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One Belt, One Road, Many Headaches: The Economic, Political, and Social Challenges of OBOR in Central Asia

Alexander Cooley

Thanks very much, I really appreciate the opportunity. It's a great honor, and this is just a magnificent conference that Marlene and the Program put on here every year, and this is a very distinguished panel as well. The bulk of this presentation draws upon some previews of some current research—the book that I'm writing with John Heathershaw about Central Asia's global networks and connections—in which we're examining the hidden links that Central Asia has to different legal and financial structures in the global economy.

The announcement of OBOR actually occurred during Xi Jinping's visit to Kazakhstan in a speech at Nazarbayev University in September 2013. A lot of different things have been written about it. One of the most hyped quotes is from the *South China Morning Post*: this is “the most significant and far-reaching project the nation has ever put forward.” It's comprised of both a land belt as well as a maritime belt with certain port upgrades, together fostering new links between Europe, East Asia, Middle East, South Asia, and Eurasia. So this is all in the service of promoting “connectivity.” At the same time, new regional financing institutions have also been created, including the AIIB and the New Silk Road (NSR) fund, which is actually under the auspices of the People's Bank. And all in an effort to fill in Asia's \$8 trillion infrastructure gap.

So we hear a lot about the US New Silk Road, and the Chinese one. What are the differences? I think they're pretty stark. China is actually committing hundreds of billions of dollars to this ambitious series of projects. The US... not much at all. China is establishing new regional funding vehicles; the US is actually kind of claiming existing projects like TAPI, and in some ways I think unnecessarily geo-politicizing them in an effort to “populate” its own project. In my view, the Chinese projects signal China's rise and enduring regional engagement, whereas the New Silk Road for the US is associated with its legacy and withdrawal from Afghanistan. Most regional countries have signed up to the AIIB, though. Interestingly enough, Kyrgyzstan has not.

So here are some visuals of the Silk Route, the economic belt, and what should really be emphasized here is that Central Asia and Xinjiang are at the hub of these proposed northern corridors, central corridors, and southern corridors. Some include China's new Central Asia pipelines: the oil pipeline from Kazakhstan, and the Central Asia-China gas pipeline. Here is the consolidated map that you see cited a lot and used a lot from the *Wall Street Journal* that includes both the pipeline routes and the maritime and overland routes.

So what are the drivers of OBOR? I think we can separate these out into geopolitical and domestic. A lot of emphasis has been placed on the geopolitical—the strategy of binding regions and states, as Beijing seeks to create a China-oriented regional community. Some talk about the need to put accumulated foreign reserves to better use than “idle investments,” the internationalization of the renminbi, and the emergence of the “Xi Jinping doctrine” formalizing China's arrival as a leading power in global governance, rule-making, and agenda setting.

But there are also important domestic drivers that don't get as much attention. One is the Xinjiang issue, the need to maintain Xinjiang as a developmental center and the notion that infrastructure investment and development will equal political stability, both in Xinjiang and Xinjiang's neighbors—that the more connected Xinjiang is, the more economic opportunity Xinjiang has, the less likely that you'll see flare-ups of separatism there.

Another factor is slowing Chinese growth rates and domestic over-capacity. This is a huge issue now. As we get to the world of 6% growth as opposed to 11% growth, China faces cement, steel, and machine-building large overcapacity; where's the surplus going to go? It's going to go into some of these projects in Central Asia. Competition amongst individual Chinese regions to be nodes in these new hubs is growing—to the point where some regions send negotiators to Central Asia to actively campaign for these different routes. This mirrors some of the earlier competition among eastern Chinese coastal cities.

Domestic drivers are critical as well, if not more. Just two specific examples of companies that I wish to flag here. First, the Xuzhou Construction Machinery Group. It's just announced that over the last two years, as the economic slowdown has been happening in China itself, it has been ramping up its operations in Central Asia. They estimate about \$490 million worth of contracts and investments that the company plans to make in the region. There's also UnionPay, provider of payment systems, as China targets the Kazakh and Central Asian market for the use of its financial products as an alternative to the Western payment systems. So there's a lot of different kinds of domestic interests, not all necessarily in infrastructure-building, and perceptions that the Central Asian market can help pick up the slack of the downturn in China.

I now would like to get into some of the problems that I see with the OBOR, hence the kind of cheeky title I have, “One Belt, One Road, Many Headaches” because I think that these don't get enough attention as we emphasize China's aspirations in the region. The first question I ask is—a lot of OBOR's premise is on the idea of building hardware—but the question is, is development a hardware problem or a software problem? Is it about the physical infrastructure that is needed, or is it about how that investment will be used and what types of governance choices are made in domestic contexts?

I'm going to flag a few challenges. The first is sort of the governance challenges. Here I disaggregate them into three different potential dangers. We're talking about a region where corruption in governance is inherently problematic. So how will this anticipated Chinese investment play out? First, there is the likelihood, or danger, that the local government agencies privatize the revenue sources that come in from China. Very similar to what happened in Tajikistan with the Dushanbe-Chanak highway, where toll booths that were linked to a company registered offshore were put up after the project, sponsored by Chinese funds, was completed. The lesson of this highway project is that the structure is *not* open and accessible to the public. It's a rent-making revenue scheme for local elites.

The second possibility is the displacement of rent-seeking so that two tiers of tariffs or rents are created: containers or cargoes that operate with clearances on the one hand, but then customs officials have to make up for that and get their informal revenues from other sources. I think something similar happened with the NDN and protected shipments. The third is the potential ratcheting of graft, where China's money-dump raises the cost to the other regional investors, increasing demands for side payments and private goods as the cost to do business. So there are three different types of governance issues that possibly could emerge.

This is the graph that I use in almost all my presentations, “The Problem of Central Asia's Informal Trade Barriers and Border Controls.” These are import/export times. From 2006 to 2014, it hasn't gotten much better, except for the export times in Uzbekistan which have improved somewhat. From this chart, it takes on average 104 days to import a good and have it cleared in Uzbekistan. In Tajikistan, 83 days, in Kyrgyzstan, 75, and in Kazakhstan, 76. So how is that comparatively in the world? It's really high. If you were to pick a region of the world where you would like to build a New Silk Route from scratch, I would say that Central Asia

would not be it. In terms of informal barriers to trade, Central Asia is three times higher as the Middle East and North Africa and twice more than South Asia. This is really one of the most trade-unfriendly regions in the world.

A second set of problems is the following: will these infrastructure development and large flows capital into the region promote political stability or actually exacerbate regional tensions and conflicts? The assumption here is that investment leads to stability and cooperation, but the question is, why? Why is this assumption warranted? In fact, you can make an argument from a micro-level that, in places with ethnic tensions or even a state of low-intensity conflict, an influx of capital and big development projects can actually exacerbate regional antagonisms. We've seen examples of this: Baluchistan in Pakistan, northern Myanmar, the southern Kyrgyz-Uzbek railway corridor, and also Xinjiang itself. I think that when these issues come up, the Chinese government tends to blame the messenger. In a lot of these cases, they blame Western NGOs that might draw attention to some of these problems and issues, but this is an overall structural problem that they're going to have to contend with.

In the Pakistani case, \$46 billion had been committed to energy and infrastructure projects. So I would pose the hypothetical here: If the US were to announce tomorrow that it was going to dump \$46 billion into road and energy plant construction projects, what would our reaction be? I think there would be broad concerns about local politics and governance issues, but, for some reason, we tend to assume that Chinese projects will function as intended.

Third, what are the geopolitical frictions and rivalries? We know the ones between Japan and China, and of course the US objections in what turned out to be, I think, a kind of ham-fisted opposition campaign to the AIIB. A possible second-order effect, it could exacerbate tensions between India and Pakistan. The most interesting one, though, is the relationship with Russia. What is the relationship between OBOR and the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU)? I think that the emphasis now on the coordination meetings taking place between Moscow and Beijing perhaps misses the greater point. Yes, there will be difficult negotiations, but also agreement on some common projects that China will fund. There will be an overall negotiation framework in which China decides to recognize the EEU as a legitimate partner. But all of this is going to be playing catch-up with the dynamics on the ground. And if you accept the premise that I do—that domestic factors and actors are making these regional inroads—then even if there is a grand macro-framework between Russia and China that sets the terms for Chinese activities in the EEU, it's going to be very difficult to get a handle on and restrict the activities of Chinese actors on the ground.

At the very heart of this, the EEU and OBOR are actually conceptually incompatible. The EEU is about fencing in economic activity as a regional economic bloc. OBOR is about transit and connectivity between regions. And so how you marry those at the micro level doesn't really matter in terms of this big-picture tension between the two. They are very different visions.

Issue four: How does China cope with foreign debt as a result of all this investment and lending? What does China do around the world? Well, in some places, it just forgives debt. In Africa, we've had a few bouts of debt cancellation in quite small sums (a few billion dollars). Sometimes debt relief is conditioned on the "One-China" policy (Taiwan). But I think the question becomes, as any lender would ask, if you restructure the debt, then what are the terms of that restructuring? It's one thing to talk about a few hundred million here, a couple billion there; but when we look at this initial tranche, most of these energy-for-loans deals concluded during the great financial crisis in 2009, what do we have? We have Venezuela at \$55 billion, Ecuador at \$5 billion, Argentina at \$19 billion. In the Central Asian context, \$8 billion to Turkmenistan, \$13

billion to Kazakhstan. We're starting to talk about some serious money. Now, yes, there's the possibility that all of this might be written off or that it's not important. But I think that in the context of slumping economic development, something else has to be planned. So do you demand more equity or in kind ownership? Do you stretch out the timeline of the debt repayment? What else happens between China and these debtors? Is there a foreign policy quid so that China asks for support in UN votes and other policy positions? We don't know yet, but it's a critical matter.

And then, finally, I think the thing that we need to acknowledge about OBOR, is that Central Asia is already connected to the world. There is already connectivity between Central Asia and the US, between Central Asia and China. There are global networks, offshore connections, hidden financial ties and many hidden ways in which deals get done, especially between state-owned enterprises and local elites. Does OBOR create new types of connectivity or does it just feed these existing informal networks? Just as a reminder, there is a massive oil industry-related anti-corruption purge going on right now in China. Two of the highest officials implicated in the CNPC scandal were involved in overseeing major operations in Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan. And what's emerged so far from the investigation? First, there was a lot of unsupervised, unmonitored activity as these oil companies expanded abroad. Second, there were a lot of offshore links. And as you go to offshore leaks sites, many of these company execs are setting up their own funding vehicles and their own personal accounts. The CNPC and AktobeMunaigas—this was originally alleged by Ablyazov, but the *Wall Street Journal* ran a big exposé on this. It shows how Chinese companies (and they're not the only ones) tend to use offshore vehicles to structure deals in the region. In this particular case, they created a special purpose investment vehicle to purchase CICL, which then re-purchased the stake in Aktobe which yielded a \$166 million dollar alleged side payment to members of the Kazakh elite.

So, connectivity, yes, there's already connectivity—it's just that we don't like talking about it. It's the connectivity that's embedded in global structures, offshore registries, intermediate brokers, all of which create these webs of global links and ties. I agree that OBOR remains a significant project, certainly a lot more significant than the US version of this. And if realized, it offers immense opportunities. But it also poses a lot of unacknowledged risks and wild cards that I think we're only now starting to appreciate and understand—on the economic front, the political, and the social front. In terms of practical policy, do all of these different risks, now that Beijing has to cope with in an arena like Central Asia, does it lead to a *de facto* (because I don't think that it's ever going to be announced) change in the non-interference doctrine? Do you need closer monitoring on the ground to ensure that a lot of these political and economic tensions don't percolate up? Or, do you just let all this stuff go?

I think that the key to dealing with OBOR is having regional knowledge and expertise and acknowledging that its impact may vary across different regions and countries. It's understandable that a project in Myanmar may not play out the same way in southern Kyrgyzstan or in Pakistan. And it's important to understand that the local environment will go a long way to determining the economic benefits and political costs of OBOR.

China and Russia in Central Asia: Cooperation and Conflict

Raffaello Pantucci & Sarah Lain

Despite the significant rise of China's economic influence in the region, Russia continues to maintain its political leverage in Central Asia. In contrast to China, it explicitly states its intention to keep its grip on this influence, as highlighted by Medvedev's speech in 2008. This declared commitment to preserving Russia's 'spheres of privileged influence' certainly includes Central Asia. The key aim for Russia is to ensure, at least in theory, loyalty to the Russian government, seeking countries it can depend on for support. The various alliances Russia plays a crucial role in alongside the Central Asian states, such as the EEU, SCO, CSTO and CIS, also have a utility of legitimizing Russia's position in a visibly multipolar world. Indeed, the SCO is a platform shared with China, but they all act as a way of overtly demonstrating structural equivalents of Western-dominated organizations such as the EU and NATO.

