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DIVISIBILITY AND INDIVISIBILITY OF SECURITY: CHALLENGES FOR CENTRAL ASIA

Abstract: *In theory and political rhetoric, the concept/principle of indivisibility of security is widely discussed and politically articulated. It is also often documented in international diplomatic relations. However, more often than not, it is taken for granted as undeniable and desirable foundation of peace, stability and security of countries and regions, perhaps due to its obvious pacifist connotation. This can, however, lead to some terminological confusion and political illusion. Moreover, such an attractive pacifist principle can be ascribed not only to certain regions or continents but also to the whole system of international security which is in fact deeply divided on various criteria. The region of Central Asia represents by itself an interesting and important laboratory for testing this principle of indivisibility of security. The study of security problematique for five states of the region – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan – became an academic and political challenge. This paper sets the purpose of critically analyzing the concept of divisibility/indivisibility of security as applied to Central Asia – the region which is located at the epicenter of geopolitical turbulence unfolding in the Eurasian continent.*

Keywords: *Security, challenge, Central Asia, Russia, imperialism*

Introduction

The region of Central Asia represents by itself an interesting laboratory for testing this concept/principle of indivisibility and divisibility of security. At least, four factors make the proposed topic of research actual: 1) geopolitical environment of the region; 2) proliferation of

‘security providers’ in this part of the world; 3) controversial (divergent and convergent) security policies of the Central Asian states; 4) the lack of strong academic elaboration of the ‘indivisibility’ concept as applied to Central Asia as well as the problem of conceptualization of security in Central Asia as a regional arrangement. The main questions around which this research is undertaken are: What are the essential features of the regional security environment that makes the region distinct from other regions? What does the principle of indivisibility of security, actually, mean as a concept? When and why do regional states pursue independent from each other (unilateral) security policies; and when and why do regional states correlate their security policies? To what extent does geopolitics modify security environment in Central Asia? Are security agendas of multiple international organizations (security providers) compatible with each other in this region?

The term ‘security’ is a complicated and often controversial one. David Baldwin pointed out to such specific questions for measuring security as: Security for whom? Security for which values? How much security is necessary? Security against which threats? Security by which means? Security at what cost? Security for how long?¹⁴ These and other questions stem from the assumption that in conditions of the scarcity of resources absolute security is unachievable. Besides this, we have to take into account that many politicians and pundits in their zeal to justify certain state’s purposes and projects and actions try to relate them with issues of national security. This phenomenon is called ‘securitization’ which means the construction of understanding and attitude toward something as an existential threat¹⁵. So security policy sometimes was produced from the wrong assessment of threats. Therefore, it is important to distinguish the real security issues from what is not security. There are, of course, multiple definitions of security. In this paper, we will understand by ‘security’ a state of relative satisfaction of nation’s needs in basic conditions for protection of its physical, cultural and political identity and vitality. For the purposes of this paper we will revisit Barry Buzan’s definition of ‘security complex’ to label “ a group of states whose primary security concerns link together sufficiently closely that their national securities cannot realistically be considered apart from one another... Security complexes emphasize the interdependence of rivalry as well as that

¹⁴ Baldwin, D.A. “The Concept of Security”, in *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 23, No. 1, January 1997, pp. 12-17.

¹⁵ Buzan, B. and Wæver, O. *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p.491.

of shared interests”.¹⁶ His conceptualization of security complexes was based on consideration of patterns of amity/enmity among states which arise from variety of issues. Although Buzan argues that “security complexes are an empirical phenomenon with historical and geopolitical roots”, nevertheless ‘security complex’ remains, to some extent, vague, since the borders of such complexes can be “drawn” arbitrarily. The matter is that interdependence of states in security and their amity/enmity relationships can be wrongly assessed. It is in this regard, that the anarchical system of International Relations (IR) and International Security (IS) becomes obvious. The ongoing war in Ukraine just confirms this thesis and correspondingly, the thesis of the divisibility of international security system and indivisibility of regional security in the former Soviet space, especially in the Central Asian region.

