integration according to their national interests (Marat, 2021).

Building on the points mentioned above, the goal of this paper is to present several authors and their works from a larger group who theorize international relations in Central Asia differently than the dominant perspectives in existing literature. The intention of this paper is not to dismiss earlier approaches, particularly those relying on the geopolitical paradigm or the concept of the New Great Game, as lacking explanatory potential for international relations in Central Asia. Instead, the paper argues that these approaches are often limited and overlook other important and influential factors.

In this context, the paper will present theoretical approaches and conceptual frameworks from selected authors to illustrate new ways of theorizing international relations in Central Asia in order to understand Central Asia's changing regional dynamics. One approach uses the English School's concept of "international society" to explain Central Asia's order and stability through norms, institutions, and informal rules (Buranelli 2019). Another advocates decolonizing international relations by integrating regional traditions and challenging Western and Russian-centric perspectives, promoting local approaches to concepts like sovereignty and modernity (Dadabaev 2022). A different perspective views power as a collective capacity shaped by shared norms and collective action, challenging dominance-focused narratives (Fazendeiro 2020). Finally, an approach employing analytical eclecticism integrates ideas, interests, and institutions to capture the dynamic nature of foreign policy decisions (Dzhuraev 2021).

### **Changes in the Intra-Regional Context of Central Asia**

The first group of changes that took place in the region are the processes of the transition of power in the Central Asian republics. It is important to note that in many cases, this did not signify a change in the character of the government system, but rather personal changes in the most important institution of the system—the president of the republic. The transition of power has occurred in almost all Central Asian republics, including Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan. Only in Tajikistan is President Emomali Rahmon, who has been in that position since 1994, still in power.

These transitions brought changes in certain aspects of the social, political, and economic contexts, as well as in foreign policy approaches and cooperation with other countries. This has resulted in improved relations between the countries of the region and even sparked the process of resolving decades-long border and other disputes. Uzbekistan and President Mirziyoyev stand out as the best example (Tolipov 2022). Uzbekistan's cooperation agenda is being reshaped by domestic policy changes that critically re-evaluate its post-independence development, leading to economic liberalization, political reforms, and greater openness. This shift has altered national self-perception and influenced the regional environment, changing the political discourse from competition to cooperation (Dadabaev 2022, 80-81).

This further triggered another significant change: for the first time, there is a self-initiated and internally driven effort to strengthen mutual regional connections and create a stronger Central Asian identity. This effort aims to establish a regional order based on dialogue and trust without external influence or initiatives from outside the region (Buranelli 2021). This is exemplified by the consultative meetings of the heads of state of all five republics. Previously, the countries of the Central Asian region were mostly connected through forms of cooperation that were driven by external actors such as Russia, China, the USA, and the EU. These initiatives often did not involve all Central Asian countries together and lacked a comprehensive regional approach.

Regional cooperation gained momentum under Uzbekistan's new president, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, who prioritized good relations with neighbouring countries for stability and sustainable development. In 2017, he proposed regular high-level consultation meetings, leading to the first such meeting of all five Central Asian presidents in 2018 in Astana, followed by subsequent meetings in Tashkent, Ashgabat, Cholpon-Ata and Dushanbe. At the Cholpon-Ata meeting, the presidents signed several agreements, including a roadmap for regional cooperation and a green agenda program. Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan signed a treaty of

friendship and cooperation, with Tajikistan and Turkmenistan pledging future accession (Kassenova 2023, 16-17).

Regionalism, as an institutionalized process of integration, is exemplified by European integration, which served as a model for regions worldwide, including Asia. However, Central Asia did not achieve the same level of integration and institutionalization due to the EU model requiring both economic and political integration. Instead, regional organizations and mechanisms in Central Asia resemble ASEAN's model, which focuses on enhancing economic cooperation without compromising the sovereignty of nation-states with supranational elements (Cornell and Starr 2018; Starr 2019)

Buranelli (2023) notes that Central Asia has its own ideas of informal regionalism and order, which do not necessarily follow the integrationist dynamics seen in Europe and other parts of the world. Consultations, consensus, and informality remain central to Central Asian regionalism, though elements of institutionalization are emerging. Annual summits, the creation of the Council of National Coordinators for Consultative Meetings, and a regional diplomatic award signify a growing commitment to stronger regional cooperation.