The Ukraine crisis has undermined Russia's legitimacy by raising suspicions for both Central Asia and China about Russian intentions in the region. The prevention of color revolutions, which was enshrined in the recently updated version of Russia's Military Doctrine, has potential implications across the former Soviet space. Indeed, Russia's commitment to protect Russian-speakers and ethnic Russians abroad causes concern for Central Asians. Although Russia has almost exclusively acted on this in the more Western-leaning post-Soviet countries, such as Ukraine and Georgia, a speech by Putin that addressed Kazakhstan was provocative in light of events in Ukraine. Not only did Putin praise Nazarbayev, but he also highlighted that Kazakhs realized the value of being part of the "greater Russian world," which raised alarm bells in Astana. Russia has proven it has no issues in leveraging its position over former Soviet states for certain self-interested strategic purposes.

It is worth noting that, despite this political leverage Russia has over its former empire, the Central Asian states are by no means passive in their relationship with Russia. Independence of action varies between the five states, but it has expressed itself in subtle ways. For example, in the UN vote on Crimea, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan abstained from voting. Although potentially more symbolic than reflecting real intention, Nazarbayev has made statements in which he says Kazakhstan will leave the EEU if it ceases to be in Kazakhstan's economic or political interests to be a member.

An area of general agreement between Russia and Central Asia, however, is the definition of and desire for political stability in the region. Although there are certainly concerns around how Tajikistan is currently handling its fragile political situation, the Central Asian states are as averse to abrupt regime changes or color revolutions threatening the status quo as Russia. This allows for a consensus between Russia and Central Asia towards political and governance norms.

China is certainly engaging in a different way politically with Central Asia compared to Russia. China's political role in the region could be described as latent but one that has not yet manifested itself so overtly. It is certainly a more subtle political actor than Russia. However, there are indications that Central Asia plays the role of testing ground for Chinese foreign policy efforts, meaning Central Asia forms what could be described as China's "inadvertent empire." The belt and road vision is a prime example of this. It was significant that Xi Jinping announced the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) at Nazarbayev University in 2013. This represented a vision that built on something that had already been happening for years in Central Asia. China had long been building infrastructure using linked loans, which allowed domestic companies to "go

out” and build in Central Asia. The announcement showed Xi Jinping stamping his name and authority onto a coherent foreign policy that was based on existing activities. China’s “testing ground” has also manifested itself in other formats, particularly those that are multilateral. The SCO is the best example of a structure through which China can test its security policy in the region.

Moreover, a contrast between Russian and Chinese foreign policy in Central Asia is that China’s policy is closely linked to addressing domestic concerns. For China, it is much more about ensuring stability and development in Xinjiang. Central Asia is an important trade link to ensure access and opportunities for Xinjiang back home. Thus, it is much less about spheres of influence for China. Rather than ensure explicit political loyalty to China within Central Asian governments, which features more importantly in Russia’s foreign policy, China strives more towards developing good economic ties. Of course, political allegiance and support assists doing business in the region, but the ultimate aim is economic utility for China.

One question, the answer to which is not yet clear, is when does this economic power express itself politically? There are a few examples of how this might express itself. For example, in Kyrgyzstan there have been cases of Chinese businessmen facing serious trouble with local corrupt officials when they have failed to pay off the right people, often ending in violence. The Chinese Embassy in certain cases has expressed anger directly to the government of Kyrgyzstan, demanding for an apology. For the most part, however, China’s political role has continued to be consistent with non-interference. China is happy to be the largest investment partner to the region, but does not wish to own the political and security problems of Central Asia in the same way Russia is prepared to do.

Therefore, in the security sphere, Russia still seems to be the dominant player. The Chinese have been active in terms of border security, military aid and some arms deals. It has conducted training with Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan in particular, which it views as weak links from a Chinese security perspective. Again, engagement primarily reflects China’s domestic security concerns rather than a willingness to project itself as a security power in the region. China still appears content deferring to Russia on this broader security agenda.

A good example of this reluctance to intervene in domestic issues can be seen in Pakistan. Some of the recent issues around the China-Pakistan economic corridor (CPEC) illustrate this. China’s priority is to build a corridor from Kashgar that ends in either Karachi or Gwadar, gaining sea access. However, it appears China was not quite prepared for Pakistan’s internal disputes over the route and is not clear on how to mediate this discussion. The Chinese Embassy in Islamabad was forced to issue a statement on this, essentially sending the message that CPEC is a project that should benefit the entire country. It is up to Pakistan to handle the local politics. Looking back to Central Asia, tensions in regional politics certainly present challenges to China’s intended implementation of the SREB. These are challenges that China will be reluctant to mediate directly.

Both Russia and China clearly provide economic incentives for the Central Asians to cooperate with them. It seems that Russia is much more willing to leverage these incentives, and indeed pressure Central Asian states economically when useful, particularly to extract political gains. A prime example of this pertains to the Manas base in Kyrgyzstan. When Kyrgyzstan was discussing closing access to the base for the US in 2009, Russia offered a huge aid package to Kyrgyzstan as an incentive to terminate the US contract. When Bakiyev went back on this deal, Russia used its soft power as a tool to pressure Kyrgyzstan to reconsider, particularly pushing stories of Bakiyev’s involvement in corruption as a way of de-legitimizing the leader. This

demonstrates Russia's approach of rewarding, but also punishing, the Central Asian states to act in a way that benefits Russia. Another example of an economic pressure point is migrant workers. In January 2015 new rules came into force that made it more difficult for migrant workers to work legally in Russia, such as mandatory Russian language tests and increased costs for documentation. This in particular affected Tajik workers, which led many to believe this was Russia's way of pressuring Tajikistan to join the EEU.

It is easy to interpret every policy Russia has towards Central Asia as a form of leverage. This is not only an over-simplification but also may be unfair to Russia. However, some of the pressure points Russia can exploit are vulnerable, indicating that the Central Asian states are by no means inevitably tied to Russian foreign policy. For example, given the economic situation in Russia, remittances are dropping. These constitute an economic life-line to Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan in particular, and if they drop there is less incentive for these countries to respond to some of Russia's more political demands. Russia has had to cancel hydropower projects in Kyrgyzstan, which it had pledged to fund, not only showing Russia as unreliable but simultaneously reinforcing the perception that China is the real economic player. Although in the long-term it is unlikely that Central Asia-Russia economic ties can be severed, it still shows that some of Russia's points of leverage are far from guaranteed.

The EEU is Russia's big economic draw, and tool, for the region. Although in principle it could be positive in furthering economic integration, it so far has shown many negatives. For example, in the first three months of 2015, inter-member trade actually dropped. The fact that Ukraine is unlikely to join unless there is another domestic political pivot means there are huge limitations to the benefits that the Central Asian members can reap from the union given the over-dominance of the Russian economy. Moreover, given the rhetoric from Nazarbayev on the EEU, there are also clearly fears that it is used by Russia as a political tool.

The failures of this Union have manifested themselves in the protectionist measures initiated by member states. For example, Kazakhstan has implemented oil embargoes against Russia. There are complaints from Kyrgyzstan regarding the lack of benefits the EEU brings the country, whilst highlighting that it had no choice in joining. Obviously this also plays into Kyrgyzstan's interests of extracting more economic incentives from Russia. But fundamentally there are question marks as how political, rather than economic, the strategy is behind the implementation of this project.

China in contrast is investing in Central Asia at a rate that Russia knows it cannot compete with. China is now the biggest trading partner of the Central Asia region, having displaced Russia. There are also risks for Russia that at least symbolically Central Asia becomes a Chinese foreign policy project. Having been very cautious about endorsing the SREB, Russia supported the project by agreeing to find ways to integrate the SREB with the EEU. The practicalities of such integration are unclear given the difference in structure of each strategy. However, it is likely instead that the EEU will be subsumed rhetorically by the SREB project, i.e. that the EEU becomes a part of the bigger Chinese project. This signifies a loss of prestige for Russia.

One unknown for the Belt and Road project is how the economic slowdown in China might affect the project's implementation. There have already been some frustrations voiced in Central Asia on this front. For example, Nazarbayev noted that Kazakhstan is being affected negatively not only by the economic slowdown in Russia, but also by that which is occurring in China. Turkmenistan is struggling to find consistent gas demand in China, and subsequent pricing, as planned. The enthusiastic push to making TAPI a reality speaks to the urgency of Turkmenistan's need to find new gas markets. There have also been challenges in Xinjiang's own

domestic build-up, the powerhouse of the SREB policy. The planned robust economic development there does not seem to have taken off at the speed required. This will have knock-on effects across the border. On the other hand, the Belt and Road presents a potential outlet for the challenges causing the slowdown in China. If the infrastructure construction market is slowing down at home, and there is excess capacity in companies and materials at home, exporting it abroad is a strategy for, at least in the short-term, ameliorating this.

Another challenge in the Belt and Road discourse pertains to the huge loans that China is dispensing to the Central Asian states, with little confidence that they will be paid back. Although economically this may not make sense, it does speak to the longer-term perspective that China takes with such loans. They are much more patient about such debts. Moreover, the way these deals are structured has an added benefit to China. For example, China's Eximbank will grant a significant loan to the Tajik government to implement a series of projects on the condition that a Chinese company will implement it. Often this means that the money never really leaves Beijing – it is simply shifted from one Chinese state bank account to another.

Thus, in conclusions, there is always potential for conflict between two great powers such as China and Russia in Central Asia, but currently there seems to be a useful division of labor between the two. There are overriding geopolitical dynamics between Russia and China that mean they gain more from avoiding confrontation. China does not seem perturbed by Russia's desire to maintain its neo-imperial approach to the region, as long as it does not conflict directly with China's economic interest. Russia is aware it cannot compete with China in terms of economic investment but knows that it can maintain the security mandate in the region. This creates a genuine mutual respect between the two in Central Asia. Moreover, there is an informal consensus on the need for political stability between Russia, China and the Central Asian states. That is not to say that tensions are absent. People we have spoken to in Beijing hint that the Russians are difficult to work with. People we have spoken to in Moscow are innately suspicious of Chinese geopolitical intentions in the region. So far, however, it is difficult to see where full-blown conflict between the two might occur.

Unwrapping the 'Belt and Road' in Central Asia: Chinese perspectives

Nadège Rolland

The idea of a Silk Road Economic Belt was introduced by Chinese President Xi Jinping in an address at Nazarbayev University in Astana, in September 2013. One month later, Xi introduced the concept of the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road in a speech to the Indonesian Parliament, in which he also proposed the establishment of an Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the concept of a “community of common destiny” in Asia. Since 2013, all the major announcements related to the “One Belt One Road” (OBOR) have been made by Xi Jinping himself and the initiative has clearly become one of the highest priorities of the Chinese leadership.

To broadly summarize the concept, the Belt and Road initiative envisions an integrated Eurasian continent that spreads from Vladivostok to Lisbon, from Moscow to Singapore, interconnected through infrastructure that is both hard (transportation links, railways, pipelines, fiber optic cables) and soft (institutions, agreements, trade zones, cooperation forums, academic research, tourism). Although Chinese publications refer to over 60 countries being part of the Belt and Road, there is no detailed official Chinese map publicly available.

The Belt and Road has grown into a dominant representation for China's foreign policy practices, regional neighborhood relations, and for some of China's domestic issues, especially related to its economic development.

Background: Silk Road revival, an idea not so new

Xi Jinping is not the first to imagine a revival of the Silk Road. In April 1994, China's Premier Li Peng told Uzbek President Karimov that it was “important to open up a modern vision of the Silk Road.” Back then, China was primarily concerned with its energy security (it had become a net importer in 1993) but Li Peng's idea was not followed up on.

Over the years, and especially since end of the Cold War, influential strategic thinkers have also cherished the idea of China's advancing towards the West. General Liu Yazhou wrote several articles in which he described Central Asia's crucial importance for China, not only in terms of resources but also because of its strategic situation. In 2001, he had already proposed connecting China to Central Asia so that it would provide the basis for a future common market and become “the fulcrum of our western strategy and thwart the US scheme to drive wedges in Central Asia.” He also advised that China “open-up a Europe-Asia land bridge to form a greater Euro-Asian economic union and develop crisscrossing economic links and common interests with the Western countries to neutralize the US encirclement of China.”

