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Russia and Eurasia Programme Meeting Summary

Politics and Contested Transformations in Central Asia

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7 November 2012

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This is a summary of an event held at Chatham House on 7 November, in which Professor Sally Cummings was invited to propose discussion around four chapters of her recent book, *Understanding Central Asia* (Routledge 2012).

Interpretations of the complex political and economic transitions taking place in Central Asia since 1991 have been the focus of intense debate among scholars and the discussion focused on: the influence of Soviet era legacies on post-Soviet nation building; the nature of political transformations; the role of identity and Islam in modern-day politics; and the influence of economic performance on regime stability and change.

Four major reasons have been proposed for the drawing of borders: the strategy of *realpolitik* and 'divide-and-rule', a view that dominated in the Soviet period and served also as a tactical concession to win round dissenters and oppressed colonial peoples from abroad; 'an active, prophylactic strategy of promoting non-Russian nation-building'¹; a belief in the necessity of creating nations to hurry up their eventual demise and the birth of a 'chronic ethnophilia'², with authors such as Arne Haugen also suggesting that territorial borders end up reflecting territorialized national identities³; and, linked to the last, borders drawn with the participation of local elites.

The transformative effect of Soviet rule on Central Asian societies continues to attract scholarly attention as the interaction between tradition, social modernization and industrialization had an important role in shaping modern national identities in the broader region. While Russian remains the *lingua franca* in the region and is still the main language used in meetings between Central Asian leaders, indigenous languages receive extensive state support.

In the early 1990s, Western governments viewed Central Asia as a region at high risk of protracted civil wars. Nonetheless, and despite the fact that the rule of law is largely absent from national politics, a sense of order and political stability, with the important exceptions of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, has generally been maintained in the post-independence years. Scholars have advanced several interpretations to account for the nature of political transformations in Central Asia.

¹ Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923-1939* (Cornell University Press, 2001), p.126.

² Yuri Slezkine, "The USSR as a Communal Apartment, or How a Socialist State Promoted Ethnic Particularism," *Slavic Review* 53, no. 2 (Summer 1994), p. 415.

³ Arne Haugen, *The Establishment of Soviet Nationalist Republics in Central Asia* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

Essentialist explanations often draw on political culture, specifically the influence of tradition and Islam on national politics in order to explain enduring authoritarianism in Central Asia. Professor Cummings argued that such explanations fail to distinguish between the multifaceted religious and cultural identifications and offer Central Asian leaders a rationalisation for political repression. The influence of religion on national politics remains heterogeneous across Central Asia and it is misleading to see Islam as inherently 'politicised'. Most importantly, binary views of Islam as the extreme opposite of modernisation ignore the modern complexities of religious beliefs. In this vein, the argument that Islam was the prime cause of the Tajik Civil War in 1992-97 needs to be challenged.

Underlining the link between economic performance and political stability, several scholars have emphasized the ability of Central Asian resource-fuelled economies to generate wealth and elite rents. In the aftermath of the Soviet collapse, political elites in Central Asia believed that economic and political independence could be safeguarded through multiple trade and energy partnerships. According to a sentiment propagated by one transnational oil company in the early 1990s: 'multiple pipelines equals multiple happiness'. Despite economic reform progressing at varying speeds, Central Asian regimes remain able to co-opt local elites and to secure the consent of the population without devolving political power. This has challenged the efficiency of Western democratization programmes targeted towards the region; despite generous external funding, civil society in Central Asia remains passive. The recent adoption of a new constitution in Kyrgyzstan, in the aftermath of the ousting of the Kyrgyz Republic's second president Kurmanbek Bakiev in 2010, replaced the old presidential system with the trappings of a parliamentary republic, but has failed to generate a ripple effect across the Central Asian republics.

Political stability in Central Asia may be compromised as popular grievances have recently been grossly mishandled and as different elite groupings jockey for influence in the run-up to succession. Succession and leadership change are still key challenges to regime stability and business elites may begin to ask for a greater say in the national economy. Arbitrary violations of human security are common to the region. Western-educated children of the local elites represent an ambivalent source for these new republics; on the one hand, they may return with a new degree but remain essentially loyal to their regime and its policies or, on the other hand, with their newfound experiences may come to question existing practices at home. Central Asian states have the highest percentage of external migration in the Former Soviet Union and

Tajikistan counts as the world's leading remittance state. No positive correlation has yet been reported between disillusionment with the regime and political change. Central Asian regimes' ability to adapt to new conditions remains impressive. The opposition is fragmented and unable to present a united front against the government.

Countries' state ideology is increasingly used as a stabilizing and legitimizing factor to justify repression. The Azerbaijani example of smooth leadership transitions has not been replicated across the region. Most domestic elites have not yet supported regime change and Central Asian states still lack domestic opposition. In Kazakhstan, the elite agreement may agree on a successor to President Nazarbayev for the short-term in order to preserve the regime while they work out a long-term solution; the short-term figure is unlikely to be accepted immediately by all groups. Political change happens incrementally and organically, and cannot be externally imposed.

The discussion then moved to Western policies towards Central Asia. During the early 1990s Western policymaking towards the region seemed to lack insightful understandings of domestic social and political realities. Above all, Western policymaking was dominated by the security agenda, particularly in the early post-Soviet years and in the early 2000s. As Western governments are currently preparing their exit strategy for Afghanistan, security becomes a priority again. In terms of scholarly debate, security organizations, such as NATO, funded large regional studies centres to provide analysis of the military-strategic aspects of the Central Asian regimes. However, perceptions of Central Asia as a playground where the new 'Great Game' would unfold have been largely unhelpful. Alarming views fed back to how local leaders viewed domestic and external realities and created mounting hostility between the region and the West. Also, Western policy thinking has been influenced by neo-colonial arrogance. While Central Asian elites have been largely successful in deciphering Western weaknesses, Western understandings of the region remain incomplete. Scholarship is important to explain how elite transition will come about and how regime legitimization involves the self-legitimation of local elites. Similarly, any analysis of decision-making processes in Central Asia needs to take into account interactions among the states in the region and between them and the rest of the world.

It has recently been argued that the impact of the Arab spring on Central Asia has generated revolutionary unrest in Kyrgyzstan, yet such knock-on effects are particularly difficult to measure. At the same time, Central Asian states exist within an extremely volatile region. The prospects of political unrest in

Iran, Pakistan and Afghanistan are today pronounced. External conditionality, as a driver of reform remains important. Yet, the West should avoid the adoption of 'double standards' that allowed Azerbaijan to join the Council of Europe in early 2001, despite gross domestic violations of human rights. Nonetheless, cooperation and dialogue possibilities should not be excluded if the prospect of externally induced change is to be maintained.

Area studies is able to offer nuanced conclusions regarding local realities in Central Asia. Interregional comparisons are also needed if we are to understand how Central Asian regimes are defined and how these develop. Simultaneously a careful collaboration between social scientist comparative theorists, on the one hand, and area studies specialists, on the other, may yield interesting results. The challenge for many scholars of the region remains how best to translate complex realities into concrete policy advice.