Why security is divisible

The overall analysis of what I call ‘security matrix’ of Central Asia permits to assume that, in accordance with Realist perspective, security is divisible depending on geopolitical context, assessment of security challenges, formulation of national interests of countries concerned and local circumstances. So many constants and variables are in play in the region that security environment seems far from being holistic and security policies are far from being cohesive. Several examples can be illustrative in this regard:

- 1) War in Ukraine revealed security of the states – former Soviet republics – is based on their different vision of threats. Russia’s hostility and hatred towards the West are shared by none of them (except Belarus). Contrary, Central Asian states maintain good relations with the US and EU up to the level of strategic partnership for many years.
- 2) CSTO has only 6 members, EAEU only 5. Even the CIS has reduced to almost the half from its initial structure. This trend exposes disunity of the former Soviet republics in a broader sense – including their vision of the future and security architecture.
- 3) Georgia, Ukraine and Moldova officially announced their intention to join the EU and NATO. Even Central Asian states have cooperated with NATO within the PfP Program.
- 4) In Central Asia a so-called geopolitical triangle emerged: US-PRC-RF. These three geopolitical actors pursue three different strategies in the region making security

¹⁶ Buzan, B. *People, States and Fear. An Agenda for International Security Studies in the Post-Cold War Era* (Boulder, Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publisher, 1991), p. 190.

environment very uncertain. Each of these three powers advance its own version of “C5+1” format of regional cooperation with 5 states of the region which further adds to this uncertainty.

- 5) Uzbekistan was a member of CSTO until 2012 and withdrew from it completely. Experts from Kazakhstan are pondering about possible exit of this country from EAEU and CSTO.
- 6) Conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Karabakh and corresponding great powers’ engagements in different peace-making endeavours are also illustrative of different and in some instances incompatible visions of security architectures in this region.
- 7) During their meeting in March 2023, Putin and Xi Jinping made a special Joint Statement on Central Asia in which they warned the West against instigating so-called “colour revolutions” in Central Asia and interfering in internal affairs of these states. This Statement was surprising since it sounded as if these two leaders were speaking on behalf of Central Asian states and wanted to demonstrate themselves as defenders of these states whereas they were not authorized to do so. Moreover, there was no any token of “upcoming” colour revolution in the region.¹⁷

So, what is considered a security threat for Russia or China is not necessarily the same for others. This means that there doesn’t exist a common vision and common assessment of security challenges and threats in the broader Euro-Asian space.

In this “spaghetti situation”, the so to speak, ‘market of security services’ emerged in the region. A number of ‘security providers’ proliferated with their own security agenda for the region and individual countries of the region. They are: CSTO, SCO, EU, NATO, OSCE, OTS, US, RF, Turkey, UNODC. Not all of them are compatible with each other in terms of their basic standards, principles and normative foundations. For instance, SCO and CSTO are geopolitically overburdened structures; on the contrary, EU and OSCE are value-driven organizations. In the ‘market of security services’ eclectic, synthetic and organic entities are offered to Central Asians.¹⁸

¹⁷ https://central.asia-news.com/en_GB/articles/cnmi_ca/features/2023/04/05/feature-01#:~:text=%22The%20parties%20are%20ready%20to,the%20statement%20reads%2C%20in%20part.

¹⁸ Толипов Ф. «Эмансипация Центральной Азии: эклектика, синтетика и органика регионализма» / ж. Аль-Фараби (Казахстан), №1. – 2022.

After the collapse of the former Soviet Union, Russia tried its best to prevent complete disintegration of this vast geopolitical space and to preserve its imperial control over this space where Moscow tried to embody its own version of the “Monroe Doctrine”. In December 2022 Russian MFA sent an ultimatum to NATO and USA: Russia demanded that NATO rule out further expansion, including the accession of Ukraine into the alliance, and that it does not hold drills without previous agreement from Russia in Ukraine, eastern Europe, in Caucasus countries such as Georgia or in Central Asia.¹⁹

By and large, in the wake of war in Ukraine, Russia managed to alienate not only the ‘collective West’ but also the former Soviet republics by resorting to multiple hard and soft power toolkits, such as top officials’ rude treatment of and unfriendly suspicions about neighboring states, intimidation, manipulations of history, propaganda, political pressure and the like. In such a context of Russian aggressiveness security in the former Soviet space cannot be common and indivisible.

