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**NATIONALISM AND REGIONALISM IN CENTRAL ASIA  
AND SOUTHEAST ASIA (II)**

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**НАЦИОНАЛИЗМ И РЕГИОНАЛИЗМ В ЦЕНТРАЛЬНОЙ АЗИИ  
И ЮГО-ВОСТОЧНОЙ АЗИИ (II часть)**

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*Nationalism and regionalism are the leading trends in today's global politics which constitute the core of the contemporary political agenda in different parts of the world. It is academically interesting and of practical use to explore the links between these two phenomena. This paper considers these linkages in two case studies: Southeast Asia and Central Asia. This research paper is a comparative exercise based on the fundamental assumption that the regions concerned have some similarities and differences which should be studied in order to make some academic generalizations and draw positive political and policy lessons. The research hypothesizes that some lessons can be learned by the Central Asian elite from a case study of Southeast Asia where nationalism and regionalism have been a mutually beneficial process and reinforcing force.*

*Национализм и регионализм являются основными трендами в глобальной политике и составляют суть современной политической повестки в разных частях мира. Академически познавательным и практически значимым является изучение связи между этими двумя феноменами. В данной статье эти связи прослеживаются на примере двух регионов: Юго-Восточная Азия и Центральная Азия. Сравнительный анализ основывается на предположении, что эти регионы имеют некоторые схожие и отличные черты, которые следует изучить с целью академических обобщений и обмена опытом принятия и реализации политических решений. Гипотеза статьи в том, что политические элиты Центральной Азии могут научиться многому на примере Юго-Восточной Азии, где национализм и регионализм протекали во взаимно-поддерживающем русле и усиливали друг друга.*

**Nationalism and Regionalism in Central Asia**

Nation-building, state-building and region-building have become the major issues for Central Asian countries to address after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The collapse of the Soviet Union marked the first time in the history of Central Asia that the nation-states of the region became independent from one or more dominant structures. These new, smaller countries had never experienced modern, independent nationhood and statehood before. The current borders are a result of the Soviet legacy. The national delimitation policy initiated by Stalin in 1924 drew "artificial" borders between the Central Asian Soviet Republics; after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the administrative borders turned into state borders. The newly created organization, the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) facilitated the process of "divorce" between the former Soviet Republics by establishing the principle of the "inviolability" of their state borders "as a norm of interstate behavior in the former Soviet Union as a whole."<sup>1</sup>

This principle was legally verified by signing the Declaration on the Observance of Sovereignty, Territorial Integrity and Inviolability of State Borders of CIS States by all member-states in 1994.

To understand the interplay between nationalism and regionalism in Central Asia, it is necessary to discuss briefly the specific features characteristic to the post-Soviet transformation. The term "transformation" appears to be more relevant to describe post-Soviet developments in Central Asia than the more widely used term "transition." The 'transition' in the post-Soviet realities means the move from communism and its central-planned economy towards building democracies and market economies. However, as we can see from reality, within 20 years of becoming independent the Central Asian states have still not been able to consolidate into democratic states. Until today, there are ongoing debates about the nature of the current Central Asian states. Some will call them "hybrid-regimes," others will define them as strongly authoritarian regimes; a third group will treat them as "countries in the process of transition." Such a diversity of views can be partially explained by the divergent political-economic paths and strategies adopted by each of the regional states, leading them into different directions and destinations.<sup>2</sup> It is therefore hard to discuss the current realities and future of Central Asia in a more or less concrete manner. A post-soviet Central Asia represents the fusion of many dichotomies such as 'state interests vs. political regimes' interests,' 'traditional vs. non-traditional security threats,' and the most important one - 'integration processes vs. disintegration processes.' The different levels of the elite's commitment and speed of political and socio-economic reforms have limited the potential of the region to represent a geopolitical unity in the international relations of the region. From one side, the discovering of independence is quite a natural process especially for countries without previous experience in being separate nation-states, but in the age of globalization when we observe the weakening of state actors at the expense of transnational and non-state actors, it appears to be at odds to be ethno-nationalistic, to be protectionist economically or to be "neutral" in isolation. It looks nearly impossible to find the true and right ways to reach the extremes (going extremely global or going extremely nationalistic). The regional level suggesting a "middle way," presents the necessary space for confidence-building and sharing of resources and visions for security and developmental purposes.