### **Rethinking Central Asia: Buranelli's English School Approach**

Filippo Costa Buranelli (2019, 237-239) in his chapter titled "The Heartland of IR Theory? Central Asia as an 'International Society' Between Realism and Liberalism" uses the English School's (ES) concept of "international society" to explain the region's order, stability, and coexistence as a balance between competition and cooperation in Central Asia. He argues that Central Asia cannot be viewed solely through the lens of realism and competition; instead, norms, institutions, and informal rules play significant roles in regulating relations between states. He argues that such an approach can shed better light on intra-regional dynamics that are often neglected by other theoretical approaches. Buranelli (2019, 240) contends that world politics is not a 'black and white' realm, where states either compete or cooperate mechanically pushed by structural forces as it is the case with neorealism and neoliberalism.

According to him, Central Asia is best theorized as an international society in which order, stability, and coexistence are *viae mediae* between competition and cooperation, far from being a Hobbesian state of nature marked by continuous conflict or a peaceful, Kantian world made up of liberal democracies (239).

The ES, like neorealists and neoliberalists, maintains that states exist in an anarchic environment, without an overarching authority. Buranelli (2019, 251) adds that states are still capable of maintaining order, coexistence, and achieving a minimal degree of cooperation by abiding by very few norms, rules, and institutions in what is known as an 'international society'. In Central Asia "relations are aimed at ensuring coexistence and limited to *ad hoc* cooperation on given matters (transit of goods, water-sharing, border definition, limited trade, diplomatic resolution of skirmishes, and intercultural programs), and not at full-fledged integration" (ibid.).

Challenging the dominant (neo)realist framework, Buranelli's (2019, 253) research highlights norms and institutions that establish a degree of order in Central Asia. These include references to sovereignty, diplomacy, non-intervention principles, and international law, along with informal practices like president-to-president dialogues, problem-solving phone calls, and seniority-based relations among elites. These elements indicate a web of normative dynamics that sustain the region.

Buranelli (2019, 256; 243-250) further contends that the institutions of Central Asian international society—sovereignty, international law, diplomacy, authoritarianism, and great power management—hold different meanings in this region. Sovereignty is more rigid and less flexible, diplomacy depends more on strong inter-presidential contacts than on multilateralism, and authoritarianism is not only accepted but has become an institution in itself.

Buranelli (2019, 254; 256) argues for a methodological approach to International Relations (IR) research in Central Asia that moves away from the traditional analytical, or "mind-world dualism," where concepts from the global level are imposed on the region without considering its unique characteristics and its unique social relations. Instead, he advocates for an interpretivist approach that focuses on understanding how institutions and practices are conceptualized and implemented by local actors creating a basis for a sociology of IR that reflects socio-behavioural differences on a regional level.

Buranelli (2019, 257) suggests differentiating regions based on the formality or informality of their practices and institutions. He proposes Central Asia as a case study to explore this approach further and to identify "regional international societies" where global norms are either weakly internalized or replaced by local customs and informal practices.

### **Dadabaev's Challenge to the Coloniality of Knowledge in Central Asian IR**

In his book "Decolonizing Central Asian International Relations: Beyond Empires", Dadabaev (2022, 150) argues that existing theoretical frameworks in International Relations (IR) applied to Central Asia either heavily rely on positivist and rationalist approaches (commonly found among realists, neo-realists, liberalists, neo-liberalists) which emphasize rivalry, domination, spheres of influence, and 'divide and conquer' rhetoric, or they attempt to transcend these rationalist perspectives by focusing on local interpretations of various concepts and terms.

Dadabaev (2022, 15) suggests that the region of Central Asia has been turned into a 'knowledge consumer' rather than a 'generator.' By prioritizing a dogmatic inheritance of 'knowledge' and 'meaning' over knowledge creation, the discipline of international relations in the CA region falls into a 'coloniality of knowledge.' This is partly due to the Soviet past, where Marxist-Leninist ideas were imposed as 'faith' rather than operationalizable political platforms. In the post-Soviet setting, Marxist-Leninist interpretations were replaced by Western interpretations, treating the CA region as a mere consumer of Western knowledge.