Why and when security is indivisible

Five Central Asian states have been engaged, since the onset of their independence, in the regional integration process. This process hasn’t been smooth and without problems. Nevertheless, it was dialectical and organic, and had proceeded through several stages and displayed obvious progress in terms of institutionalization. The Central Asian Cooperation Organization (CACO) which was created in 2001 and functioned until 2005 was a structure that could lead to full political integration and had full potential for creating a security architecture in the region. However, “hard geopolitics” derailed the erstwhile steady process of political integration of Central Asian states.²⁰

Interestingly, when five Central Asian states achieved successes in the integration process their security environment was taking stronger and explicit shape; but when they faced reversals in integration their security environment was damaged. Anyhow, there has always been a common

¹⁹ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/17/russia-issues-list-demands-tensions-europe-ukraine-nato>

²⁰ Tolipov, F. Geopolitical Stipulation of Central Asian Integration, in *Strategic Analysis*, Vol. 34, No.1, 2010.

vision of security challenges and threats among these states, that is, security in Central Asia has been indeed indivisible and based on organic unity of peoples and countries of the region. For example, it deserves mentioning that yet in 1997 five states proclaimed their region 'Nuclear Weapon Free Zone' (NWFZ) which was one of the boldest statements of their common security arrangement. In 2013, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan established strategic partnership with each other. By 2022, these two states further raised the level of their relationships up to alliance relations. The latter means, among other things, highest level of mutual trust and cooperation in the sphere of security and defence. Indivisibility of security among Central Asians is testified by a number of joint activities in this sphere reflected in corresponding agreements, institutional arrangements, joint political statements as well as joint military exercises.

It has to be noted that indivisibility of security in Central Asia is based on and stems from indivisibility of the region itself. An illustration of such a dialectics are Consultative Meetings (CM) of Central Asian presidents which were launched in 2018 at the initiative of President of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoev. For example, in the Joint Statement that they adopted on 6 August 2021 after the 3-d CM, presidents stated that they intend "to work out the question of creation of dialogue on security and cooperation in Central Asia as permanent platform for consideration of actual questions of the regional development on the systemic and regular basis". In a year, on 21 July 2022, during the 4th CM presidents adopted the Treaty with the ambitious title: "On friendship, good neighborhood and cooperation for the sake of development of Central Asia in the XXI-st century".

Article 5 of the Treaty says: "The Sides closely interact aiming at strengthening peace, stability and security in Central Asia including conducting five-lateral consultations on actual questions of regional and international agendas..."

Article 7 says: "The Parties provide each other with comprehensive support and mutual assistance in preventing threats to their independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity.

In the event of a situation that poses a threat to the security, sovereignty and territorial integrity of one of the Contracting Parties, appropriate consultations can be held both in a bilateral format

and within the framework of the Consultative Meetings of the Heads of State of Central Asia in order to determine measures to effectively prevent the threat that has arisen”.

Article 10. “The Contracting Parties, in accordance with their national legislations and international obligations, expand and deepen cooperation in countering new challenges and threats to security, including terrorism, extremism and separatism, transnational organized crime, cybercrime, illegal migration, human trafficking, illicit trafficking in weapons, narcotic drugs, psychotropic substances and their precursors”. _As one can see from Joint Statements and the Treaty, the principle of indivisibility of regional security is acknowledged by all five states. Actually, there is no alternative to the integrated security arrangement in the region. At the same time, being surrounded by great powers and exposed to geopolitical intrigues, Central Asian states are suffering from the “complex of a weak state” of which they must rid themselves. This complex means that the leaders of Central Asian states a priori feel themselves limited, humbled vis-à-vis big powers, unable to disagree with the latter on certain issues of their relationships. That’s why Central Asian regional security, albeit, obviously indivisible remains fragile.

Indivisible but fragile

Of course, ‘divisibility’ and ‘indivisibility’ of security are rather theoretical concepts. They are tested in the complex international and regional reality which is in flux. From this perspective, the situations of enmity and amity can have explicit and implicit fluidity. Thus, geopolitical vulnerability of Central Asian states makes their independence and security fragile. This became recently evident when Russia began its war against Ukraine. Russian imperialism towards former Soviet swath at its geographical perimeter has put countries on this swath in trouble concerning their independence and security; and this imperial attitude of Moscow towards former Soviet republics appeared to be its permanent *modus vivendi*.

