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### AROUND THE NAMES OF REGIONS: THE CASE OF CENTRAL ASIA

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## Abstract

The fall of the Soviet Union is one of the main factors which contributed to an increasing interest in the *problématique* of space and regional dynamics in International Relations literature. It is therefore pertinent to consider how the new independent states established after the fall of the Soviet Union are being analyzed through different spatial concepts. Since their accession to independence, there have been several regional definitions to denote to these new states. Some of these regional definitions concentrate on a group of five post-Soviet countries: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Actually, several regional concepts are used to refer to these countries in the international public space. Among them, I will concentrate on three: post-Soviet space, Central Eurasia and Central Asia. Of these, I will consider the terms of “post-Soviet space” and “Central Eurasia” as concepts being coined largely by outside-in approaches which respond mostly to analytical and geopolitical purposes. Then, I will elaborate on the concept of “Central Asia” as it constitutes an inside-out effort to develop a proper name for their region by the five countries in question.

## Introduction<sup>2</sup>

In what follows, first of all, I will briefly refer to some aspects of contemporary conceptualizations of the “world of regions”, which highlight an increasing urge both by states and regional ensembles to identify the subjects of the regionalized international system. Then, I will continue by presenting how a group of States in the post-Soviet space was named and renamed both exogenously and endogenously. I will concentrate on regional denominations used to refer to a group of States which appeared on the world scene as a result of the demise of the Soviet Union. These countries are Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. They had all been part of the Soviet state throughout “the short 20<sup>th</sup> century” and all of them acceded to independence following the decision to dismantle the USSR in 1991. Since their accession to independence, there have been several regional definitions to denote to these new states. Some of these regional definitions concentrate on a group of five post-Soviet countries: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Actually, several regional concepts are used to refer to these countries in the international public space. Among them, I will concentrate on three: post-Soviet space, Central Eurasia and Central Asia. Of these, I will consider the terms of “post-Soviet space” and “Central Eurasia” as concepts being coined largely by outside-in approaches which respond mostly to analytical and geopolitical purposes. Then, I will elaborate on the concept of “Central Asia” as it constitutes an inside-out effort to develop a proper name for their region by the five countries in question.

## The “world of regions”

Region-related frameworks and theories have become essential for understanding contemporary international relations. Scholars across all disciplines of social sciences frequently call for the developments taking place at the level of regions to be better scrutinized in order to make sense of the logic of state and non-state actors at both national and international levels. Some scholars argue that the post-Cold war era could signify a return to regional sovereignty where the architecture of world politics would be based on regional structures (Rosecrance, 1991; Acharya,

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2007). This vision of world order based on regions was also defined as “a world of regions”. The term was used Peter Katzenstein in his recent book “A World of regions: Asia and Europe in the American Imperium” where he argues that we are living in a world which is sustained by regional orders (Katzenstein, 2005). The question of regional orders is also object of another important work by Barry Buzan and Ole Waever. In their book “Regions and Powers: The structure of international security”, they argue that the end of the Cold war when the world order was formed around bipolar structure left place for a new power constellation. In this power constellation, international system is composed of several regional orders defined as regional security complexes (Buzan and Waever, 2003). Reviewing these works, Amitav Acharya speaks about “the emerging regional architecture of world politics”. For him, regional orders will be essential elements of emerging world order. For understanding the nature of this order, it is vital to study the regional orders: how they are constructed and organized; what kind of political, economic, cultural and strategic interactions occur both within and between regions; and, what are the relationships between regional orders and the international system (Acharya, 2007).

In this world of regions, the concepts of “*regionness*” “*regionhood*” or “*regional identity*” feature alongside the concepts of state and international community, as regions increasingly try to assert themselves as actors and stakeholders across different levels of governance (Van Langenhove, 2003; Hettne, 2008; Paasi, 2009). This leads to a situation where regions not only seek to elaborate their own identity and self image in order to support their acceptance as actors in world politics, but they also try to make sense of the nature and identity of other regions. The politics of making sense of regions, by naming them and defining their nature and contents, is thus an important part of the phenomenon of the world of regions.