In October 2012, one of China's most prominent strategic thinkers, Wang Jisi, wrote an article in which he advocated for the creation of a New Silk Road, divided into 3 routes (southern, central and northern) in addition to another road going through the Indian Ocean. Wang called for increased Chinese economic and trade cooperation with all “West Asian nations” and for the establishment of a cooperation and development fund. “Marching Westward,” he insisted, was a “strategic necessity for China's involvement in great power cooperation, the improvement of the international environment and the strengthening of China's competitive abilities.” Wang also listed possible obstacles, and advised Beijing to “avoid risks, balance all sides, increase efforts in research and development and be part of an overall strategic plan.” In retrospect, Wang Jisi's article looks prophetic. It is hard to say though, if his ideas influenced Xi Jinping or if his article,

published in English, was commissioned by the leadership and used as a trial balloon for the concept.

Today's "Belt and Road"

The initiative was adopted at the Third Plenum of the 18th CCP Congress in November 2013. In October 2014, 21 Asian countries signed an agreement to found the AIIB (now a total of 57 nations have been approved as founder members), followed a month later by the creation of the Silk Road Fund.

In March 2015, the regime created a Central Leading Small Group on "Advancing the Development of the One Belt One Road," a top level coordination body under the leadership of vice-Premier Zhang Gaoli and comprising key-figures of Xi Jinping's close circle. That same month, the "Vision and Actions on Jointly Building the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Maritime Silk Road" was jointly published by China's National Development and Reform Commission, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Ministry of Commerce. In the Action Plan, the OBOR was officially called the "Belt and Road Initiative" (as opposed to "Belt and Road Strategy," its initial name, discarded because of its conspiratorial connotation).

Chinese perspectives

The Belt and Road initiative now saturates every official declaration and speech and has gained much attention in the Chinese media and academic world.

Since 2013, dozens of Silk Road events have been organized all over China and around the world. Several specific OBOR research institutes were founded in China, and the International Silk Road Think Tank Association was launched in February 2015 in Shenzhen, in order to provide "sustained intellectual support for China's Belt and Road Initiative." Roza Otunbayeva, former president of Kyrgyzstan, attended the meeting, and declared: "Think tanks play positive roles in helping solve difficulties. Research institutes and think tanks in Kyrgyzstan are willing to participate in the initiative research with think tanks from other countries."

There also has been a proliferation of articles and scholarly analyses in Chinese, which can be broadly organized as follows:

- Some look at the drivers and background for the Belt and Road, and describe them as an acceleration of China's western development. Others see them as an economic necessity for China (energy, trade, agriculture). Others believe they are a necessity for China's national security (balance of power, counter-terrorism, energy security, regional stability).
- As far as economic cooperation with Central Asia is concerned, Chinese experts underline the complementarity between the Chinese and Central Asian economies and assert that Central Asia's economic situation will improve. The high degree of trade dependence is seen as a solid basis for bilateral trade, sustainable over the long run thanks to Central Asian rapidly growing trade and its need for diversification from Russia. In Chinese eyes, Kazakhstan looks the most promising of the five republics.
- For Chinese analysts, the Belt and Road initiative in Central Asia will have a positive impact on China in many different sectors: energy cooperation and security (balancing China's excessive dependence on maritime imports and improving its diversification strategy), transportation infrastructure development, trade and investment (helping regional growth,

expanding trade within the SCO, serving as a basis for further multilateral trade and investment and as an incentive for regional financial institutions). Other experts point to the development of science and technology, cultural and tourism exchanges between China and its Central Asian neighbors.

- Chinese analysts acknowledge some potential problems, such as the possibility of a great power contest (India, Russia and the EU are regarded as generally favorable to the Belt and Road, whereas the US and Japan are seen as being more problematic) or because of peripheral conundrums (imbalance of China-Central Asia trade; possible frictions over the “China threat theory”) or because of the lack of “common language,” customs inefficiency, and differences in railway gauge.

Conclusion

Overall, Chinese scholars and academic experts are very positive about the prospects for cooperation in Central Asia. The Belt and Road initiative is sometimes portrayed as an extension of what China has been doing so far in the region, but it clearly has the mark of Xi Jinping’s ambitious touch. And that is the main difference with what came before: the Belt and Road is not focused on Chinese development only, but expands outwards, throughout Eurasia, South Asia, Europe, the Middle-East, and even Africa. It’s not just about China’s future economic cooperation with its neighbors, including Central Asia, but mainly about how China views itself as a rising power, bound to become a great power and to “take back its rightful place in the international system.”

The Belt and Road combines all the elements of national power, domestic and international, coordinated at the highest level of the leadership, in an effort to generate a whole range of instruments in order to shape the world in ways that serve China’s interests.

Gaining political influence from economic exchange is certainly not an easy task, but China is planting seeds for gaining access along the entire Eurasian continent, that can be cultivated and used to achieve its own strategic ends. Whether or not they succeed, these efforts will have significant implications for the Western liberal order. The economic, trade and financial arrangements and political agreements foreseen by the Belt and Road in order to create the Asian “community of common destiny” are leading to rules, norms and expectations that are outside of the current international framework.

Multilateralism a la Russe: How the EEU and CSTO are Performing

Jeffrey Mankoff

I'm going to talk about multilateralism *a la Russe*, to try and give a little bit of a sense of how the major multilateral organizations that Russia is sponsoring in the post-Soviet region are performing, and then I'll be taking a look at recent developments as a lens for trying to draw some longer term conclusions about the opportunities and the challenges these organizations face.

I'm going to focus mainly on the Eurasian Economic Union. I'll say a little bit about the Collective Security Treaty Organization, and I think Richard is actually going to say more about it. With both organizations, there is a kind of underlying vision and it's not necessarily a new one, even though the EEU was only founded a little bit more than a year ago. If you think about it, Russia's strategy in the post-Soviet space going back to the 1990s has, to some degree, centered on the idea of keeping these states together in one form or another and, at the very least, preserving and in some cases even rebuilding institutional, economic, and political ties among them.

Now, this is not a process that's unique to Eurasia. Regionalization is an important topic in a number of other parts of the world now, especially as an alternative to the road blocks that globalization—the WTO's Doha round, for example—are facing. As a result, we're seeing the emergence of regional economic institutions—regional economic blocs, including on the part of the United States within initiatives like TPP and TTIP.

So, what's happening in Eurasia with the EEU in some ways fits into a pattern that we're seeing elsewhere, but also reaches back much farther, to the aftermath of the Soviet collapse. At the same time, I think there's another difference here, which is unlike that of a lot of other multilateral fora that we talk about. With ASEAN, for example, or APEC or the EU, the model is different. The relationship among the different players is different.

The EEU in particular is organized on more of a hub and spokes model, with Russia at the center and the other post-Soviet states occupying the different spokes, rather than a kind of alliance of equals. This is very visible if one looks for example at disparities in the size of the relative economies, with Russia counting for 85% of the EEU's total GDP. Similarly, Russia's population is eight times larger than Kazakhstan's, which is the second largest.

So there is an impressive imbalance, and you see it in the way that the institution operates. If you look at the trade flows, they're not relatively evenly distributed among the countries themselves. Rather, it reinforces this notion of a hub and spokes, with a much higher percentage of the bilateral trade occurring between Belarus and Russia, Kazakhstan and Russia, Kyrgyzstan and Russia, rather than between Kazakhstan and Belarus, or Armenia and Kyrgyzstan.

This is a basic structural feature of the organization, and it says something about the opportunities and the challenges it faces. It also hints at what remains, I think, the fundamental challenge, which is that the objectives of the member states only coincide to a relatively limited degree, and certainly I would say less so than in ASEAN and, despite all of its difficulties in the last year or so, less than the EU as well.

I want to go over how the diversions of objectives among the member states has been visible in the last year or so since the formal founding of the EEU, and what that says about the longer

term prospects.

As you know, the EEU grew out of a number of precursor organizations, keeping with this idea that preserving and strengthening multilateral linkages among the post-Soviet states has been at least a sometimes focus of Russian foreign policy going back to the 1990s. The Commonwealth of Independent States was the first iteration of this impulse. It was basically designed to prevent the complete rupture of a lot of these linkages that threatened to collapse along with the Soviet Union itself. So given that history—given the fact that there's been some degree of some multilateralism in the post-Soviet region since the 1990s, what makes the current iteration different?

I would argue that the biggest difference is the creation of centralized institutions with power to set the agenda on a number of key economic policy issues affecting all of these states, and the invocation of the supranational model, which in the discussions of the EEU's founding is alleged to be based on the model of the European Union. That is to say, states who are members of the organization actually cede some of their sovereignty to the supranational Eurasian Economic Commission, which was set up to direct the operations of the union as a whole.

And in that sense, the EEU is moving well beyond the level of integration that existed with previous institutional incarnations of multilateralism in the post-Soviet region, and the commission has powers to regulate a whole range of economic activities, including trade agreements, currency policy, energy policy, subsidies, migration, transit, and the like.

Its ability to actually follow through on these competencies remains very much a matter of contention. At the same time, there have been trial balloons that have been floated at different times for other supranational institutions and powers that so far have not been accrued because of the opposition that they face in some of the smaller member states, particularly from Kazakhstan. Russia has put forward proposals like having a common currency, or having a common court of human rights that is an alternative to the European Court of Justice.

What's happened recently, and where are some of the developments that bear watching and some of the bigger lessons that we can take? 2015 was a very active year. Of course it marked the formal founding of the EEU, but additionally the union expanded beyond its initial membership base, taking in Kyrgyzstan and Armenia.

Free trade agreements were negotiated with Vietnam and additional agreements are being discussed with other partners including China, Israel, and others. The commission adopted a number of laws, some on seemingly mundane issues like common regulation of pharmaceuticals, but also on some potentially more expansive areas like a common foreign exchange market, and potentially the creation of a common energy market, which would address one of the biggest concerns of some of the non-Russian participants, which is their ability to access the Russian pipeline infrastructure.

Now whether these regulations will be translated into practice remains to some degree an open question. At the same time though, even as we've seen the both broadening and deepening - to use EU terminology - of the EEU over the last year, we've seen also some of the structural challenges it faces.

One of the biggest, in part because of the centrality of Russia to the overall organization, is the vulnerability of the entire EEU to political and economic shocks in Russia itself. Of course, Russia had a difficult year economically in 2015. The economy shrank about 3.7%, largely on the

back of lower oil prices but also the impact of Western sanctions over the conflict in Ukraine.

Given the vulnerability of these other countries because of their dependence on Russia, there were knock-on effects, which also had the political impact of dampening whatever enthusiasm existed for the deeper integration on the part of Astana and Bishkek, and even Minsk.

We saw a sharp decline in remittances to countries like Kyrgyzstan, which are very dependent on remittances from Russia for their overall economic performance. The decline in exports to Russia stemmed largely from the decline of the ruble and the more difficult terms of trade that resulted. In response to these challenges, we saw the emergence and creation of new, particularly non-tariff barriers on the part of some of the smaller states, including Belarus and Kazakhstan.

So if the entire goal of economic integration is to reduce barriers to trade and create a common trade area, the re-imposition of sanitary checks, limits on types of goods that can be imported, customs inspections on the borders, and the like, is actually a move in the other direction. And I would argue is a direct consequence of the fact that Russia plays such a central role in this overall union that when Russia sneezes, the rest of the countries catch a cold.

At the same time of course there was the response of the other countries to the sanctions and the counter-sanctions that Russia imposed. Obviously, in Kazakhstan, Belarus, and Kyrgyzstan there's not a lot of enthusiasm for the counter-sanctions that Russia imposed, especially on food imports from the European Union, and conscious efforts were made by some of these countries to bypass the sanctions.

That of course led to Russia then seeking to crack down on the importation into Belarus and Kazakhstan of, say, Italian cheese, because of the possibility of it being re-exported to Russia. Again, the result ends up being a reduction of the level of integration, rather than an increase.

I think perhaps an even more significant development was the adoption by the Eurasian Economic Commission of a protocol to address the fact that Kazakhstan is becoming a member of the World Trade Organization, and then Kazakhstan negotiating tariff lines within the WTO that were lower than those that it was supposed to enforce as part of its membership in the EEU.

And as a result, the EEU itself had to pass a special protocol which basically makes it more difficult for Kazakhstan to re-export goods that have been brought into Kazakhstan from third countries at the lower WTO bound tariff rates to Russia and to the other EEU member countries.