Robert Brannon rightly noted that “even now, it is difficult to think of Russia’s policy toward the Central Asian states as “foreign”. Many [in Russia] believed that geographic location; shared history; common production systems, infrastructure, and institutions; and old dependences on Soviet financial subsidies and the Moscow markets would guarantee a continued interest in extensive cooperation with Russia. They also believed that a shared sense of national identity,

derived from a long history of cohabitation, had survived the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Unfortunately, these assumptions proved wrong”.²¹

Indeed, such a “common” background seems to obscure a false image of Russia in the eyes of Central Asians and vice versa – wrong image of Central Asians in the eyes of Russians. Moreover, the question arises as to whether there existed a real common Soviet identity and whether now Russia is still the main and reliable security guarantor as it has been perceived until recently, given its aggression against Ukraine and imperial attitudes toward the independent states around it. Brannon’s observation is very actual today: “What had once been shared values among the Soviet republics were replaced by new or “national” identities, suspicions about Russia’s intentions, and pragmatic calculations about what Russia actually could provide. Instead of a *security community* [italics is author’s – F.T.] including Central Asian states grouped around Russia, a web of bilateral agreements developed with strongly expressed sensitivities about issues of sovereignty”.²²

Ironically, Central Asian states, including Uzbekistan, concluded strategic partnership agreements with Russia; Tashkent even managed to sign an Alliance Treaty with Moscow in 2005. At the same time, Tashkent and Washington also have strategic partnership agreement signed yet in 2002. So, paradoxically, Uzbekistan is supposed to be simultaneously a strategic partner with two strategic rivals. This paradox well illustrates divisibility/indivisibility conundrum when small countries find themselves in a delicate and fragile situation of concealing their real strategic sympathy towards one of the two (or even more) rivals.

“Deeply rooted anti-Americanism (a legacy of the Cold War), and the sometimes-open hostility toward the United States as a world leader, are stronger than feelings of sympathy for the victims of the terrorist acts of September 11”.²³ Nowadays, Russian propaganda and official foreign policy line are preoccupied with imposing their anti-Americanism upon Central Asian public opinion; and this cannot but affect public moods and policy circles and further entangle foreign

²¹ Brannon, R. Regional Security Cooperation and Foreign Policies in Central Asia: A 21st Century “Great Game”? in “In the Tracks of Tamerlane. Central Asia’s Path to the 21st Century”, edited by Daniel I. Burghart, Theresa Sabonis-Helf (Washington: National Defense University, 2004), p.426-427.

²² Ibid, p. 427.

²³ Ibid, p.

policy modality and strategic *modus operandi* of states of the region. In this respect a question arises as to when strategic partnership really works and when it doesn't? It looks like Uzbekistan has to make a choice between two strategic rivals with whom it signed strategic partnership agreements. When it comes to Russian geopolitics, one has to take into account that until recently (conditionally, before the war in Ukraine) foreign policy of the Russian Federation has been a product of uneasy convergence of different political forces ranging from neo-communists and neo-imperialists to democrats and Eurocentric liberals. As Russian analyst Dmitri Trenin rightly pointed out, "In the early twenty-first century, Russia looks ahead to a long and painful period of post-imperial disengagement from the former provinces *and* simultaneous re-engagement with its new neighbours on a new set of principles".²⁴ However, obviously, not post-imperial but neo-imperial outlook prevailed in Moscow's engagement with former Soviet republics. It takes often the form of securitization by Moscow of any progress in cooperation of Central Asian states with what it calls "collective West".

In this regard, Russia tries to use two instruments to secure its strategic dominance in the former Soviet territory: Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and maintaining Russian military bases in some countries such as in Armenia, Transnistria (Moldova), Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. CSTO consists of only 6 states, three of them – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan – are Central Asian states. Since its inception CSTO never demonstrated indivisibility of security among member-states and has remained too formal and internally dysfunctional.