The book underscores the necessity of decolonizing international relations in the Central Asian region to achieve a fair representation of regional states in global affairs. According to Dadabaev (2022, 1-12), this involves exposing the concepts and stereotypes imposed on the region by dominant assumptions in contemporary international relations. By offering empirical grounding for alternative perspectives, the author challenges Western international relations' tendency to replicate the errors of Russian Marxists in attributing a narrative of modernity to the region. He highlights the need to integrate Central Asia into the broader International Relations (IR) discipline by valuing knowledge production rooted in regional traditions and approaches. This approach does not dismiss Western IR advancements but calls for recognizing and incorporating regional perspectives to give Central Asian actors a voice and agency. Currently, non-regional actors like the EU, the US, Russia, and China dominate the narrative on CA politics. To address this imbalance, CA voices should be central in discussions about the region, allowing their unique perspectives to enrich IR discourse and promote a more inclusive and representative body of knowledge.

Contemporary approaches to Central Asia suggest that the end of the Soviet Union did not terminate colonization but merely shifted the narrative of 'modernity' from a Russian perspective to a Western one. These societies are continually framed within a dualistic system: 'modern vs. traditional,' 'agricultural vs. industrial,' and 'democratic vs. authoritarian.' Their non-European (non-Russian, non-Western)

traditions and approaches are often relegated to the past, with the future portrayed as aligned with 'global' and 'universal' values and norms (Dadabaev 2022, 15-16).

Dadabaev (2022, 152) argues that attempts should be made to counter the tendency to accept the 'meanings' of concepts from other regions and apply those 'meanings' to the Central Asian regional context. He argues that the Marxist-driven theoretical platform, prevalent among Central Asian scholars in the late Soviet and immediate post-Soviet context, was a double-colonial construct. It was initially framed around European experiences, applied to Russia, and then reintroduced in the Central Asia realm, shaping new layers of colonial ideas. The unconditional acceptance of the Western version of the state and progress, coupled with the rejection of the Central Asian past as immature and transitional, leads to the rejection of the CA 'self' and the possibility of alternative visions of progress, sovereignty, cooperation, and engagement.

Both Western and Russian perspectives disregard the region's unique model of modernity and progress, which doesn't necessarily align with the modern nation-state, ethnicity, and state-building. Central Asian behaviour is often guided by notions of neighbourhood, brotherhood, informal community of states, and regional norms, rarely acknowledged in mainstream IR theories (Dadabaev 2022). Dadabaevs (2022, 5) study emphasizes the need to move beyond state-centric notions of sovereignty, power politics, domination, democratization, and modernity, or their complete rejection. Instead, it advocates for a 'reconciliation of diverse perspectives' aiming 'to achieve mutual learning'. There is a need to use Central Asian cases to advance Western theoretical assumptions about state behaviour. The major problem is not the reflection of Western and European experiences on Central Asian cases, but the claim of their global and universal applicability. This book joins the call for a need to pursue global IR with disciplinary inquiries that focus on pluralistic universality and respect for diversity and agency while negating exceptionalism (Dadabaev 2022, 16).

According to Dadabaev (2022), Central Asian states should be seen as active agents capable of shaping their foreign policies and generating knowledge, on par with global powers like Russia, China, the US, and the EU. Related to this problem are the concepts proposed as paradigms defining the nature of relations in Central Asia. The most enduring one is the narrative of the Great Game. However, there is a growing understanding that this image is no longer empirically valid. According to Dadabaev (2022, 20), narratives of various schemes in the Central Asia require successful interlocutors between rationalism and critical post-positivist approaches. While these interlocutors have Western intellectual roots, they need to be equipped



to account for the social construction of relations, identity, norms, and the changing nature of the state.

In this process of constructing norms and identities, the notions of 'practicality' and 'functionality' are key for understanding the construction of relations among Central Asian states (Dadabaev 2022, 20). Dadabaev (2022, 22) emphasizes the importance of neighbourhood as a psychological and identity-rooted notion defining the Central Asia 'selves' as parts of a regional identity. Informal structures of neighbourhood, informal consultations, and the institution of political elders are based on shared norms of enduring, collective decision making, brotherhood (fraternity). These norms shape the Central Asian identity and define how Central Asian states construct their interactions with others. Central Asian states have demonstrated agency in constructing their regional order, albeit within the constraints imposed by historical, geopolitical, and economic factors.

The concept of neighbourhood is central „long-term platform for interactions, which is neither formalized nor operationalized in terms of structure (Dadabaev 2022, 23).“ It extends beyond geographical proximity to encompass shared history, culture, and social interactions. This notion of neighbourhood has facilitated the development of informal mechanisms of cooperation, such as regular summits of heads of state and subnational diplomacy among regional governors (Dadabaev 2022, 25).