So, again, the EEU is trying to penalize member countries for building economic linkages with the outside world, and forcing them to make these kind of compromises in a way that is beneficial to Russia but is less beneficial for these countries themselves.

This is an indication, I think, of how the basic interests of the participants in the EEU in important ways do not align. Russia is an industrial power — we think of it in the West largely as a natural resource state, but compared to the other countries in the EEU, it is a large industrial power that produces primarily for export to those markets. For these other countries, which are not themselves major industrial powers and are more import-dependent of course, their interests in tariff and trade policy do not necessarily overlap with that of Moscow.

Partially for this reason the EEU spent a lot of 2015 trying to negotiate a common customs code,

which it was unable to do, largely because of objections from Kazakhstan. Again, because the basic interests of the different sides don't coincide.

One of the things that the union did accomplish during the year, incidentally, was agreeing with China on integrating the integration projects—the EEU and the Silk Road Economic Belt—which was announced in May of 2015. This 'integration of integration' was a high priority for Russia for larger geopolitical reasons, but a number of the Central Asian countries were very worried because they saw it as threatening their ability to generate tax and customs revenue from Chinese goods that were being traded across the Silk Road Economic Belt that would be going through their own countries. The loss of income threatens to deprive them of an important source of government revenue. Again, there's a lot of disconnect here between the interests and the goals of Russia, which accounts for 85% of the union's GDP, and the smaller countries.

That's the EEU. I'm going to say a bit about the CSTO, because even though it has a separate function, I think part of Moscow's vision centers on developing greater coordination among the different integration projects it sponsors, and it's a vision that not only exists in Moscow. In fact, when Armenia made the decision to become a member of the EEU in 2013, Armenian president Serzh Sargsyan said in no uncertain terms that it's impossible to be a member of one security system and another economic system. Because Armenia is part of the CSTO, and depends on the CSTO for its security, Sargsyan's argument was that it therefore had to be part of the economic system that overlaid the same group of states.

The CSTO has also been quite active. In particular, it has developed more of a focus on terrorism as the situation in Afghanistan deteriorated and has taken more steps—which I assume Richard is going to discuss to some degree—to help counteract these challenges, including exercises and drills designed to deal with what member states are worried about, in terms of the spread of terrorism across the border from Afghanistan.

At the same time, you have some of the same problems with incompatible interests among the member states within the CSTO as well. Here, Armenia is a good example, where at the CSTO meeting in December it complained about the close ties that all of the other CSTO members maintain with Azerbaijan at a time when the situation in Nagorno-Karabakh and along the Line of Contact was becoming more and more dangerous.

The CSTO's position on Karabakh could be decided politically, but, of course, since one of the parties to the conflict is a member of the CSTO and the other is not, it rankles to the country that is a member that its CSTO allies are conducting good business with its rival.

And again this situation gets to this question of whether or not there is a common vision motivating all of the CSTO member states. Similarly, if you start thinking about counterterrorism cooperation in Central Asia, it's an open question what the response of governments in Belarus and Armenia, in particular, would be should the CSTO find itself called upon to react. Belarusian and Armenian forces did participate in the CSTO's most recent counterterrorism exercises in May 2015, but if push comes to shove, it's an open question as to whether they would be willing to actually engage in military operations connected with insecurity coming from Afghanistan into Central Asia.

The CSTO is trying to develop a collective security strategy to 2025. It hasn't been published yet, but discussions are underway, and if and when a draft is published, I think it will be very interesting to see how it seeks to resolve some of these contradictions.

Overall, when one thinks about multilateralism *a la Russe* in this region, there remains a fundamental tension between Russia's vision of what integration is for and the vision or visions of the smaller states, which are participating more or less willingly in these integration projects.

Russia of course, and we can talk more about this in the discussion, sees integration in part as a strategy for establishing its role in a multipolar, global order. Whereas for countries like Kazakhstan, Belarus, Kyrgyzstan, and Armenia, it's much more about the concrete benefits of deepening integration among themselves. In other words, what's in it for me in very practical economic and security terms?

Squaring that circle remains, in many ways, the biggest challenge that both organizations face. There's also the question of exclusivity, which develops out of the same dilemma. To the extent that Russia sees these organizations as part of the strategy for balancing in a multipolar world, it would prefer that countries that are members of them are members only of these organizations—that they limit their participation in other potentially competing groups and multilateral bodies. If you're a member of the CSTO, you're not allowed to be a member of NATO; and as we've seen with Ukraine and Armenia, Russia will seek to block efforts to move closer to the European Union as well.

For the smaller countries, the challenge is figuring out how to balance participation in groups like the EEU with efforts to have both bilateral and multilateral cooperation outside of the group. One foreign diplomat that I was interviewing recently put it this way: he said that for us [from one of the smaller states], participation in the EEU is a strategic choice. Russia wants it to be a civilizational choice, but we don't. And I think that if there's any takeaway from the experience of 2015 in the functioning of both the EEU and the CSTO, it is precisely that: the question of whether these organizations require their smaller members to make a fundamental civilizational choice at a time when Russia's relationship with the West is increasingly strained.

Assessing Russia's Military Buildup in Central Asia: Dynamics and Implications

Richard Weitz

Under President Vladimir Putin, Russia has managed to reestablish its superior position in Central Asia and the South Caucasus, reinforcing Moscow's primacy in Eurasia through a combination of bilateral and multilateral initiatives. Russian diplomats have negotiated comprehensive energy, military, and other bilateral agreements with the former Soviet republics. They also have been promoting a series of increasingly ambitious Russian-led multilateral institutions, such as the Customs Union, a Eurasian Economic Union, and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). In many cases, these Moscow-led initiatives have outweighed the various Western initiatives to link Eurasia to Europe, such as the EU's eastern partnership, the U.S. State Department's New Silk Road, and NATO's partnership programs.

Russia's main defense tool in Central Asia is the CSTO. One reason Russia supports the CSTO's existence is to counterbalance NATO and U.S. military activities in the former Soviet space. Another reason for Moscow's backing of the CSTO is that it could augment Russia's international influence by allowing Moscow to claim it is acting at the head of an alliance of states or on their behalf or in defense of their interests. Another benefit for Moscow is that the CSTO helps legitimize Russia's military presence in the other member countries.

At first, Russian policymakers met considerable opposition from other member governments when they tried to expand the CSTO's combat capabilities and missions. The leaders of these newly independent states were not eager to compromise their post-Soviet autonomy. However, the Russia-Georgia War of 2008, the mass violence in the Kyrgyz Republic in 2010, the "revolutions" in the Arab states during the last few years, and NATO's inability to suppress the Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan have sufficiently alarmed CSTO members to outweigh their concerns about augmenting the CSTO's missions and capabilities long sought by Moscow.

Russian leaders repeatedly express concern about Islamist militants in Afghanistan moving northward into Central Asia. Of course, one must also consider that Russia might inflate the threat of instability and terrorism in Central Asia in order to gain greater support for its military presence and political influence in the region. Leaders of Central Asian states may also seek to misrepresent the threat of terrorism in order to control members of the political opposition.

Russian leaders have argued that Western actions in Ukraine threaten Eurasian security. They also warn Eurasian countries against developing defense ties with NATO, especially joining the alliance or supporting its missile defense projects, constructing socioeconomic ties with the European Union or other Western regional economic structures, and backing Western sanctions or other measures against Russia. Instead, they affirm Moscow's determination to build its Eurasian Economic Union and partner with China and other non-Western states in establishing a new institutional framework that would embrace Central Asia and the Caucasus in an eastward orientation.

Russian leaders caution their counterparts in Central Asia and the Caucasus that Western governments are seeking to overthrow "legitimate political authorities" with "color revolutions" by backing local groups and individuals who, under the banner of promoting civil liberties, are seeking to undermine their regimes and replace them with U.S. puppets. They hold the West responsible for the "anti-constitutional coup" in Kyiv that overthrew the constitutional system and created enduring enmity among Ukrainians and insecurity for their neighbors. The

complaint that the West has transformed Ukraine into a long-term source of European instability adjacent to Russia implies that Moscow will do whatever it can to avert similar developments in other Eurasian regions such as Central Asia.

Another line of thought found in the current Russian discourse seeks to limit Western ideas in local media—including through suppression of the Internet—by warning of how foreign intelligence agencies and terrorists misuse information flows to weaken national unity and stir up ethnic and religious hatred. If leaders in Central Asia and the Caucasus suppress media freedoms, they will further alienate their countries from Western partners and have fewer alternatives to deepening ties with the Eurasian autocracies.

Of the five Central Asian states, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan depend most on Russia for security due to deficiencies in their equipment and training. Moreover, Russia maintains large military bases in both states. As a carrot and as a means of keeping its allies militarily dependent, the Russian government provides CSTO personnel with subsidized education and training opportunities at Russian military institutions and allows CSTO allies to purchase Russian weapons at the same cost as the Russian armed forces. Russia has also donated more than one million dollars' worth of military equipment to the Tajik and Kyrgyz militaries, which find it harder than oil-rich Kazakhstan to purchase Russian weapons even at subsidized prices.

Through the CSTO, Russia has been increasing the frequency and size of its exercises in recent years through drills aimed at improving interoperability and rapid reaction capabilities for a variety of missions, including counter-narcotics; counter-insurgency; collective defense; nuclear, biological, and chemical clean-up; reconnaissance; and logistics. But while the CSTO has conducted numerous military exercises, it has never engaged in an actual combat operation. The CSTO has been criticized for past failures to act in crises directly affecting member states, such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) incursion into Kyrgyzstan in 1999 to 2000 and ethnic violence in Kyrgyzstan in 2010. There have also been suggestions by Russian and other CSTO analysts that the CSTO might deploy peacekeeping forces in eastern Ukraine, but no member government has yet supported that idea.

Thus far, Beijing has been content to leave Moscow and the CSTO to police Central Asia. However, as China's interests in the region grow, Beijing may seek a greater security role for the SCO, particularly if the CSTO looks unable to manage what even its members predict will be a sharp deterioration in Afghanistan's security environment following the withdrawal of all NATO forces.

Capturing Russian Media Influence in Central Asia

Marlene Laruelle and Marat Raimkhanov

The research I am presenting here is an ongoing project that I am doing with my colleague Marat Raimkhanov. Since the Ukrainian crisis, there have been a large number of statements both in the US and Europe, as well as in Central Asia itself, about the Russian media influence in the region. And indeed sociological surveys that collect public opinion in the former Soviet states show a group of three countries—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan—largely sharing the same world perceptions as the public opinion in Russia. This parallel is less visible in Uzbekistan. Even if compared to many other post-Soviet countries, Uzbek public opinion can still be considered as closely aligned with the Russian one, and we have almost no information for Turkmenistan.

However, one does not know what the level of this Russian media influence is, which portions of the public opinion it is exerted on, which specific issues it is focused on, or how to interpret it. Paradoxically, very little research has been done on Central Asian media. The few studies we have were mostly done in the 1990s and were devoted to the issue of freedom of press. But we have almost no work on state-controlled media, which shapes the majority of public opinion. So what I would like to do here is to discuss with you the kind of data we have, the difficulty in trying to capture this Russian media influence, and to give you some preliminary findings.

We have some good indirect data of what we guess can be interpreted as Russian media influence in the region. For example, the Integration Barometer published every year by the Eurasian Development Bank shows that in 2014, during the Ukrainian crisis, the number of people in Kazakhstan supporting integration with Russia suddenly increased—showing support for the Russian perception of the crisis—while at the same, it notably dropped in Kyrgyzstan—showing a more polarized public opinion. We have other kind of more direct data. Recently, BBG and Gallup published a series of surveys done over the whole post-Soviet region. These surveys show without ambiguity that in Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Tajikistan, a majority of the public opinion considers the Russian media to be highly reliable, significantly more than Western media.

Marat and I are thus trying to un-puzzle this Russian media influence in the region, and today I will specifically discuss the Kazakhstani case. Russian media dominates the Kazakhstani television space: the most popular television channel is First Channel-Eurasia, 20% of which is controlled by the government of Russia; the most popular show on TV is Russian (*Pole chudes*) and most popular miniseries are Russian; and almost 50% of channels transmitted through cable networks are Russian. Russia also dominates the Kazakhstani internet space—the most popular services are Russian—along with the Kazakhstani radio space—the two most popular radio stations, Radio Retro and Russian Radio, are Russian. Finally, it also dominates a large part of the Kazakhstani print press—in particular, *Komsomols'kaia pravda* and *Argumenty i fakty*—which are widespread throughout the country. However, once we notice this domination of Russian media in Kazakhstan, it still leaves us with more questions than answers. I will briefly discuss several of them.