Identifying and naming subjects of a certain region necessitates reflection on power and capacity. Hence, there is a tendency to concentrate on regional denominations produced and promoted by powerful actors of world politics. This aspect is usually referred to as an outside-in approach to regions where powerful States name and shape regions, both in their immediate and distant environments, according to their own purposes and interests (Neuman, 1994; Katzenstein, 2005). However, there is a need to shed light on an inside-out aspect of regions where a given region’s

identity, aspirations and preferences are constructed endogenously (Acharya, 2007). This requirement stems from the discourse of the world of regions as the latter situates itself as a viable alternative to power- and interest-driven visions of world order. As the world becomes increasingly interdependent, a more sophisticated picture of regions will necessarily involve both outside-in and inside-out approaches.

Among the examples of outside-in and inside-out efforts to conceptualize a regional space are a group of post-Soviet countries, known usually as Central Asian states – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. These states are also referred to as a part of post-Soviet space and Central Eurasia.

### **The decline of macroregional associations? Increasing criticism of the concepts of “post-Soviet space” and “Central Eurasia”**

The concepts of post-Soviet space and Central Eurasia are prominently used in the literature to refer to former Soviet republics. However, there have been some attempts to criticize the use of these concepts for several reasons.

#### **Post-Soviet Space: a vanishing reality?**

The concept of “post-Soviet Space” was coined to refer to former republics of the Soviet Union which obtained sovereign statehood in 1991. Lately, it has been applied to 12 out of 15 former Soviet republics, namely, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kirghizstan, Moldova, Russia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Ukraine and Uzbekistan. The former Baltic Soviet Republics of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania are usually considered outside post-Soviet narratives. In International Relations literature, the terms ‘region’ and ‘regional’ are used as a level of analysis (Buzan and Waever, 2003) or as an actor (Telo, 2007; Laidi, 2008). What is the situation with the “post-Soviet space”? Does the frequent use of the “post-Soviet space” concept imply an emerging regional actor in international relations or is it used as an analytical framework? There has been some tendency to approach “post-Soviet space”, associated with the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), as a potential regional actor in international politics. This debate was

at its most lively during the final days of the Soviet Union and during the years following its demise. After the failure of “New USSR Treaty” project, the CIS has been viewed as a possible integrator of all former Soviet republics (Brzezinski and Sullivan, 1997). However, it has never lived up to these aspirations (Kubicek, 2009). Recently, Vladimir Putin, then president of Russia, has ruled out the evolution of the CIS along the lines of the EU. According to him, “while the EU countries have been working towards greater unity, the CIS was set up to manage a civilised divorce. In this the CIS has succeeded” (quoted in Markedonov, 2010). Hence the debate surrounding the “post-Soviet space” as a regional actor would appear to be closed. Moreover, the subregional tendencies have existed within the CIS since its birth (Bremmer and Bailes, 1998). Such outlooks have prevented the post-Soviet space and the CIS from transforming into a regional actor.

In this context, “post-Soviet space” framework would be more of an analytical nature. It is mostly used as a level of analysis. According to Sergei Markedonov, “Post-Soviet space” is understood to be a descriptive term for analyzing a set of former Soviet republics (Markedonov, 2009). But in actual fact, it is necessary to question whether the “post-Soviet Space” is a coherent analytical framework. As previously mentioned, the *raison d’être* of the concept was analytical and was used as a descriptive term for analyzing different processes in all former Soviet countries (Markedonov, 2009). However, authors have been dissecting the post-Soviet region into further subregional sectors. Barry Buzan and Ole Waever, for example, devoted a chapter to “Post-Soviet regional security complex” in their book on “Regions and powers” where after general description of the post-soviet complex (the main uniting factor of which is dependence on and connectedness to Russia), the discussion focused on three distinct regions, namely Western CIS, the Caucasus and Central Asia. (Buzan and Waever 2003).

The term “post-Soviet Space” has been used by analysts in the absence of a more appropriate concept. According to a group of Russian authors, “CIS countries” could have emerged as an alternative term. However, the perceptions of CIS as a failed and temporary organization prevented it from replacing “post-Soviet Space” term (Council on Foreign and Defense Policy, 2007). The latter is not used whenever there are alternative frameworks. The most obvious

example of dropping the “post-Soviet” label is that of the Baltic countries. After their successful integration into European and transatlantic political and security structures - EU and NATO - these countries no longer feature in post-Soviet narratives. The above-mentioned report by the prestigious Russian Council of Foreign and Defense Policy excludes Baltic countries from the list of the post-Soviet group. It also describes “post-soviet space” as a “vanishing reality” (Council on Foreign and Defense Policy, 2007).

