

Introduction: Shifting Security and Power Constellations in Central Asia and the Caucasus

Marie-Sophie Borchelt Camêlo and Aziz Elmuradov

This volume brings together scholars who seek to inquire into the course of post-Soviet political transformation across Central Asia and the Caucasus by investigating the changing security and power constellations. By synthesizing the role of changing regional and global security and power constellations, our contributors offer a nuanced and well-informed analysis of how the countries of post-Soviet Central Eurasia navigate their paths across the rocky terrain of world politics. Our authors, international and regional experts from a variety of backgrounds, provide a thorough and up-to-date overview of contemporary Central Eurasian politics, identifying key themes, trends, and trajectories of transformation and analyzing the conceptual underpinnings of security and power as discourse products of world politics. Key topics include autocratic diffusion and regime security in Central Asia, the strategic situation in Afghanistan, China's changing role in Central Asian security, governance problems in Kyrgyzstan as a rentier state, the destructive role of internal security services in the context of democratic transition in Armenia, e-justice and cyber security in Kyrgyzstan, and the politics of authoritarian neoliberalism and labor resistance in Kazakhstan. By drawing on a diverse literature, the contributors seek to engage theoretically and empirically with discourses of security and power while attending to their numerous intersections and overlaps and the ways in which they are reflected in politics and policies across the region. Rather than aiming to develop a uniform model or a common framework, the volume explicitly seeks to retain theoretical and conceptual openness. Equally importantly, the contributors focus on changing security and power constellations on the ground while keeping the structuration of the broader global political field in view—the geopolitical tensions, local conflicts and power dynamics, and regional balancing strategies that underlie the processes of transformation in Central Eurasia.

At a time when world politics finds itself at critical junctures in a number of ways and the talk is of a new world order evolving though with no end in sight, it is increasingly important to understand how post-Soviet Central

Asia and the Caucasus are on their way to becoming the cross-roads of an emergent Eurasia and why we should, in our endeavor to understand their story of transformation, refer to new insights and perspectives. Political developments of recent years—violent protests and subsequent political reforms in Kazakhstan, the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan, the escalation of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, subsequent clashes and the dissolution of Nagorno-Karabakh, power transitions, aggravation of the cross-border conflict between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan—are indicators of a region that is dynamic, diverse but at the same time retains considerable commonality. Not only is the region dynamic, the broader global environment is as well. In light of geopolitical shift in post-Soviet space—most notably in light of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine—the current state of security and power constellations in Central Asia and the Caucasus and their potential trajectories generate great interest among scholars.

The study of Central Asia and the Caucasus is predominantly concentrated around central and prominent themes such as post-Soviet transition, state- and nation-building, international security, neopatrimonialism, authoritarian rule, and the authoritarian–liberal democracy continuum. The security approaches toward understanding these regions are manifold. Central Asia and the Caucasus are predominantly viewed through the prism of international security and regionalism and these regions are portrayed as endangered by geopolitical tensions, local conflicts, and lack of self-organized frameworks for regional security (Allison 2004; Cooley 2012; Mayer 2021). It is argued that “in view of their power deficits the Central Asian states themselves are not prepared to manage their regional security to any greater extent” (Mayer 2021: 227). Security cooperation in Central Asia “involves primarily bilateral or multilateral frameworks nurtured by external state and nonstate partners ... including Russia and China. In contrast, multilateral cooperation among the five states remains weak” (ibid.).

The mainstream accounts inquire into conventional security approaches in which self-interested actors operate and pursue their political aims, with the state figuring as by far the main referent of security. Despite yielding a fair amount productive research, however, the conventional approaches to security issues have faced significant criticism from scholars with diverse intellectual origins and perspectives. Various novel, critical, and integrative approaches to security have increasingly challenged traditional conceptualizations of security threats. Scholars have pleaded for the security paradigm to be reconceptualized and the notion of security to be extended to incorporate a broader range of threats such as migration