First, can we really dissociate a 'television versus Internet framework,' as it has often been stated? We usually tend to separate the TV as being state controlled, and the Internet as being free. But both display more or less the same views: Internet is just amplifying what is said on TV, for better or for worse. Obviously on the Internet one can find non-mainstream narratives which are not available on television, but still, both mediums are in fact sharing much more of

their worldview than we would imagine.

Second, it is not because people read Russian newspapers or watch Russian TV that they accept everything; they may display critical distance. However, we have very few tools to measure this critical distance. Third, we often do not know exactly what is coming from Russia, and what is 'genuinely' Central Asian. Sharing perception is not an evidence of a unilateral Russian influence over Central Asia. Fourth, sometimes the information available is so general that we don't know what is produced in Russia, and what is produced in Central Asia in Russian language. That's an important difference, because it means in the second case we should be able to identify media actors in Central Asia, and not only in Russia.

Another point I want to raise is that we assume that what is published in national languages is less pro-Russian than what is in Russian, but we have only anecdotal evidence to demonstrate that. Another assumption is about the role played by labor migrants in spreading Russian perceptions. We have some information showing that households with migrants working in Russia are often more pro-Russian than the average. At the same time, we do not have studies discussing how migrants manage fears of street xenophobia and discrimination in Russia while at the same time promoting Russian perceptions.

So what does that mean? It means that we have limited tools to capture this Russian media influence. What I would like to do now—for the remaining time I have—is discuss what I consider to be the critical elements and variables to study in order to offer a more nuanced view on this media influence.

First, we can suppose that generations matter, but surveys are contradictory on that issue. Some show that older generations are sharing more with Russia than new ones due to their obvious shared Soviet past; others show that the younger you are, the more statistically likely you are to be pro-Russian. So that seems to be kind of a difficult variable to work with.

Second, the line of divide between urban and rural populations is a key one for the whole region. However, here too it is difficult to demonstrate that urban populations would be more pro-Russian, and rural populations less—because the latter live in a Kazakh-speaking environment. Some surveys show the contrary: rural populations are more supportive of Russia, of its strong leadership and its 'law and order' narrative, while urban populations, parts of which follow Western media, are more critical or distant. As I said, the difference between Russian and national languages is still an unknown variable. No scholars have been studying how a specific topic is discussed in parallel in Russian and in national languages.

The fourth variable, one that I consider to be crucial, is that Russian media influence should be studied topic by topic. Russian media has been successful in shaping the Central Asian public opinion mostly on foreign policy and worldviews issues: in stating that the liberal order is an illusion, that everything is geopolitical, that the United States has hidden hands behind every big world event, that history is made by 'civilizations', and that Russia offers at least a balance or possible alternative to the US/liberal order. This explains why Central Asian public opinion largely supported the Russian perception of the crisis in Ukraine, as well the anti-NGO and other 'foreign agents' laws, which are framed by media in this 'civilizational' language.

However, Russian media has failed, partly or largely, to produce a narrative for domestic, Central Asian, issues. Questions related to Central Asian history and Russia's place within it, on national identity, Central Asian public opinions—even if they share many aspects of the current Soviet nostalgia—are much more critical than what the Russian media would like them to be.

The same goes for seeing Russian society and the Russian economy as a model for the future; here, too, the success is more limited than what the massive investment by Moscow in Russian media soft power was hoping for.

To conclude, I think we see a growing paradox among Central Asian societies—of course a deeper analysis should offer a dissociated view country by country. We see a rising number of people, especially young, feeling unsatisfied with the way Russia interacts with Central Asia and with what they interpret as Russia's sentiments of (post-)colonial superiority. The growing number of people identifying themselves as Muslims plays a role in it, while at the same time they share Russia's worldviews and perceptions of its role in the world. Consequently, it is crucial to develop new analytical tools to capture the critical distance that people have toward media.

Speed Bumps on the New Silk Road

Scott S. Smith

For most of the Obama administration, a not insignificant amount of diplomatic energy has been invested in the idea of building a “New Silk Road” in which Afghanistan would act as a land bridge between South and Central Asia, allowing in particular the energy surplus in Central Asia to be transported to energy deficit countries of South Asia—Pakistan, in particular. This vision formed the centerpiece of the presidential campaign of Afghanistan’s new president, Ashraf Ghani, when he ran in 2014. The expectation was that the rents Afghanistan would benefit from this project would allow it to become sustainable. From a larger perspective, it was also assumed that the benefits that would accrue to the region would provide less incentive for regional partners to meddle in Afghanistan’s perpetually fractious politics. The flaw in the theory was always that it was more likely that Afghanistan’s fractious politics would impede the development of this project rather than be healed by it. At one time this might have been considered a “chicken and egg” question; it is now increasingly clear, however, that stability—or at least far greater stability than exists right now in Afghanistan—must precede infrastructure and economic development.

Certain shifts in the policies of countries such as Russia and China towards Afghanistan indicate that they have little hope that the fifteen-year project to stabilize that country will succeed. Furthermore, they are building the probability of failure and ongoing instability in Afghanistan into their calculations and acting on them in ways that are undermining the fragile international unity that used to exist, at least rhetorically, regarding Afghanistan.

The immediate cause of this shift is the emergence of a branch of the “Islamic State” in Afghanistan, formally announced by the Raqqa-based movement as “Islamic State in Khorasan” (IS-K). It is unlikely that IS-K has strong links to Raqqa, or that it has long-term viability in Afghanistan. The group was able to hold several districts in eastern Afghanistan and appeared to have a small presence in Helmand, but that was immediately challenged by the Taliban. Anti-IS-K operations by both Afghan national army forces and US drone strikes, while facing a separate counterinsurgency campaign by the Taliban, have reduced its presence in the east as well. Nonetheless, the specter of IS in Afghanistan is a symbol of how little control the Afghan state actually has over its territory. The possibility that it might expand to Central Asia is a concern to those countries as well as to Russia. Equally worrying to some Central Asian states is the presence of groups like the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, allied with Chechen, Uyghur, and other extremists, in Afghanistan, some of whom appear to have formed alliances with IS-K. These groups were once based in the tribal areas of Pakistan but fled into Afghanistan to escape Pakistan’s two-year counterinsurgency operation to clear those areas.

Afghanistan’s political transition has been as uncertain as the security transition. The 2014 presidential election almost brought about a collapse of the political order and led to a power-sharing government that has so far been unable to deliver on its promised reform agenda and barely able to form a cabinet. An opposition to the government has formed and is increasingly agitating for alternative governing arrangements—including new, early, elections. None of this inspires confidence in future Afghan political stability, especially as the rump international community in Afghanistan, led by the United States, continues to signal disengagement.

The lack of confidence in the US-driven project to rebuild Afghanistan has led to a gradual breaking down of the tacit international cooperation around that project. Russia, which for a decade tolerated without complaint the presence of a large NATO-led force in its backyard, has

now signaled through stark and strong statements by senior officials such as Zamir Kabullov that Russia is not interested in US initiatives in Afghanistan. These may be read as mere rhetorical broadsides in the context of the “new Cold War” between Russia and the United States, but other indications suggest that there is more to it. The recent sale of 10,000 Kalashnikovs to the Afghan National Army is something that would have been unthinkable even a few years ago—Russia, given its past in history, would never have proposed the sale and Afghanistan would never have accepted it. Finally, reports that Russia is secretly supporting the Afghan Taliban in their fight against IS-K can be read in a number of ways, but none of them indicate confidence in Afghanistan’s future or cooperation with a United States-shaped strategy.

The breakdown of international consensus increasingly suggests that Afghanistan is quickly losing the opportunity it was provided fourteen years ago to re-found its political order on an inclusive and rules-based system, reintegrate itself into the global community, as well as benefit from its geographical position as a potential “land bridge”.

For all the talk about the New Silk Road—and there have been endless papers, conferences, and speeches on it—all the action has been according to a different blueprint. China has invested extensively in east-west energy infrastructure, bringing Central Asian energy to China across Afghanistan’s northern border. Its proposed China-Pakistan corridor would similarly bypass Afghanistan, cutting northeast to southwest from Kashgar to Gwadar. The possibility of Iran opening to global trade would further isolate Afghanistan. India has begun re-investing in its proposed infrastructure corridor from the new Iranian port at Char Bahar up to Central Asia. Finally, if the final issues that have bedeviled agreement on the Iran-Pakistan-India pipeline were worked out, then that would be a much more likely way of bringing Turkmen gas to Pakistan than through Afghanistan. It is another sad reality that new building techniques mean that the construction of infrastructure such as pipelines mean they can be built increasingly quickly. The ability of Afghans to resolve their political problems, in the meantime, seems only to have increased.

US officials may be the last ones still talking about the New Silk Road and regional integration, but the reality is of an Afghanistan that is increasingly being shut out of fast-moving developments that is linking the region to the world in a number of different ways that do not require Afghanistan, and indeed are bypassing it. Central Asian officials have never really bought into the New Silk Road rhetoric. In part, this is because the US, unlike China, never put any resources behind their vision. Mostly, however, they do not see much that Afghanistan has to offer that they would like to import and they are wary of regional economic integration in general. The burden has therefore always been on Afghanistan to prove that it can offer something. Unfortunately, Afghanistan’s leaders, despite having at times significant US-backing, have failed to do so. Given the regional recalculations of the past few months, the effort will most likely become far more difficult.

International Arbitration and US Interests in Central Asia

Eric McGlinchey

I would like to pick up on a few points Scott was making. One, your point about the challenges of the Silk Road—the US Silk Road policy—and your astute observation that a lot of Central Asians feel the benefits are theoretical and far off in the future. This is a serious framing challenge for US policy. What I want to talk about here is something that is not theoretical, that is immediately possible, and I think might resonate as a real benefit for the region. I also want to address the idea—and I think that Scott is right in the way that he has framed it—of US disengagement. This conclusion has been phrased, a little bit more politically correct and diplomatically, by a recent report that came out of Carnegie by Rumer, Sokolsky, and Stronski, and I wanted to take a little bit of issue with this policy of ‘disengagement’, and suggest that perhaps it is a bit premature. And then I want to address Scott’s point about the view of Central Asians associating democracy with instability.

A lot of what I want to talk about leads into some of the earlier debates that we had, as social scientists, about ‘transitions’. In the 1990s, when we were looking at post-Soviet Central Asia, and the post-Soviet space in general, there was a lot of optimism about the potential for transition. A lot of us said that this was naive optimism. Today we are at a new stage where there is a lot of pessimism about the continuity of autocracy. And what I would like to suggest is that we are maybe going too far in the opposite direction. The current US disengagement policy is making the exact same mistake that we made in the 1990s, but in the opposite direction. Where we were overly optimistic in the 1990s, we are overly pessimistic today. I’ll try to lay out this argument. And a lot of this has to do with this idea of property rights. My point here is that international arbitration is going to come in as part of the mechanic that will get us to a hopefully more optimistic future for Central Asia.

Let me begin with a little bit of micro-level data. I’m a social scientist, I like to go to the field and do a little bit of research every now and then, and so this story that I’m going to tell you is the story about everything which is wrong right now with the potential for transition in Central Asia. Some of you will know this building. This is 107 Kievskaya in Bishkek, and it’s owned by the Lozitski family. Natalia Lozitskaya—well, her husband owns it—is the real *tour de force* behind this property. And the case is interesting because this is one of the only cases that I know of in Kyrgyzstan where the state tried to take over a property, the property owner fought it in court, and won. They actually won.

Let me give just a little bit of background. In 2007, the court cases began against the Lozitskis. It was a third party that brought it, but it was known that Janish Bakiyev wanted this property. If you have been here, you know this is such a plum piece of property in Bishkek. It’s probably worth—well, I don’t even want to hazard how much it’s worth. Natalia, who also is probably the leading budget expert in Kyrgyzstan, fought this all the way to the end, and the end was in April 2010. This date probably gives you some indication, or some understanding, about why she actually won the case. In April 2010, the Bakiyevs were overthrown. She went to court the next week, and the judge said, “You know, look Natalia, don’t worry about it, the case has been dropped.” And not only that, but the head judge apologized to her and said, “Listen, there was only so much I could do; I tried to stall the case, we tried to stretch it out as long we could. But you have to realize that I was told there was a certain verdict that had to be delivered.”