Finally, both Western and Russian analysts have been openly voicing their dissatisfaction with the term. For Western analysts, the continued use of “post-Soviet” and “CIS” frameworks perpetuates Russian domination in independent countries and has a restraining effect on their sovereignty. Instead, they propose concepts like “Greater Central Asia” (Starr, 2005). On the other side of the debate, some Russian analysts have also been calling to abandon post-Soviet label (Trenin, 2001). Recently, voices from different circles of Russian foreign policy analysts have also started to criticize the use of “post-Soviet” as an analytical framework. According to Alexander Nikitin several factors plead for acknowledging “the end of the ‘post-Soviet space’”. Among these are the weakening of the CIS, the change in the political orientation of newly independent states, the strengthening of the influence of ‘extraregional actors’ in the post-Soviet area, and the emergence of new regional organizations, created both by post-Soviet countries (EAEC, CSTO, SCO) some of which have a wider geography extending beyond post-soviet territories (Nikitin, 2007). Sergei Markedonov not only contests the post-soviet label, but he also calls for the new denominations to be questioned. For him, post-Soviet area and the new labels “Eurasian Economic Community” and “Collective Security Treaty Organizations” based on it are full of incoherencies and continued use of them is damaging for foreign policy perceptions of Russia. He warns against overestimating the potential of CSTO for becoming a coherent regional alliance. For him, the interests of its individual members are quite divergent and the only factor bringing Central Asian countries together with Armenia is dependence on Russia (Markedonov, 2009).



### Central Eurasia: a juxtaposition of two distinct regions?

Central Eurasia is another term being used to replace the concept of “post-Soviet Space”, however to a much lesser extent. Even if the term can be used to cover vast areas of Eurasian geography stretching from Russia to Mongolia, Xinjiang and Tibet (Central Eurasian Studies Society Website), in the vocabulary of contemporary international politics, it is made up of countries of Central Asian and South Caucasus regions and excludes other CIS countries. The literature identifies these two as interconnected regions with a strategic position in the wider Eurasian continent. The concept of Central Eurasia is often traced back to geopolitical theories of Heartland and Eurasia, popularized by British geopolitician Halford Mackinder and revived by Zbigniew Brzezinski after the fall of the Soviet Union in his acclaimed book on “The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and its Geostrategic Imperatives”, published in 1997 (Maksimenko, 1999). If history and social conditions are the determining factors of the post-Soviet space, energy and geostrategy are the main features of Central Eurasian geopolitics (Buzan and Waever, 2003). “Central Eurasia” has some similarities with “post-Soviet space” as a concept.

First of all, it is an analytical framework and excludes debate on regional actorness. It is possible to analyze it within a general framework of tendencies and processes occurring in countries situated in different spatial and social dimensions. The main factor uniting these countries is the consequences of these processes on power politics on the Eurasian continent. If the concept “post-Soviet space” could not achieve recognized status in international politics due to the incoherencies inherent within it, Central Eurasia’s prospect of becoming a regional actor are compromised by the presence of several great powers bordering it. Brzezinski himself also argues against the emergence of strong Eurasian actors (Brzezinski, 1997).

Secondly, Central Eurasia as a concept stems from the perspectives of great powers situated outside the region itself. The use of “chessboard” as a metaphor is helpful in illustrating this outside-in focus on the region. Subsequent literature has continued to follow this tradition. The work of a Russian political scientist pledging for cooperation between Russia and United States

in Central Eurasia sounds more like a call for a concert of external great powers to manage Central Eurasian affairs and largely ignores the perspectives of countries situated within the region itself (Troitskiy, 2006).