Unfortunately, what seems to have developed mostly in Central Asia is discontent between nationalism and regionalism. The regime interests have been protected not through the improvement of socio-economic situations and the increase of regime legitimacy in the eyes of the population via proper and effective government policies but through the promotion of a national ideology and populist politics.<sup>3</sup> The toppling of two authoritarian regimes in Kyrgyzstan shows how inadequate policies in reality can lead to popular unrest. Some scholars argue that the tragic June events in the south of the Kyrgyz Republic in 2010 also showed the inability of the regional security organizations such as SCO, CSTO and OSCE to react effectively to security crises and oppose the toppling of political regimes.<sup>4</sup> The question then becomes, why and on what basis, can external actors such as the regional security organizations mentioned above intervene into the territory of a member state? There could be two legitimate ways of doing so: 1) in case such interventions are envisioned in the Statutes of the concerned organization, or 2) an agreement is reached between the organization and a host state. There are no such provisions in the Charters of CSTO and SCO, and non-interference into the each state's internal affairs stands to be the respected principle among the member-states. Moreover, as seen in the case of the OSCE "police training" project, a security organization may be accused openly in supporting and strengthening the coercive power of authoritarian rulers.<sup>5</sup> The issue of state-society relations is the leading issue on the agenda of all Central Asian states. Within the past 20 years, all of the Central Asian countries except Kazakhstan have not been able to noticeably improve their economic performances. The main reasons are economic mismanagement and the high levels of corruption - especially within each government's structures. Even in case of positive changes in a state's economic performance, it is not yet guaranteed that it would translate into better living conditions, as rightly observed by Shahram Akbarzadeh: "Given widespread corruption and economic mismanagement in the region, and a lack of transparency, it would be very optimistic to assume that positive economic indicators will necessarily translate into improved living conditions. There is no doubt that a small group of entrepreneurs and government officials is increasingly benefiting from economic expansion, leaving the rest of society behind"<sup>6</sup>

At the same time, there are some regional efforts which offer hope that regionalism in Central Asia may yet be successful. The first treaty which effectively united the five post-Soviet states is the Central Asian Nuclear Weapons-Free Zone Treaty, which was signed in 2006 and entered into force in March 2009.<sup>7</sup> In my view, this treaty has to be regarded as a symbol of the ability of regional state leaders to reach a common vision and position among themselves and with the leading external powers. This agreement may act as a basis for the future "neutrality" hoped for in the region; perhaps the adoption of a Declaration similar to the one adopted among the ASEAN member-states in 1971 (Zone of

Peace, Freedom and Neutrality Declaration, ASEAN) would also be an important step.

One of the most important factors which impacts both nationalism and regionalism in Central Asia is a geopolitical factor. This factor is manifested via 1) the strong role of Russia in the politics of each Central Asian state and within regional organizations and 2) the geopolitical competition of external powers such as the USA, Russia, China, Iran, Turkey and others that we can observe in the region. The dependence of the Central Asian states on Russia is present in various dimensions: security, cultural-psychological (the area's mentality) and economic. The Collective Security Treaty Organization led mainly by Russia is the regional scheme for security cooperation and aims at providing a collective security for its member-states. The Russian language and ethnic Russians are the basis for cultural dependence along with the post-Soviet public mentality that is present in all of the Central Asian societies. Economically, the Eurasian Economic Community and the Customs Union are considered as the leading platforms for economic cooperation in the post-Soviet space. Such a domination by Russia in regional organizations and regional politics has led to a situation where Central Asian leaders look for diversification of their international relations. The closer relations with the United States and NATO, China and Shanghai Cooperation Organization, Iran, Turkey and Organization for Economic Cooperation have come to manifest the multi-vector foreign policies of all Central Asian states except Turkmenistan, which in December 1995 officially declared its "positive neutrality" in foreign policy. At the same time, the appearance of external powers in the region with their own political and economic interests has resulted in divergent and shifting foreign policy orientations in each of the Central Asian states, and thereby has limited the development of a Central Asian sub-regionalism. Also, due to the fact that the Russian language and culture had been dominant during the Soviet Union as well as the post-Soviet nationalism, i.e. efforts to build nation-states in Central Asia along with efforts to create a Central Asian regionalism could be perceived as anti-Russian.