### **Fazendeiro's Challenge to the Dominance Paradigm in Central Asia: “power as togetherness”**

Bernardo Teles Fazendeiro (2020, 1) in his article "Domination and Togetherness: Conceptions of Power in Central Asia's International Politics" begins by highlighting that in the academic literature on Central Asian international relations, the "struggle for dominance" is the most commonly represented conception of power. As he notes, "the struggle for dominance remains one of the more systematic ways to depict Central Asian international relations (ibid.)." This concept, which gained prominence in the 1990s under the "New Great Game" label, equates the regional dynamics to a contest involving great powers (the United States, Russia, and China) and other influential states (India, Pakistan, and Iran) competing for material wealth, particularly natural resources. While still a prevalent analogy, it is increasingly criticized for exaggerating the influence of external powers and overlooking regional agency (Fazendeiro 2020). Additionally, Fazendeiro (2020, 1-2) notes that it perpetuates misleading geopolitics, benefiting local incumbents who invoke external threats to maintain their positions.

According to this author, different conceptions of power significantly influence the understanding of international relations. He contends that these different conceptions of power offer distinct interpretive frameworks for analysing international politics, particularly in regions like Central Asia, where both forms of power are evident. The author builds on two classical manifestations of power: *potestas* (power as domination) and *potentia* (power as togetherness). *Potestas* focuses on individual or group dominance through coercion and strategic positioning, emphasizing a logic of instrumentality. Conversely, *potentia* highlights the capacity for collective action based on shared norms and values, emphasizing a logic of performance and logic of appropriateness (Fazendeiro 2020). Fazendeiro (2020, 1-3) draws on Hannah Arendt's ideas, suggesting that political actions are influenced by collective norms and the moral principles of the community. Words, ideas, and symbols play a crucial role in constituting meaning and guiding actions. This conception of power as togetherness highlights how communities are built on shared ideas and practices, reaching beyond the elite's preoccupation with retaining power.

According to him, while several scholarly depictions have moved away from certain aspects of the New Great Game, they still adhere to its underlying spirit of domination. Fazendeiro (2020, 3-6) uses Roy Allison's concept of "virtual regionalism" to show how Central Asian leaders prioritize regime security and reinforce dominance through regional organizations, Kathleen Collins to highlight how local elites use patrimonial networks for survival and enrichment through corruption and nepotism, and Alexander Cooley's "Great Games, Local Rules" to demonstrate how local actors manipulate great powers for their advantage, all emphasizing the spirit of domination in Central Asian politics.

The author argues that there's another way to see this: power can also be about cooperation and a sense of belonging to a common region. Countries work together on things like border control, establishing regional organizations, and managing natural resources. This cooperation helps create a sense of shared identity and strengthens the states involved. State actions are not solely driven by material interests or coercion but also by the desire to establish a sense of belonging. This broader perspective challenges the simplistic view of Central Asian politics as dominated by the pursuit of dominance and highlights the importance of collective ideas and practices in shaping regional dynamics (Fazendeiro 2020).

To support his argument, Fazendeiro (2020, 6-7) highlights several contributions to the literature that demonstrate how emphasizing togetherness can mitigate the pervasive spirit of political domination typically invoked. As Fazendeiro explains, Nick Megoran argues in "Nationalism in Central Asia" that the tensions between

Central Asian states stem primarily from their distinct nationalist visions (nationalistic ideology), rather than solely from hegemonic ambitions or patrimonial politics. While acknowledging the role of patrimonial politics, Megoran asserts that focusing solely on patronage networks overlooks deeper ideological factors at play in regional interactions. He emphasizes that beyond economic or security interests, nationalist ideologies significantly shape the positions of state actors and often hinder bilateral cooperation between countries in Central Asia.

Fazendeiro also examines the perspectives of other authors. According to his analysis, John Heathershaw and Edward Schatz (*Paradox of Power: The Logics of State Weakness in Eurasia*) argue that states in Central Asia should not be viewed merely as entities with a monopoly on violence. Instead, they contend that states also perform roles to satisfy audiences, and these performances can maintain order and legitimacy even without formal benchmarks of power. Heathershaw further argues that performances of the state in the international arena are significant and impact how local and international actors perceive and interact with the state (Fazendeiro 2020, 7).