As a result, literature on Central Eurasia is centered mainly on geopolitical and geostrategic analysis. Regional processes are strongly influenced by the behavior of foreign actors involved there, Russia, China and USA being the most important among them. All of these actors active in Central Asia perceive each other's behavior through the prism of the so called "Great game". According to the Great Game narrative, Central Asia and South Caucasus are important pieces in the strategic confrontation between great powers for regional and global domination (Maksimenko, 1999; Torbakov, 2004). In its modern version, the control of the region will offer to the prevailing party unique opportunities to define the conditions under which the oil and gas resources of the region will be transported to other markets (Buzan and Waever, 2003). Under this geopolitical pressure, Central Asian states themselves also adopted the old balance of power politics as the main instrument of their foreign policy. They try to use this instrument to play the major powers involved in Central Asia off against each other. At the same time, they also feel obliged to balance among themselves (Tolipov, 2004).

Thirdly, the occasional use of the term by Central Asians themselves is quite opportunistic in nature. We can identify two groups who use the Central Eurasia concept in the post-Soviet space. The first group uses "Central Eurasia" argument as an evidence of strategic significance of their countries on the Eurasian chessboard - implicitly in world politics- and thus entitling this centrally located country in question to expect the support and assistance (financial, political, etc) of international community and great powers (Suyunbayev in Khojand Conference, 2007; Bakiyev, 2009). The second group rejects those concepts in order to promote their own frameworks. In the post-Soviet space, this trend is represented by the "Eurasian idea" promoted by Russian geopolitical circles or by Kazakh Eurasianists (Shlapentokh, 2007 and numerous works of Aleksandr Dugin; Nazarbayeva, 2003).

Finally, as in the case of the post-Soviet space, beyond the geopolitical prism, Central Eurasia brings together two different regions. Johnson and Allison state that the interconnectedness of these two regions mainly stems from the perspectives of the great powers and extra-regional actors like Russia, the US, or Turkey. As for the states of the region themselves, despite similarities between the challenges they face, geographical factors constrain interactions between the countries of Central Asia and South Caucasus (Allison and Jonson, eds, 2001). Moreover, much of the interesting local debates are not framed by the “Central Eurasia” concept, but rather, they are framed as Central Asian or Caucasian issues.

### **Central Asia: Inside-out attempts to develop a regional name**

The above-mentioned outside-in denominations which consider the five countries to be part of larger groupings, namely “Central Eurasia” and the “post-Soviet space”, are now being questioned by those who coined them at the first hand. For these analysts, any further use of these concepts is compromised by the fact that the countries included within these frameworks have been evolving along different political, economic and social lines for quite some time and consequently it would be analytically unproductive to continue to refer to them as a set of homogenous states. In view of this situation, there is a need to analyze endogenous efforts to define a proper regional name by the countries themselves. The term “Central Asia” in fact represents a prominent inside-out attempt by these five countries to elaborate a regional image.

### **The emergence of “Central Asia” in the post-Soviet era**

In January 1993, the leaders of five formerly Soviet Republics (Kazakhstan, Kirghizstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan) came together in Tashkent to declare that they should henceforth be collectively referred to as “Central Asia”. This term was intended to replace the traditional Soviet term used to denote them: “Middle Asia and Kazakhstan” (Medvedev, 1993; Belokrenitskiy, 1996). This declaration was about the creation of a new region in world politics. Soon after, leaders also announced their intention to create a Central Asian regional organization outside the frameworks like CIS which included Russia (IGPI, 1993). According to Djalili and Kellner, the emergence of Central Asia was among the most fundamental changes of the post-

Soviet era. For them, this “phenomenon of exceptional importance” has yet to have fundamental consequences in the international arena (Djalili and Kellner, 2006: 70). Since then, a lively discourse around the “Central Asia” region has emerged. This discourse consists of a set of ideas, representations and arguments aimed at both constructing and deconstructing Central Asia as a distinct region. The structure of this discourse can be summarized in a three-step dialectical outline. The first two blocks conceptualize Central Asia as one region in need of regional integration and a framework of cooperation, while the third set of arguments question the regionness of Central Asia and the viability of regional integration.