and climate change as well as a broader spectrum of actors across the board (Lemon 2018; Beyer and Kojobekova 2019; Vakulchuk et al. 2022; Mamadshoeva 2019). There has been a call for more attention to be paid to a series of important connections linking security with multiple other domains. For example, the idea of separating state and society has been critiqued on the basis of there being a need “to bridge the discourses on security and civil society” (Schuck and Vasilache 2021: 110). It has been noted that there is a tension between stability- and transformation-oriented rationalities, especially with regard to security issues. This tension finds its ultimate reflection in the idea of separating state and society, which results in contradictory goals and dysfunctional consequences (Schuck and Vasilache 2021). As a consequence, the development of a free and independent civil society in these regions is being hampered by authoritarian and semi-authoritarian power structures. Even in the context of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Georgia, where civil society organizations enjoy relative freedom to carry out civic engagements, contestation tends to be minimized. In Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, and Armenia civil society organizations and their engagement are viewed, albeit in different ways and to different degrees, as a potentially destabilizing factor that could grow into instability.

Next, and concurrently, the subject of power and its multiple relations to security needs to be addressed. The contributors to this volume have their say on power and its different intersections with security from their respective theoretical perspectives. Grappling with the enormous demands of Leviathan, the laborious task of erecting a state apparatus throughout the post-Soviet period, Central Asia and the Caucasus have much in common. Their authoritarian, semi-authoritarian, and hybrid power constellations continue to endure behind democratic facades and demonstrate a significant degree of resilience. Despite significant political transformation and power transfer, authoritarian and semi-authoritarian rule endures. It has been observed with respect to power transfer in authoritarian political systems in Central Asia that “transitions at the top of the power hierarchy represent a caesura” that “can be accompanied by disintegration of the political system or even of the state’s unity” (Vasilache 2017: 25). “Because regularized procedures for the transfer of power are usually lacking, even when an autocrat dies of natural causes, his passing leads to an exceptional, transitional situation that is often highly precarious. Struggles over power and policy directions may erupt as well as those over key positions and the country’s future political orientation” (Vasilache 2017: 25).

In Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, transfer of power has taken place with great difficulty. In Kazakhstan, President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev vowed, in the wake of massive violent protests across the country in early 2022, to make major political changes and to reform the political system. As a result, substantial amendments to the constitution were introduced, which in effect put Kazakhstan on track to moving from being a super-presidential republic to a presidential republic with a strong parliament. In Kyrgyzstan the 2020 parliamentary elections, deemed to have had significant flaws, were accompanied by violent protests. Parliamentary elections were held at the turn of the power transition and paved the way for Sadyr Japarov to sidestep the basic law and declare himself acting president. Subsequently, the constitution was amended and approved in a referendum. In contrast to Kazakhstan, however, the constitutional changes expanded the power of the president while reducing that of the parliament. It has been argued that the constitutional amendments “move Kyrgyzstan away from a checks-and-balances system of semi-presidentialism towards a form of presidentialism that is close to authoritarian-style ‘crown-presidentialism’” (Partlett 2021: 1). Despite constitutional changes, or perhaps precisely because of the peculiar fact that they are handily amenable to adjustment and adaptation under questionable circumstances, authoritarian and semi-authoritarian hybrid systems in Central Asia continue to endure and operate in ways in which they are intimately conflated with security rationalities. As noted elsewhere, “security politics in Central Asia displays the relevance of sovereign security patterns” with a focus on “strengthening recently established statehood and sovereignty” [...] whereas “we can hardly detect any governmental security rationalities.” Instead, “we find a traditional and narrow definition of security; a monopolization of security policy in the hands of state governments and corresponding inter-government relations; the reliance on hierarchic, juridical and institution-based repression” (Vasilache 2019: 691–692).

Aijan Sharshenova (Chapter 1) argues that the authoritarian trend has gathered significant momentum in Central Asia. She explores the complex phenomena of autocratic diffusion and authoritarian learning, and provides an insightful analysis of the most recent political trajectories and dynamics in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan with an eye to governance structure, socioeconomic characteristics, state–society relations, and the geopolitical impact of their broader international environment. Sharshenova investigates the broader global implications of autocratic diffusion and illustrates how the Central Asian republics interact with each other at the regional level as well as in the context of their immediate

international neighbourhood with respect to pursuing economic cooperation, a security agenda, and political alliances. By providing a valuable contribution to the intricate dynamics of autocratic diffusion, her chapter relates to the ongoing academic and policy discussions on authoritarian learning and autocratic alliances.