According to Fazendeiro (2020, 7-8), Alessandra Russo's work "Regions in Transition in the Former Soviet Area: Ideas and Institutions in the Making" introduces a framework that reinterprets Central Asia's international politics by challenging the notion that former Soviet regional organizations are merely tools of domination. Russo argues that these organizations and states mutually shape each other in what she terms co-constitution. This means that regional organizations, like the Commonwealth of Independent States, not only help states secure political networks but also contribute to defining the region by fostering a sense of belonging. As Fazendeiro (2020, 7-8) noted, Russo concludes that while power struggles are part of the regional dynamic, cooperation at various levels contributes significantly to Central Asia's cohesion as a region beyond mere domination dynamics.

### **Overcoming Monocausality: Dzhuraev's 3-i's Model for Central Asia**

Shairbek Dzhuraev (2021, 232-234) in his chapter "Domestic Sources of Foreign Policy in Central Asia" begins by grouping the literature on international relations in the Central Asian region into three categories based on different disciplines: international relations, foreign policy analysis, and comparative politics. Actually, he identifies two main groups of literature on international relations in Central Asia: one that predominantly relies on systemic theories of international relations, and

another that relies on foreign policy analysis (FP) of using domestic sources of international relations.

Dzhuraev (2021, 232;241) continues with his criticism of both sets of literature and academic works, pointing out that both lack broader explanatory potential, or that their explanatory power is at least limited. According to him, both groups are characterized by monocausality and structural explanations of foreign policy and are limited by the domestic-external dichotomy.

The first group, which relies on systemic theories of international relations, especially neorealism, views international relations in Central Asia through the lens of either the relations between major geopolitical players or the relations of Central Asian states with those actors. This approach typically views the agency of the Central Asian republics in international relations as limited, seeing them as objects of international relations due to their status as "small" and "weak" states. If Central Asian states are considered small and weak, their foreign policy agendas are primarily focused on international alignment with greater players (Dzhuraev 2021, 233-234).

When it comes to the second strand of literature, Dzhuraev (2021, 232) argues that it originated from dissatisfaction with the theoretical limitations of geopolitics-focused arguments but seldom escaped its own restrictive framework of political ruling regimes. According to Dzhuraev (2021), the focus on ruling regimes in Central Asian political studies is well-founded, given that these states have not experienced peaceful transitions of power through elections in the thirty years since their independence. However, Dzhuraev (2021, 239-240) argues that an exclusive focus on regime interests can limit the understanding of Central Asian foreign policies in several ways.

Firstly, viewing regimes as unitary and rational actors merely replaces one presumed unitary actor (the state) with another (the regime), without justifying the assumption of their rational and predictable behaviour. This perspective risks simplifying the complexity of who actually constitutes the ruling regime at any given time. Secondly, while the shift from IR-centric views to domestic ruling regimes aims to incorporate domestic politics into the analysis, it often neglects the intricacies of domestic political dynamics, assuming that external threats are the primary concern for these regimes. Finally, the focus on regime interests tends to promote monocausal explanations, limiting the scope of foreign policy analysis to a single variable and ignoring the multifaceted nature of foreign policy actions.

He proposes using analytical eclecticism as an alternative and the 3-i's model to provide complex understanding of the factors at play. This approach would integrate ideas, interests, and institutions into a comprehensive analytical

framework, offering a better understanding of foreign policy actors and actions. By considering the interaction of these three elements, researchers can better capture the complex nature of foreign policy decisions in Central Asia. This framework allows for a deeper exploration of how individual leaders' ideas and identities influence foreign policy, how regime changes impact decision-making processes, and how personal motivations and interpretations of political environments shape foreign policy actions. Analytical eclecticism, therefore, provides a more holistic approach to studying Central Asian foreign policies, moving beyond the constraints of monocausal explanations (Dzhuraev 2021, 239-241).

## **Conclusion**

The long-standing lack of clear indicators of more serious regional integration in terms of institutionalization in Central Asia, coupled with its strategic geographical position, wealth of resources, and proximity to major regional powers, has contributed to the perception of the Central Asian region as historically unstable, fragmented, and strongly influenced by external forces competing for dominance. Central Asia has long been seen as a "pathologically" non-cooperative region (Karabayeva 2021, 25-26).

The prevailing narrative of Central Asia as a volatile region prone to instability and conflict, often framed within the "Eurasian Balkans" or "New Great Game" paradigms (great power rivalry), while rooted in historical realities, has increasingly become an oversimplification.