It was very symptomatic and illustrative that, as was said above, in 2012 Uzbekistan left the CSTO where it was a member since 2006. So, Tashkent doesn't consider national security of Uzbekistan being under the CSTO security umbrella. The same for Turkmenistan. This situation reflects discrepancy in the Central Asian regional security architecture caused by divisive character of CSTO presence in this region. The most paradoxical thing is that Central Asian countries including those CSTO members are most exposed to and really are facing nowadays threats and intimidations from the Russian side – allegedly their ally.

²⁴ Trenin, D. "Russia and Central Asia. Interests, Policies, and Prospects", in Eugene Rumer, Dmitri Trenin, and Huasheng Zhao, eds., *Central Asia: Views from Washington, Moscow, and Beijing* (N.Y.: M.E.Sharpe, 2007), p.80.

In this context, two parallel and competing trends have emerged over time, namely: to adhere to ambiguous strategic status-quo and rely on Russia as a security guarantor; or to look for alternative solutions of regional security-building. Obviously, solely the region-based security arrangement could be, so to speak, geopolitically neutral, strategically prudent and self-reliant (and in this sense manageable) system. For this to have come true, by and large, in and by Central Asia the new, emancipatory, strategic thinking and security policy are needed which would overcome their fragility and emancipate them from, so to speak, long lasting 'complex of a weak state'. Broadly defined, as Ken Booth suggested, "Emancipation is the theory and practice of inventing humanity, with a view to freeing people, as individuals and collectivities, from contingent and structural oppressions. It is a discourse of human self-creation and the politics of trying to bring it about. Security and community are guiding principles, and at this stage of history the growth of universal human rights culture is central to emancipatory politics. The concept of emancipation shapes strategies and tactics of resistance, offers a theory of progress for society, and gives a politics of hope for common humanity".²⁵ So, progressive and bolder strategic posture is lacked in the overall current political and societal circles. Meanwhile, the Dmitry Medvedev's recent hate speech displayed once again that Russian official security and geopolitical rhetoric fully ignores political will and choices of former Soviet republics located at the Russia's perimeter and undermine their security.²⁶

Conclusion

The international concept of indivisibility of security often is taken for granted in pacifist political adjustment endeavors. It seems here, two IR schools – Realism and Liberalism – intersect in an intricate way as *Liberalism*. Central Asian geopolitical and security environment well illustrates *Liberalistic* behavior of five states of the region on the international arena. Contemplations on the main questions around which this research was undertaken reveal more complex and dialectically contradictory structure of international security. The concept of regional 'security complex' (in Buzan's sense) seems insufficient in two terms: ambiguousness and fluidity of amity/enmity relations of countries; vagueness of boundaries of the complexes per se. These two issues make the term 'security complex' theoretically relevant but politically

²⁵ Critical Security Studies and World Politics, edited by Ken Booth (New Delhi: Viva Books), p. 181.

²⁶ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pU8YBFis35U&ab_channel=AKIpressnews

confusing. Central Asian case confirms this thesis when analysis of national, regional and international security problematique displays that countries can belong to one security complex but their security-building can be driven by rather more sophisticated principles. For instance, security agendas of multiple international organizations (security providers) are not always compatible with each other in this region: SCO versus OSCE; NATO versus CSTO; CACO versus EAEU; CIS versus EU have obviously different, sometimes opposite, visions of Central Asia as a region, in general, and its security – in particular. Geopolitically galvanized Central Asia has been permanently susceptible to external pressures which entangled the regional countries' own security-building. Region-wide, they almost never pursue independent from each other (unilateral) security policies; even the recent most acute case – Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan border incident in September 2022 – showed that two states have political will and mutual interest to resolve the problem as quickly as possible. However, in terms of international security agents, five states pursue slightly different policies which can undermine solely regional format. Thus, political and in some sense philosophical, question remains open as to in whose hands lies security of Central Asia? Undoubtedly, the answer depends on short-, mid-, and long-term perspectives regarding war in Ukraine that will have a tremendous impact on security, independence and development of the entire former Soviet space. Overall, the analysis presented in this paper shows that security should be considered from dialectical and strategic perspectives taking into account numerous factors, variables and constants determining security environment which, in turn, includes concrete situations, space-and-time characteristics, role of policy-makers, types of challenges and their classification and so on. So, further exploration of Central Asian regional security-building dynamics can provide interesting insight into international security problematique.

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