So the problem that we see in Central Asia, not just Kyrgyzstan, but throughout Central Asia, is there is no private property. There’s no private property rights whatsoever, and this poses deep,

deep challenges for transition. I am going to return to that in a few more minutes. But let me just give you a couple things that I want to put on the table before we get to the central point.

First, I would like to take a look at US interests in historical perspective in Central Asia to lay the grounds for why I think we are currently going in the wrong direction. Next I want to talk about Central Asia's institutional change. And assessments for Central Asia's institutional change (including my own) have been very negative. I would like to suggest that there actually has been some very deep, fundamental institutional change that we should pay attention to. It actually opens up the possibility for some kind of political reform. And then the last point I want to look at is this idea of "tribunals" and "transitions," and how external tribunals—I'm thinking about the International Center for Settlement of Investment Disputes, say, for example, here in DC, or the Stockholm Chamber of Commerce where we see a lot of this litigation going on over big Central Asian assets—can act as vehicles for providing property rights in the absence of property rights in Central Asia per se.

As far as US interests in the historical perspective, I would direct everyone's attention to this very good study by Rumer, Sokolsky, and Stronski that came out with Carnegie in January 2016. It's a good study; actually there was a recent event at Johns Hopkins where people were talking past each other and Navbahor Imamova, from Voice of America, said, "Let's take a look at what's already been said, let's talk to one another." So I want to directly talk to this study that Rumer and Stronski and Sokolsky put out, and go to issue, in a friendly way, over a few of their points. I think they get the central formulation of US interests in Central Asia essentially right, at least for the 1.0 that they refer to in the 1990s. Initially, the United States was interested in eliminating the spread of nuclear weapons, and promoting political and economic reform. And for the 2001-2014 period, geopolitical interests were indeed very much driving US foreign policy toward Central Asia.

Today, the policy that is being advanced by the establishment—and I would put Rumer and Sokolsky and Stronsky very much in the establishment—is the following. They suggest, first, that we prioritize US regional engagement with Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. Second, that we recognize that the United States shares some interests with Russia and China, and seek to harness Russia and China's actions to advance these interests. And third, this is going to be the one that I take most issue with, "Let demands for change be locally driven and focus the US reform agenda on improving social and economic conditions rather than democracy promotion." So this is essentially raising the white flag on democracy in government and so forth. I want to question the wisdom of that advice. They say next, "Do not condition security cooperation on human rights performance." Also, "Avoid militarizing US policy by overreacting to the threat of Islamic extremism"—very sage advice, I would posit. And lastly, "Use leverage more effectively by playing harder to get and pursuing more realistic and prioritized goals."

Again, I want to focus on the point to let demand for change be locally driven and for the United States to step away from democracy promotion. I think there's a lot more that can be done, and there's a lot of low-lying fruit that can be accessed that we're not paying attention to. But, to get to that point, let me just lay out their argument and some of the logic of their argument, which, to a certain extent, I agree with. First they say, "Efforts at democracy promotion have not been successful". Not only has there been no progress towards regime change in Central Asia, there has been backsliding. If you look at the indices of, say, Freedom House, this statement is right. There's been no change in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan along this seven-point scale. It was not free in 1991, it's not free today. There's been no change—well actually there's been some change in Tajikistan and Kazakhstan—it's gone from "Partly Free," according to Freedom House, to "Not Free." And then, Kyrgyzstan, "Partly Free" to "Partly Free." So, some backsliding,

otherwise, no change.

If you look at aggregate indices, and you kind of just sit back and look at the big picture from 30,000 feet up, they're right. But I would like to posit that there's actually been a fair amount of change that we would do well to pay attention to. There's been fundamental institutional change in the region. And, more specifically, if you look at what these countries entered into the post-Soviet period with, you had really no elections to speak of. Elections now are seen as fraudulent, but the elections before were even more fraudulent. You had a single party that had complete control over the ideological space. There was no conceivable way to imagine some kind of institutionalized transfer of power outside of the Communist Party. That no longer is the case. They have elections in Central Asia. Of course they are manipulated heavily. There is opposition in Central Asia. Of course, the opposition is oppressed. But it's not beyond the realm of imagination to have a scenario with a different outcome.

The population and the political elite have been acculturated into this institution of elections that are well-covered in the press, where you see fighting, where people actually participate in some kind of meaningful way. So, I would posit that's a fundamental change that, to a certain degree, US and international efforts—but most of all, Central Asian efforts—at political reform have brought about. We should pay attention to that and we should not just write off the 1990s and the 2000s as a failure. This is a big change.

Where there hasn't been a big change, however, is in this realm of private property. I would posit that for regime change, the elections, the breaking of the monopoly of the ideology, these are necessary—but not sufficient—conditions for political reform. Also necessary but not sufficient is the presence of private property rights. People who have private property rights have a stake in political reform. They would much prefer to have a system that is not patronage-based. They would much prefer to have a system where individual access to some asset is not at the whim of some autocrat. They would much prefer to have some kind of rule of law. But we don't have this in Central Asia. Rather what we have is patronage-rule. We have the leader, who distributes rents, and in return for loyalty to the leader, individuals get to maintain some kind of tenuous control over their assets.

The scenario that I'd like to put before you is, what would happen if we had both the institutional change *and* the private property rights? Here, I think we would have a much more rosy understanding of the potential for political reform in Central Asia. And this is not just a theoretical example, this is an example that we see today in Kazakhstan. Kazakhstan is the one country in Central Asia where there is some measure of property rights. If you look at litigation, international litigation (all these big assets that are being litigated in Stockholm or here in DC or Isle of Man or London), it's rarely litigation about Kazakh assets in Kazakhstan: they're litigating assets that have been taken over in Uzbekistan or in Kyrgyzstan. So you have some degree of private property rights. I would posit that you have this because the Kazakh government does not feel worried about other economic actors because they know they are the biggest game in town. In Kyrgyzstan or Uzbekistan, the government does fear people becoming wealthy, gathering enough resources to challenge it. In Kazakhstan, that was never a fear of the Nazarbayev's government, so there was never this level attack on private property rights that one noticed in Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, or Tajikistan.

If you look at the prospects for change with the upcoming leadership successions—the fact that Nazarbayev and Karimov are aging out of office—what effect does this have on Central Asia? I say it's a very different effect in place where you have both institutional change—that is, elections and breaking of the monopoly of the ideology—and private property. In a place like

Kazakhstan, you can imagine a scenario with some contested transition and a real potential for political reform, while in Uzbekistan, where institutional change has been minimal, and property rights are non-existent, the likelihood of meaningful political reform is very low. So, again, this isn't an unrealistic scenario, at least for Kazakhstan.

What I'd like to say in conclusion is, go back to that example of Natalia Lozitskaya and her ability to protect her property rights in Kyrgyzstan, this is the one-off example. Imagine a scenario where several very influential business people were able to defend their rights, incorporate international, or where companies could take advantage of Bilateral Investment Treaties and litigation, and thus access Stockholm, London, or the ICSID to protect their property rights. We see this actually going on right now with Kumtor in Kyrgyzstan. Imagine a scenario where we actually had wealthy individuals at the local level who had an interest in changing the system.

I think we're at the early days of seeing people defending their property rights through the international arbitration, and accumulation of capital among business folk at the local level. You can imagine a scenario like you see now in Kazakhstan, where the next time we have an exogenous shock—that is, Karimov dies or another leader dies, or there's some kind of ground swell like we see in Kyrgyzstan every five years—it could generate political transition or some kind of political reform.

So, just to sum up, I think, for a long time, academics, people like me, have been faulted for being far too optimistic about the prospects for transition in Central Asia. We're now in a period where the United States has kind of just said it's 'disengaging.' It's walking away. And there are prior mechanisms out there, short of these grandiose Silk Road strategies, where the vision is distant and the benefits are not immediate. There are immediate things that the United States can do. For example, helping with this process of international arbitration, where we could see the potential for reform. We have the institutionalization of elections; we have the institutionalization of alternative ideologies. We don't have the private property. There are ways to advance private property so as to bring about some kind of political reform in Central Asia.

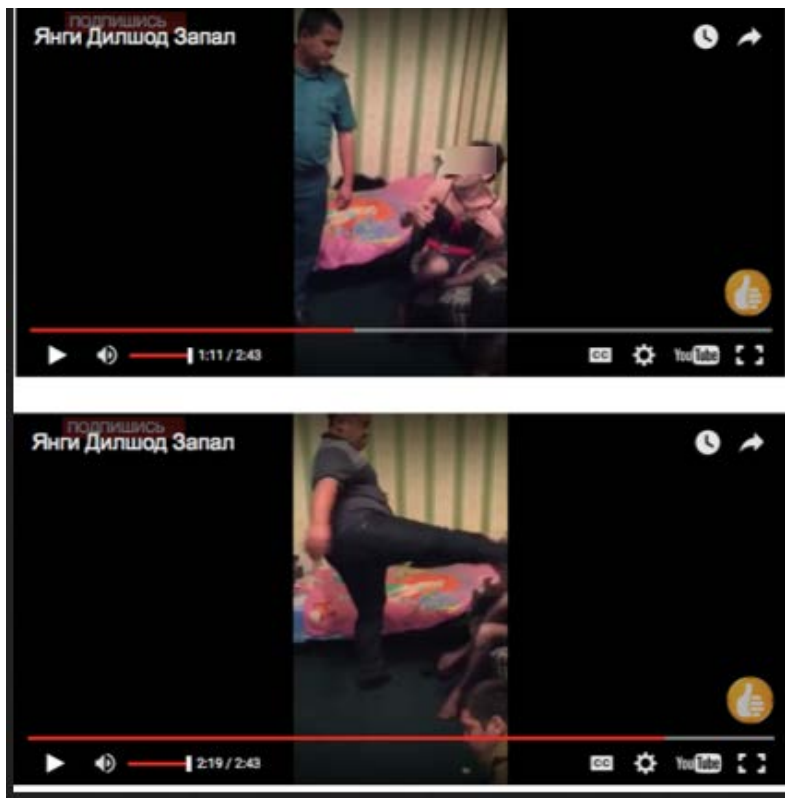
Fear and Loathing in Central Asia: Social Media's Role in Generating Hate and Mobilizing Violence

Noah Tucker

In early January of this year, a new Uzbekistani independent news and satire site called ElTuz published a disturbing video, carefully redacted to obscure the identities of the victims portrayed. The video, which the article notes first began circulating on social media in Uzbekistan a few months earlier, shows plainclothes police officers carrying out a raid in an apartment in Tashkent. They had received information about a transvestite inside, and as the group burst through the door they grabbed the men inside and roughly forced them to the floor, shouting abuse at them as one of them filmed the entire “raid” on his own cell phone and later leaked it to the Internet. A half-clothed transvestite dressed only in makeup and underwear is the focus of their attention, slight and skinny and trembling with fear. One of the officers demands that she retrieve her passport and show it to them, and she begins to weep. Terrified, surrounded, almost naked, begging them not to expose her secret life, she pleads between sobs, “I have a family, please, I have a family, if they find out I will kill myself.” A portly officer, looming over her, responds by kicking her in the chest.

ElTuz published the video to shame the police officers who abused the citizens in the apartment, and noted that they wanted to raise awareness about the plight of marginalized minorities living in a country where private relations between men is illegal even in their homes, and where the existence of transgender people is a subject that “cannot even be discussed.” Some two weeks later, the site triumphantly reported that after the first article was published, readers had identified the senior officers in the video who had led the raid and engaged in the most brutality, leading them both to be demoted and punished by the Tashkent City Internal Affairs department. It appeared to be nothing short of a small miracle in one of the world’s most consolidated authoritarian

governments with one of the worst records on press freedom: citizen journalism had forced accountability for the country’s ubiquitous and seemingly all-powerful police. A well-known Uzbek activist living in exile posted the article to a popular Facebook group called “Qo’rqmaymiz” (“We are Not Afraid”), which itself began in 2014 as a social media protest encouraging citizens to stand up and claim their constitutional rights. While the group, which now has more than 10,000 members, tends to discuss issues from a Western liberal-democratic perspective, it is most notable for including members from all across the Uzbek political



spectrum, many still inside Uzbekistan (in contrast to previous efforts that were rarely able to bridge the politics of exile to the needs and interests of the vast majority of Uzbeks who still live in Uzbekistan).