Thus, it is time to conclude that the relationship between nationalism and regionalism in Central Asia are not mutually reinforcing but mostly conflicting. The main factors which affect this relationship are:

the political leadership or authoritarian regimes with their vested interests in maintaining and promoting their regime interests;

The poor governance and high level of corruption;  
The geopolitical rivalry mostly among external powers

And of course, the post-Soviet factor which continues to affect the politics and international relations of Central Asia through the common mentality and the specific role of the Russian language and Russia's politics as such.

Conclusion/what and why: lessons to learn

The most valuable part of the case study methodology relates to learning. The logic of learning is simple: identification of what can be learned, understanding how certain states and/or organizations

have been able to do certain things, and how similar things can be accomplished in a state's own realities. Below, I would like to share my preliminary views on what and why it can be useful for Central Asia to learn from the experience of Southeast Asian nationalism and regionalism without developing concrete policy recommendations, which will be a subject for future academic research.

First of all, what is extremely important for the success of both nationalistic and regional projects is *the principle of interference into each state's internal affairs*. It is a vital condition for successful confidence-building and cultivating trust and a spirit of cooperation among the national states, and their leaders in particular. Otherwise, it is hard to expect that regional stability and development take place in a region where national sentiments are high because of historical circumstances, and because of dependence at such a late date. *The importance of an economic platform for political social development*. In Southeast Asia one can observe following logic of relations between the nation-state and right to violence and market forces: the principle of non-interference into a state's internal affairs has led to fewer acts of conflict and of use of force among the states, which has led to the concentration of a government's efforts to improve socio-economic performances without caring much about security issues. In turn, better economic conditions have led to greater trust on the part of the people in institutions developed by their regimes/states. Sound economic performances and the actual improvement of living conditions will necessarily lead to a greater legitimacy of the political regimes and create *the necessary form for political and social development*.

The third but equally important lesson is the *'geopolitical responsibility'*. The "geopolitical Responsibility" means an awareness of the historical role of a region in world affairs. Each region has its unique location and consequently a unique combination of risks and opportunities. Similar to the ASEAN member-states, the Central Asian states must become aware of the need for its region's geopolitical independence. Moreover, the adoption of the "neutrality" declaration - the Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality Declaration adopted by the ASEAN member-states in 1971 - will create the necessary political and legal basis for a balanced and multi-vector foreign policy for each state as well for the Central Asian states as a whole. In this view, the fundamental, essential and necessary condition for the success of nationalism and regionalism in Central Asia is *the creation of a platform for developing Central Asian sub-regionalism*. The platform can take on various forms: it may be a separate regional organization; it can be a platform within the existing regional organizations; or it can be a discussion platform without actual institutionalization.

In the world of increasing interdependence, it is impossible to rely on a region's own capacity. ASEAN has also engaged into the "functional expansion of membership" through creating ASEAN-plus institutions to deal with new issues that involve states outside Southeast Asia or that require capabilities not found amongst ASEAN members."<sup>8</sup> Therefore, at this stage of development, the Central Asian elite has to learn that *regionalism is about prescribing means rather than ends*.

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