The analysis presented here underscores the significance of intra-regional developments in reshaping Central Asia's trajectory. The transition of power in several republics, coupled with Uzbekistan's pivot towards regional cooperation, has fostered a new era of intra-state relations characterized by increased dialogue, trust-building, and a nascent sense of regional identity. This shift is evident in the establishment of consultative meetings among the heads of state and the growing emphasis on regional cooperation initiatives in many areas.

Likewise, other approaches and explanations have begun to appear in the literature, offering different theoretical and methodological starting points for a more thorough understanding of interstate (international) relations in this region.

In this paper, we first highlight the basic shortcomings in the so far dominant views and analyses of regional international relations in Central Asia, based on the works of several selected authors who critically examine the weaknesses and limitations of traditional understandings of the region. According to them, the geopolitical

paradigm, systemic theories of international relations (neorealism and neoliberalism), as well as previous works in the field of foreign policy analysis (which rely on domestic factors of foreign policy behaviour and relations), have limited explanatory potential regarding Central Asian IR. There are several dominant points of criticism of the previous literature and approaches to IR in Central Asia, which we noticed in the new group of authors analysed in the paper. First, they criticize earlier literature for overemphasizing only one factor (variable) as influential, whether it is the influence of great powers and their hegemony, internal factors such as the struggle for influence, dominance and rivalry between the Central Asian states themselves, or the overemphasis of domestic factors such as the role of regime-centric or elite-driven factors (patrimonial regimes, security concerns, and personality cults) as determinants of the foreign policy behaviour of CA states and, consequently, international relations in the region (Buranelli 2019; Dadabaev 2022; Fazendeiro 2020; Dzhuraev 2021).

These authors further argue that the CA region cannot be viewed only through the lens of realism, characterized solely by competition and conflict, and that the propositions of systemic IR theories are monocausal and dominantly focused only on structural factors that mechanically and deterministically influence the states of the region. According to these authors, previous approaches to the region are dominantly based on rationalist points of view, while ideational and normative ones are left out. They dominantly emphasize dynamics of dominance, "power as dominance", and "logic of instrumentality" (Fazendeiro 2020). According to them, such approaches significantly lead to the uncritical imposition of top-down external concepts onto the region in explanations of regional dynamics in CA without taking into account its unique characteristics and distinct social relations, where the region becomes a recipient of knowledge rather than its generator (Dadabaev 2022). The consequence of such approaches is the practical denial of any agency of CA republics in their own region, viewing them as objects of international relations due to their status as "small" and "weak" states (Dzhuraev 2021).

To address the shortcomings of the aforementioned approaches, the authors analysed in this paper propose different theoretical-methodological approaches, concepts, and explanations that, according to them, have greater explanatory power. They suggest moving towards an "inside-out" approach to the region, emphasizing the need to recognize the agency of Central Asian states in shaping their foreign policies. This involves moving beyond the limitations of established theoretical frameworks by adapting them to the unique context of the region.

While traditional approaches to the Central Asian region have merit, the region is also characterized by cooperation, the absence of major interstate conflicts, and the

existence of local regional informal rules and norms that maintain stability. The foreign policy behaviour of Central Asian states is often guided by notions of neighbourhood, brotherhood, and regional norms, which are rarely acknowledged in mainstream IR theories (Dadabaev 2022). Therefore, the authors we analysed argue that it is necessary to understand and explain international relations in Central Asia through theoretical and methodological approaches that include analytical eclecticism, interpretivism, multicausalism, and pluralistic universality while respecting diversity and negating exceptionalism (region) (Buranelli 2019; Dadabaev 2022; Fazendeiro 2020; Dzhuraev 2021).

The concepts that these authors believe have greater explanatory power include "international society", "power as togetherness", and the "logic of appropriateness", according to which ideas, norms, interests, and formal and informal institutions are integrated into a comprehensive analytical framework (Buranelli 2019, Fazendeiro 2020). These authors advocate for an approach that focuses on how institutions and practices are conceptualized and implemented by local actors in Central Asia. In Central Asia, institutions hold different meanings, and global norms are often weakly internalized or replaced by local customs and informal practices. This perspective values knowledge production rooted in regional traditions and approaches, and it does not dismiss Western or any other IR explanations. Instead, it calls for recognizing and incorporating regional perspectives to give Central Asian actors a voice and agency (Buranelli 2019; Dadabaev 2022; Fazendeiro 2020; Dzhuraev 2021).

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