It was here, in the response within the social media group, that the story took another unexpected turn: instead of applauding the minor journalistic miracle, users in what may be the most largest, most free, open, and diverse discussion platform on Uzbek social media began to cautiously defend the police and less cautiously call for gays and lesbians to be put to death. “That was good [what the police did in the video], What [are you] supposed to do with those ITs?” (ОНОлар Russian+Uzbek). “This is the first time I have ever felt bad for a cop... I am against homos. I’m don’t support Iran and ISIS, but if they kill gays I support that. The

punishment for gays and lesbians is death.” “...That’s right – death to pedos!” The discussion took place mostly in Uzbek, but with nearly every reference to sexual minorities – particularly the most course and derogatory – users briefly code-switched to use Russian words. Though Uzbekistan state press and officials have railed for over a decade against what they claim is a Western liberal conspiracy to destroy Uzbek culture and values, the language used in the discussion (*pidor[ast]*, *gomoseky*, *ono* [the Russian third-person neutral pronoun]) is not the language of Uzbek state media – it is not Uzbek at all. It is the language of Russia’s culture war, the shibboleths of an anti-liberal assault that in the past three years has become increasingly violent across Eurasia, and Central Asia is no exception. The video published by ElTuz is only one of dozens of attacks on trans people in Uzbekistan filmed for the applause of a social media audience, and the response of the Qo’rqmaymiz commenters is far more common than the outrage the journalists hoped to inspire on behalf of the victims. Vigilante attacks on people in public who appear to potentially be transvestites have become some of the most “successful” self-published videos on Uzbek language social media, with some reaching more than half a million views. Each attack is brutal and violent, but often treated as a joke by viewers, the attackers applauded for purging society of some unwanted or inhuman “foreign contagion.”

The Uzbek trans attacks are a small part of a much larger trend emerging in Central Asia (and elsewhere) as people use social media technology to create larger identity groups and mobilize violence against the group’s “enemies.” The identities, as well as the enemies, are perhaps imagined, and the interactions begin as virtual; but the violence that results is very real. Much attention has already been paid to the way jihadists and violent Islamist extremists use social media to recruit for the war in Syria and attempt to inspire violence at home; the overwhelming international attention this trend has received has perhaps obscured the fact that jihadists are only one of several groups in Central Asia using social media this way and perhaps not the most influential. In addition to the disorganized “social media vigilante” activity exemplified by the examples above in Uzbekistan, most other states in the region have organized movements that use social media to coordinate member actions in real life and mobilize physical violence.

Three basic groupings of organizations represent broader movements:

1) Jihadist organizations, including Central Asian members of ISIS, that use social media to recruit members and mobilize them to join military conflict or carry out terrorist attacks;

2) Russian ultra-nationalist and pro-Eurasian organizations, like the *Moladya Evraziya* movement led by Alexander Dugin admirer Yuri Koffner – many of which are linked to Slavic White Power groups – that have trained and mobilized recruits to fight in military operations against the Ukrainian central government (whom they describe as puppets of “Western liberal-fascism”) in Crimea and Eastern Ukraine; and



Кырк чоро рейд кытайлар менен жургон сойку кыздар

Негетичный КГ +18
Jun 29, 2015 at 10:50 am · 58 views

https://vk.com/kg_club

Screenshot from a Kyrk Choro video, distributed by members to advertise their “raids” on Bishkek restaurants where they claim ethnic Kyrgyz waitresses are “prostituting themselves” for Chinese foreign visitors.

3) Indigenous ultra-nationalist or far-right groups like *Kyrk Choro* [left] and *Kalys* in Kyrgyzstan.

While at first glance the groups have irreconcilably conflicting ideologies, their mobilization tactics are remarkably similar, as are the narratives that they advance to convince ordinary Tajiks or Uzbeks or Russians in Kazakhstan that “we” (Sunni Muslims, ethnic Russians, non-Westerners, ethnic Kyrgyz, etc) face an external threat that can only be countered with violence. The similarities between groups and their social media mobilization tactics is not a coincidence, and is not limited to Central Asia. These groups can best be understood as part of a much larger picture, a global or generational response to circumstances perceived to have been shaped by neo-liberal economics and liberalizing social reforms. As I have written about elsewhere,

ISIS recruiting Central Asian migrant workers in Russia, for example, is light on Salafi jihadist theology and extremely heavy on victimization narratives that rail against perceived Western and Jewish conspiracies they claim create the economic hardship faced by non-Slavic migrants in a society mobilized to hate and suspect them by mirrors of these same conspiracy theories (with a different “victim”). This global wave of not just illiberal, but specifically *anti-liberal* social mobilization with militant and terrorist groups at its extremes – it is readily visible here in the United States and in Europe as well. Populist candidates like Donald Trump or Marie Le Pen inspire enthusiastic support of far-right groups who believe that progressive social policies, immigration, or “multiculturalism” are all part of a global plot to commit “white genocide.”



Anti-LGBTI protesters break into the May 17 celebration of the International Day Against Homophobia and Transphobia (IDAHOT) in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan. Click the image for video. (Photo from video courtesy of Labrys)

All of these groups rely heavily on the ease with which (often deliberately) falsified information from “alternative news” sources can be mixed with selective or heavily skewed interpretations of current events to create distinct (and often conflicting) alternative versions of reality on social media. In the same way that the false belief that President Obama was born in Kenya and therefore was a “foreign infiltrator” was used throughout his presidency to mobilize hatred against him and against the US government



From Facebook, a collage illustrating an article from a popular independent reformist Islamic devotional site warning share the “fake Burma pictures” [Uzbek].

(among its citizens), Central Asian social media feeds are full of fake photographs of Buddhist monks supposedly murdering Muslim babies in Burma, of John McCain shaking hands with Abu Bakr al Baghdadi (the leader of ISIS), or a fake social media account created to post “firsthand testimony” of a Muslim doctor from the Caucasus (who does not exist) who “witnessed” the “brutality of Ukrainian” soldiers against ethnic Russians and claimed it was worse than the Nazi occupation. Fake reports or false information is used within each “us” group to interpret real events, often reversing victimization and reinterpreting

uncomfortable realities that might challenge political convictions to support them instead.

While militant Islamist groups like ISIS or the Uzbek al-Bukhoriy Brigade in Syria are the best armed and organized of the diverse set of extremist groups currently mobilizing in Central Asia, their recruiting activities continue to take place largely outside of the region (among migrants and exiles) and to mobilize militancy elsewhere. Etho-nationalist and anti-liberal violence continues to take place much more frequently – albeit on a smaller scale – within the region itself, and it is often supported or tacitly condoned by regional states, including Russia. To understand the future of grassroots violence in Central Asia we may need to look past a few hundred high-profile (but short-lived) militants in Syria and consider that the sobering prospect of tens of thousands of young people who laugh and express approval when a fellow countryman is beaten in the street for being different as bystanders idly look on. In the right circumstances – if political competition were to emerge in Kazakhstan or Uzbekistan following the death of their leaders-for-life – these anti-liberal mobilizations could become a tempting base for populist politics, just as they already have in the US and several European states.



Clockwise left to right: Yuri Koffner's profile picture from the Russian social media network VKontakte – his organization has affiliate offices in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan; Uzbeks in ISIS fighting in Iraq; Kyrk Choro in Kyrgyzstan.

Russian-speaking Militants in Syria and Iraq: A Threat to Russia and Central Asia?

Jean-François Ratelle

This policy brief investigates the trajectories and profiles of North Caucasian militants in Syria and Iraq in order to assess the threat they represent for Russia and the Eurasian region in general. By looking at the importance of Russian-speaking militants in the Syrian civil war, it seeks to underline a forgotten component of the brutal Russian intervention in Syria. If the main rationale of the intervention has always been aimed at ensuring Bashar Al-Assad's regime survival and serving as a geopolitical leverage for Russia against the West, it also represents an effective way to fight a brutal counterterrorist operation against ISIS, Jabhat al-Nusra, and its Russian-speaking militants threatening the post-Soviet space. In order to further explain this counterterrorist strategy, it is crucial to look at these militants, their short-term objectives, and their willingness, or lack thereof, to return to Russia or to Central Asia in order to export their jihadist views.

One can identify two waves of North Caucasian foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq; these two waves mirror what one can observe in Western countries and in Central Asia. The first wave of North Caucasian foreign fighters was mainly concentrated between 2012 and 2013 and consisted of members of the North Caucasian diaspora unable to travel to the North Caucasus to support the insurgency. The majority of foreign fighters were Chechens and Kists living in Turkey, Georgia, and in Western Europe, and they were seeking a credible alternative in order to join the fight against Russia and its allies. These foreign fighters were generally associated with the Imarat Kavkaz (the Caucasus Emirate) network in Turkey, as many of them fought along with the organization and the Chechen resistance during the Second Chechen war. By the end of 2014, several fighters from the North Caucasus had reached key strategic positions in Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS.

At the same time, the long-term goal of these militants always remained to fight against the Russians in the North Caucasus, but the Syrian civil war was seen as a temporary solution in order to gain military experience and create links with transnational Islamist fighters. Their numbers remained relatively low and did not represent an important trend inside the North Caucasus itself. According to many interviews I conducted in Dagestan and in Chechnya in 2011, during this period the jihad in Syria was never depicted as an important issue of interest for the North Caucasians Salafists. They considered their own struggle with the Russian state as the most urgent issue to be dealt with. Issues like local corruption, religious repression, and nepotism were underlined by respondents as key social problems in the region which required immediate actions, in contrast with international jihad and the Syrian civil war, which were perceived as foreign problems. It is in this context that the first contingent of ethnically Caucasian fighters travelled to Syria.

However, with the establishment of the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq in 2014, the situation changed radically for many religiously-driven individuals in the North Caucasus. The second wave of foreign fighters started leaving in the summer of 2014 and were mainly composed of young Salafists seeking to join the Islamic State in order to live under Sharia law and escape Russian religious repression. The emigration phenomenon often included entire families severing ties with their communities in order to live the 'Caliphate' dream. The Federal Security Service (FSB) facilitated the transit of these militants by offering indirect logistical support (i.e. passports without background checks) seeking to export its extremist problem abroad.¹ Even if

¹ <http://www.novayagazeta.ru/inquests/69364.html>

the majority of the second wave would not openly express an intention to return to Russia in order to fight the jihad, the growing number of militants leaving Russia represented a potential problem for Moscow.

Under the influence of key Russian-speaking insurgent leaders controlling important militant factions in Syria and Iraq, these new recruits represented an enormous potential to destabilize Russia in the near future. As the number of Russian-speaking militants exponentially grew in 2014 and 2015, these Caucasian insurgent leaders started threatening Russia directly by openly advocating for the return to the North Caucasus to export their jihad back home. Even with a high mortality rate amongst these Russian-speaking militants in Syria and Iraq, the number remained far superior to the currently active militants in the North Caucasus and could jumpstart the Islamist underground movement in the region.

Vladimir Putin's speech at the General Assembly of the United Nations in September 2015 and the subsequent Russian decision to intervene in Syria should be seen in relationship to the growing threat posed by Russian-speaking militants in Syria and Iraq. Bashar al-Assad's regime's survival and its military offensive against the Syrian opposition can be seen as a key feature of a broader Russian counterterrorist operations seeking to insure Russian internal security. When one investigates the patterns of aerial bombardments in Syria between October 2015 and March 2016, it becomes clear that Russia mainly targeted districts where Russian-speaking militants have been active such as Aleppo and the broad region of Latakia. By supporting the Hezbollah and the al-Assad regime invasion of these regions, Moscow established the basis of a military preemptive strike against the capacity of the Russian-speaking militants in Syria.

The intervention in Syria could be seen as part of a broader counterterrorist plan for Russia including target assassinations against the Imerat Kavkaz in Turkey and in the North Caucasus, seeking to weaken the foundations of the Islamic insurgency in the North Caucasus and its support abroad. By targeting the main safe haven where North Caucasian militants established military camps, directly collaborating with Al-Qaeda, and utilizing links with Central Asian militants, the Russian intervention has gravely damaged the operational capacity of the Russian-speaking foreign fighters in Syria. Furthermore, it has drastically reduced the threat of returnees as the majority of the Russian-speaking factions in Syria are now struggling for their own survival. Even after Russia's announcement regarding the end of the aerial bombardment campaign, the current situation in Palmyra underlines Russia's willingness to continue its counterterrorist operations by now focusing on ISIS in Central and Eastern Syria. Military advisors and Russian troops remain on Syrian soil, seeking to further help shrink the contingent of Russian-speaking foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq and strengthen the Assad regime.