Edward Lemon and Bradley Jardine (Chapter 2) examine China's role in Central Asia's security and the ways it has evolved over the past decade, which has brought several major developments and trends. The authors argue that China is using security governance as a means to extend its influence and exercise power in Central Asia. They show how China has, while charting an increasingly independent course in Central Asia and showing less deference to Russia, established a complex web of regional frameworks, trade agreements, educational exchanges, technology transfers, and training for local security services in the region. By establishing its first overseas military facility there (in Tajikistan) and by increasing its share of arms imports, China has built a growing footprint in the region's security sector. Central Asia has also proven to be a testing ground for China to develop its own *parallel order-building* and experiment with forms of security cooperation, increasingly without the region's traditional external hegemon Russia. These practices fit into China's vision of security governance which centers on building a loyal cadre of local leaders who share Beijing's vision with regard to trade, alternatives to Western liberal norms and values, and becoming politically aligned with China's security interests. The authors also argue that, despite growing dependence on China, the Central Asian republics are still exercising agency in their relations. The region's regimes have attempted to strengthen their long-standing multi-vector foreign policies to create a broad range of patrons offering public goods, security assistance and trade deals to enhance their sovereignty.

Farkhad Tolipov (Chapter 3) provides a conceptual analysis of the protracted war and peace-making efforts in Afghanistan. He argues that the international war and peace-making efforts in Afghanistan have hitherto been conceptually ill-defined in two important ways. The inefficiency and ineffectiveness of international peace-making efforts have to do to a significant extent with major misperceptions and misinterpretations of the actual rooted problems as well as a poor conceptual grasp of the situation on the ground in this war-torn country. According to the author, the strategic deadlock in war making is, in fact, equally related to common misperceptions and consequently to serious deficiencies in choosing proper strategies and approaches. As a result, the strategies of international forces

and local governments for peace-making have not undergone substantial modifications for many decades. Based on the realist theory of international relations and referring to numerous insights by Carl von Clausewitz, the author puts forward explanations for the strategic stalemate in war waging and the conceptual conundrum of peace-making in Afghanistan.

Akram Umarov (Chapter 4) inquires into the numerous structural and multidimensional links between the governance problems and development issues that affect Kyrgyzstan as a rentier state. He argues that there is a close connection between increasing rent and deteriorating governance as a result of the overwhelmingly top-down nature of development governance. Using a variety of indicators from international institutions, he seeks to investigate to what extent direct connections can be traced between changes in sources of government revenue and adjustments to governance and how ignorance of a bottom-up approach to development can negatively affect the country's resilience. To this end, the main research question is divided into three subquestions: (1) Why has Kyrgyzstan been facing problems such as high-level corruption, clientelism, together with low levels of accountability and submission to the rule of law, and generally inefficient governance plus severe economic problems despite receiving substantial external aid and implementing numerous development projects? (2) Why has Kyrgyzstan been unable to make effective use of the considerable aid and state revenues it has received to build resilience? (3) What is the connection between increasing revenues from different sources of rent such as external aid, gold exports, and leasing military bases, and increased authoritarianism and corruption, and degraded governance, stability, and economic development in Kyrgyzstan?

Aliia Maralbaeva (Chapter 5) shows the significance of e-justice transformation as part of an ongoing reform involving the digitalization of public services in Kyrgyzstan. On the one hand, implemented e-justice systems facilitate the openness of courts, business processes in courts, transparency, efficiency, and accessibility. On the other, they significantly increase the need for data storage and raise challenges and risks for privacy, confidentiality, and data security. As a result of the relatively recent application of e-justice systems in Kyrgyzstan, an integrated legal framework outlining the cybersecurity of e-justice transformation is still lacking. In light of this gap, the author explores national legislation, government strategies, and implemented e-justice systems to identify a successful balance between openness of courts and data protection.

Shalva Dzebisashvili and Lia Evoyan (Chapter 6) investigate why hybrid regimes, or semi-democracies in which democratic and autocratic features are mixed, are unable to complete the democratic transition to form stable institutions and full-fledged civil societies. They argue that, instead of solidifying democratic gains in the long term, hybrid regimes often fall into the trap of democratic backsliding. Semi-authoritarian hybrid regimes use their national security agencies to consolidate their newly acquired power after democratic transition and eventually fail to preclude the prospect of an authoritarian reversal. Using the case study of Armenia, one of the first nations in post-Soviet space to adopt key principles of democratic governance, they show convincingly how, despite expectations of radical democratic change and institutional transformation, the establishment of a patronage system, widespread corruption, political persecution and the monopolization of political power contributed to the stalling of democratic transformation and good governance. Dzebisashvili and Evoyan review the period of the last 30 years and attempts to uncover the major factors that contributed to this stalling notwithstanding multiple changes of political regimes and elites. They argue that the democratic backsliding has to be attributed primarily to the common pathologies shared by different (rival) political groups/elites and is strongly linked to the extensive use of internal security agencies to consolidate power (after political victory), persecute opponents and police politics. The old-fashioned security apparatus, inherited from, and built in accordance with, Soviet tradition, lurks behind what comes across as a new wave of democratic transformation.

Serik Beimenbetov, Zumrat Sanakulova and Zhansaya Aitbay (Chapter 7) examine the effects of rising neoliberalism on labour in Kazakhstan by looking at the situation of oil workers in the west of the country, who have been subject to direct attacks by the state over the last decades. Contrary to expectations, the introduction of neoliberal, market-oriented reforms in this sector has not led to greater prosperity for the workers, but to increased commodification of labour, the insulation of workers from key decision-making processes, a curtailment of workers' rights, and blatant coercion. This development has been accompanied by growing discontent among workers who, in the absence of an impartial judiciary and independent trade unions, often find themselves at the mercy of employers and the coercive state. All this is highlighted in this chapter by reference to the situation of workers in the oil sector in Western Kazakhstan, which has been the backbone of oil industry in the country. Specifically, the authors interrogate the dynamics of neoliberalism in Kazakhstan and its impact

on the oil sector, identify its contradictions and, against this background, examine the forms and dynamics of labour unrest. They argue that the inability of workers to form an effective countermovement is due to the absence of independent trade unions and thus a lack of leadership. The study draws on the results of field research in Western Kazakhstan in 2022.

References

- Allison, Roy (2004) "Regionalism, regional structures and security management in Central Asia," *International Affairs*. 80.3, 463–483.
- Cooley, Alexander (2012) "The new great game in Central Asia: Geopolitics in a post-Western world." *Foreign Affairs*. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/central-asia/2012-08-07/new-great-game-central-asia>.
- Lemon, Edward (2018) "Critical approaches to security in Central Asia: an introduction." *Central Asian Survey*. 37.1, 1–12.
- Mayer, Sebastian (2021) Cooperation from outside: security regionalism in Central Asia and its limits. In: *Central Asian Affairs*. 8.2, 203–228.
- Mamadshoeva, D. (2019) "Listening to women's stories: the ambivalent role of feminist research in Central Asia." *OpenDemocracy*. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/odr/listening-to-womens-stories-the-ambivalent-role-of-feminist-research-in-central-asia/>.
- Marat, Erica (2021) "Introduction: 30 years of Central Asian studies – the best is yet to come." *Central Asian Survey*, 40.4, 477–482.
- Partlett, William (2021) "Kyrgyzstan's 2021 constitution: a brief comparative and historical analysis." University of Melbourne Legal Studies Research. Paper no. 944SSRN Journal. https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3834766.
- Schuck, Christoph and Vasilache, Andreas (2021) "Civil society and patterns of security in Central Asia." In *Central Asian Affairs* 8.2, 109–119.
- Vakulchuk, Roman. Daloz, Anne Sophie, Overland, Indra, Sagbakken, Haakon Fossum, and Standal, Karina (2022) "A void in Central Asia research: climate change." *Central Asian Survey*, 42.1, 1–20.
- Vasilache, Andreas (2017) Authoritarianism and security in Central Asia. *Neue Gesellschaft/Frankfurter Hefte: International Quarterly Edition* 1, 25–29.
- Vasilache, Andreas (2019) Security in the sovereignty–governmentality continuum. *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 32:6, 681–711.