In this context, one should expect a growing spillover of terrorist violence outside of the Syrian and Iraqi borders as ISIS' territorial control shrinks further and its long-term strategies change and focus on the far-enemy. This spillover will mostly be coordinated by former foreign fighters as witnessed in the Paris and Brussels attacks. It represents an imminent threat for the Eurasian region based on the amount of Russian-speaking militants in Syria and Iraq. Notwithstanding the fact that the collateral damage and the indiscriminate violence behind the Russian aerial bombardments undoubtedly represent war crimes under international law, this brutal intervention might very well reinforce the security in Eurasia and diminish the threat of ISIS' expansion in Russia and in Central Asia.

From Xinjiang Madrasas to Global Jihadism War Fields: Political and Ideological Transformations of Uyghur Salafi Networks

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In 2001, the Chinese authorities capitalized on the American army's arrest of East Turkestan Islamic Movement (ETIM) militants, an Uyghur cell of the Pakistani-Afghan Jihadist networks. This small Jihadist group, henceforth integrated into the complex of Al-Qaeda networks, was thrust into the current affairs limelight as part of Beijing's media campaign against the Uyghur opposition, and the campaign soon extended to Beijing's communications on the web and social networks. Even so, little is known about the matrix of this network of militants, its genesis, and its politico-ideological reorganizations. The aim of this presentation is to examine these elements in order to get a better understanding of the ideological matrix and trajectory of these networks, notably in their confrontation with the rest of the militant Uyghur scene, which is dominated by pro-Western democratic nationalist circles.

The 1980s and the genesis of modern Islamo-nationalist networks

Uyghur society was profoundly secularized by the socio-cultural reforms undertaken by the Chinese Communist Party during the second half of the twentieth century. The religious milieu came out of it decimated by the bouts of repression inflicted during the Maoist period. Nevertheless, in the 1980s, the short-lived loosening of state control over society allowed Islam to regenerate. Koranic schools were then opened pretty much everywhere with more or less advanced teachings. The most prized schools were headed by a handful of reformist religion professors who had survived the purges of the Cultural Revolution. For the latter schools, the point was to promote a purified reading of Islam influenced by the synthesis that Tatar, Central Asian, or Indian ulemas performed at the turn of the twentieth century in order to reform Islam and local Muslim societies.

These schools put forward a synthesis between the modernization project dear to Jihadism and a re-reading of the principle of purification of Islam endorsed by Salafism or Deobandism. With attitudes more impartial to "tradition" and to more heterodox forms of Sufism (without slipping into the excesses of the most radical Wahhabis or Salafis), this generation of Talibs was also more receptive to the purified readings of Islam emerging from the centers of the Arab world. Of course, these Sufi networks were able to regenerate at the start of the 1980s; but, little by little, their waning influence in the religious landscape benefitted reformist clerics with better representation in the head body overseeing the Muslims of China and Xinjiang, namely the Islamic Association of China.

These Muslim reformists' project of re-Islamization contained the seeds of socio-political reform. This reform was based on the fundamental values and principles involved in the purified readings of Islam and aimed to place Turkic-speaking Muslims back at the center of a political, social, and economic game dominated by the Han (or ethnic Chinese).

The 1990s: the repressive turn and the emergence of Islamo-nationalist cells advocating armed combat

Observing the rise to power of a critical discourse in the enclosure of mosques and madrasas, the Chinese authorities decided to renew their policy of strict control over Xinjiang's Islamic society. Following the conservative party takeover after the events of Tiananmen Square, the closure of Koranic schools at the turn of the 1990s and the vanishing of all prospects for dialogue led some Talibs

to organize an underground network aimed at preparing an uprising throughout the region. The most committed individuals decided to move toward armed action.

Under the initiative of its founder, Zeydin Yusuf, the ETIP (East Turkestan Islamic Party, *härqiy Türkistan Islamiy Partiyisi*) launched a Jihad in Barin, close to Kashgar, in April 1990, which the Chinese security forces quickly suppressed. Having already contended with anti-colonial student demonstrations in Xinjiang in 1985 and 1988, and again with demonstrations that degenerated into riots in 1989, Beijing became convinced that it then had to engage in a merciless struggle against all forms of subversion. This dismantling of ETIP networks and its ensuing repression has contributed to the radicalization of the most militant Talibs. Many of them hail from the now closed madrasas of the revered Abdul Hakim Makhsun.²

The impossibility of preaching, the closure of madrasas, and the placing of Abdul Hakim Makhsun under house arrest all worked to give Islamo-nationalist fringes the feeling that the Chinese Communist Party had decided to go after Islam. The security measures also prevented the restructuration of large underground networks, and indeed the Jihad of Barin highlighted the asymmetry between the forces present if an attempt at armed uprising were to be made. In short, the prospect of a general uprising was no longer a realistic one.

Some Islamo-nationalist militants then crossed over to terrorist action. They formed terrorist cells aiming to attract the attention of the international community and “palestinize” Xinjiang in a bid to destabilize Chinese sovereignty. We have thus seen the formation of more or less ephemeral small groups such as the East Turkestan Islamic Reformist Party (*Shärqiy Türkistan Islamiy Istahätjilar Partiyisi*) or the East Turkestan Allah Islamic Party (*Shärqiy Türkistan Islamiy Allaning Partiyisi*).

ETIM genesis: its strategy of sanctuarization and connection with the Jihadist networks in the Pakistani-Afghan fringes

The second half of the 1990s brought a new twist to the history of Uyghur Islamo-nationalist networks. The monitoring carried out by Chinese security forces led to repeated waves of dismantling. Contrary to the nationalist circles, which form the broad majority and are redeployed in the diaspora, these networks remain confidential and isolated.

Hasan Makhsun, a former student of Abdul Hakim Makhsun and a former ETIP member, put forward the following strategy: delocalize the logistics centers and training camps of these networks in the Pakistani-Afghan fringes and garner financial support from foreign movements. What was in fact set up at the Pakistani-Afghan borders was the skeletal structure of the future international Jihadist complex that joined together Taliban networks, various Pakistani groups, and al-Qaeda.

Nevertheless, some within the Islamo-nationalist cells were distrustful of the religious radicalism of the Arab and Pakistani Jihadist networks. Hasan Makhsun left Xinjiang with a handful of close associates. Within the diaspora, he observed a deep line of ideological fracture that separated him from the pro-Western democratic nationalist circles, but he managed to forge some connections with the Taliban and al-Qaeda networks. In 1997-1998, he re-founded the ETIP, which, since 2001, has become more widely known in the Western media under the name of East Turkestan Islamic Movement.

² The madrasas that he set up in Kargilik met with brisk success. A figure of the struggle against Chinese power in the 1940s and 1950s, he was imprisoned for more than twenty years in the camps. Favor was restored to him in the early 1980s and he became the vice-president of the China Islamic Association in Xinjiang.

Under protection from the Taliban commander Al-Haqqani, at the end of the 1990s the ETIM set up an office and training centers in Afghanistan in order to train militants that would then be able to organize terrorist cells in Xinjiang. At the end of the 1990s, the Chinese authorities attempted to coerce the Taliban to deactivate the network. To rid themselves of the problem, the Taliban sponsored a merger between the ETIM and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), newly arrived in the north of Afghanistan. Although their networks remained partly disconnected, at the turn of the 2000s both organizations officially merged under the name of the Turkestan Islamic Party (TIP).

Internal tensions and the reorganization of the ETIM's networks in the 2000s

This Uyghur network is heterogeneous. Not all of the militants are part of the anti-Israeli and anti-Western Jihad promulgated by the Al-Qaeda networks or of the Central Asian Caliphate project of the IMU. Some are battle-hardened militants who want to fight the Chinese government in East Turkestan. Nevertheless, many of the recruits are young Uyghurs who have fled, essentially to find a sanctuary and escape the threats of extradition from Central Asia or Pakistan. In addition, the intervention of international coalition forces in Afghanistan beginning in the fall of 2001 halted the ETIM's rise to power.

The offensive and the bombardments left victims among those who would fight with the IMU in Kunduz. Others crossed the Pakistani border and took refuge alongside the IMU and other Jihadist movements in the tribal zones of Waziristan. When the movement's head, Hasan Makhsum, was killed in 2003 as part of a Pakistani army operation, the movement was forced headlong into internal dissensions. The handful of militants who ultimately remained there were more than ever dependent on protection from Taliban networks (and notably from Tehrik-e-Taliban), al-Qaeda, and the Uzbeks who then advanced in the Pakistani tribal zones.

On the eve of the 2008 Olympic Games, Jihadist Uyghur militants in Waziristan reappeared on the internet under the now exclusive label of the TIP; whereas the East Turkestan Culture and Solidarity Association was then being organized in Istanbul at the initiative of Uyghur imams and militants who upheld a quietist Salafism. The movement's new leaders, Abdul Haq, Abdu Shukur, and then Abdullah Mansour, all tried from time to time to send militants to Xinjiang to carry out terrorist acts there. They also sought to capitalize on the despair of some Uyghur Muslim youth. The measures of control—and the repressive turn of the screw inflicted on Xinjiang from the 1990s on—were, in actuality, becoming counter-productive.

Degradation of the situation in Xinjiang and the Syrian jihad: a chance for TIP?

So, after a lull in the 2000s, Xinjiang has seen an increasing number of violent acts over the last three to four years. The Chinese authorities have often attributed these acts to the TIP, but in reality things are more complex. A handful of these attacks—such as those in Kashgar in July 2011 and April 2013, or in Urumqi in April-May 2014—were probably remotely controlled or inspired by the TIP.

Nevertheless, the operative methods, the frequent absence of any claims of responsibility by the TIP, and the profile of individuals behind the numerous acts of violence in recent months often reveal the more or less poorly prepared acts of groups of young radicals resentful of the Chinese state. Some launch themselves, with a bladed weapon in hand, on acts of reprisal against the police, the Hans, or “Uyghur collaborators,” whereas others are inspired by the sorts of *modus operandi* broadcast on Jihadist sites for those wanting to organize attacks with few logistical means.

Denouncing the democratic model and the too-westernized values of the nationalist militants, the TIP attempts to posit Jihad and the Koran as the only paths toward the emancipation and reorganization of

Uyghur society. Its radicalism, the maintenance of tight control by the Chinese security forces, and a lack of intermediaries in Xinjiang give the TIP little chance of mobilizing a Uyghur society that is little inclined to support the establishment of an Islamic state.

However, the Syrian crisis has provided a new resource for this movement. Recently, the movement has had to withdraw from Waziristan in the face of ongoing Pakistani drone attacks and military operations. What remains of the TIP has been redeployed to the east of Afghanistan. Should an agreement be made between the Afghan government and the Taliban, the movement could, however, be threatened due to China's growing influence in the country. So, in its publications and videos in 2013, it announced its participation in Jihad alongside the local branch of al-Qaeda, the al-Nusra Front.³ The presence of Katiba of the TIP in Syria enables it to receive some of the financial, and even politico-logistical, support enjoyed by components of the al-Nusra Front.

The movement is also counting on the communication it is developing around its active involvement in military operations in the north-west of Syria, both in order to continue to gain legitimacy among the Jihadist movement and to attract new recruits from the disillusioned fringes of Uyghur youth.⁴ It thus seems to have developed recruitment channels from South East Asian countries and from Turkey.⁵ In recent months the videos of the movement and the testimonies of Uyghur militant circles tell of personnel reinforcements in the TIP branch in Syria. These videos and testimonies relate reports of Uyghur recruits who have fled Xinjiang, sometimes accompanied by their families. Nevertheless, the Russian airstrikes in the Jisr al-Shugur region close to Idlib are liable to have destabilized the movement, albeit without undermining its presence in Syria. Taking into account the uncertainties weighing on the situation in Afghanistan and the little first-hand media coverage there, the TIP's involvement in the Syrian conflict is indeed vital for the development of the movement to this day. Even more than before, it is isolated from the rest of the militant Uyghur scene, dominated by pro-Western democratic nationalist circles.

³ In spite of the presence of some Uyghurs in the ranks of the Islamic State organization in Iraq and in the Levant (ISIL), the TIP, contrary to other Jihadist movements, has hitherto remained loyal to its alliance with the al-Qaeda networks.

⁴ It seems to have developed recruitment channels from South-East Asian countries and from Turkey.

⁵ Since China has engaged in closer relations with Central Asian countries, the Uyghurs who have fled China illegally cross through these countries in an attempt to reach Turkey.