### Central Asia as one region

The idea of Central Asia as one region has its roots in both historical and contemporary perspectives. Historically, Central Asia has been considered as a once prosperous region situated on the Silk Road and well connected to the world system (Starr, 2005). Subsequently, it became isolated from the world with the advent of sea routes which reduced the significance of continental trade routes (Canfield, 1992). The region increasingly weakened and fell under the domination of the Russian empire. The period of Russian rule, later replaced by the Soviet regime, is associated with the freezing of independent contacts of the region with the rest of the world (Canfield, 1992) as well as the division of the region into several ethnocentric units (Roy, 1997). The dissolution of the USSR has been seen as an opportunity for Central Asia to regain its regional unity and to reconnect to the outside world by breaking its socio-economic isolation. Contemporary commentators see the five former soviet republics as a closely interconnected set of newly sovereign fragile states sharing many ethnical, cultural, linguistic, geographical and religious links and facing the common challenges of political independence, economic development, regional public goods, governance and geopolitical transformation (Olcott, 1996). The interplay of these factors in the new context of the globalized world is the emergence of ‘*Central Asia as a space, polity, peoples, and fate*’, an essential region of a new Great Silk Road (Tolipov, 2005). There is a third view of Central Asia which is a combination of historical and contemporary perspectives: the Great Game perspective. According to the Great Game narrative, Central Asia has been an important piece in strategic confrontation among great powers for regional and global domination (Torbakov, 2004). Russo-British competition for prevalence in

the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the Heartland theory of Halford Mackinder referring to Central Asia are the historical landmarks of this narrative. Uncontested Soviet control over Central Asia also fits within this perspective where the Soviet Union is considered to be an archetype of land power, eager to consolidate its grip on Heartland, under constant pressure from the USA, the archetype of sea power, controlling Rimland (Shlapentokh, 2007). The break-up of the Soviet Union has again unleashed Great Game dynamics. In its modern version, whoever gains control of Central Asia will be presented with unique opportunities to define the transportation of the oil and gas resources of the region (Buzan and Waeaver, 2003).

### **Regional integration and cooperation in Central Asia**

This perspective of Central Asia as one region has always been linked to the idea of Central Asian regional integration. It has become ‘an axiom accepted by everyone’ working on and in Central Asia (Alexander Malashenko in The Proceedings of Khojand Conference, 2007). Its ideological underpinnings are historical, ethnical, cultural, geographical commonalities and consist mainly of the Euro-Asian, Muslim and Turkic elements of their identities (Hyman, 1997). The presence of a number of problems requiring a common approach constitutes material grounds for building a Central Asian regional integration framework (Dieter, 1996). UNDP identified the following main fields as requiring regional cooperation in its report on Central Asian regional cooperation in 2005: trade and investment, water, energy, environment, social development as well as the need to better fight regional threats (natural disasters, drugs, crime and terrorism). Enhanced regional cooperation on these issues ‘could generate a regional economy twice as large and well off’ by 2010. (UNDP, 2005; See also, ADB, 2006). Regional integration is also seen as essential for the international reputation of these countries, both in their immediate surroundings and also in the world arena. Central Asians therefore tried to build regional projects of their own “to prevent their further marginalization in the new post-soviet order” (Bohr, 2004). The impetus for integration projects in Central Asia comes from the perceptions present among some circles of policy makers and scholars in the region who see regional integration as one of three pillars of the new world order alongside intercultural dialogue and globalism (Tolipov, 2002), where states “have to deal not with governments of

individual countries, but with the executive organs of large regional groupings” (Sultanov and Muzaparova, 2005).

### **Unsuccessful attempts towards institutionalizing Central Asia**

These calls for regional integration and cooperation were implemented via several projects developed during the post-soviet period. The first was the declaration of the presidents of four republics of Central Asia in 1993 that their region would henceforth be called “Central Asia” instead of the Soviet style “Srednaia Azia”. Later in January 1994, the presidents of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan signed a treaty establishing a common economic zone between the two. This agreement was immediately joined by Kyrgyzstan. In April 1994, the three presidents decided to establish Central Asian Economic Union. The Union was intended to grow into a regional economic association with free movement of goods, services, capital and workers. Among its organs were the Interstate Council and the Central Asian Cooperation and Development Bank. CAEU’s membership increased when Tajikistan joined the organization in 1998. However, the leaders of the Union decided to narrow its competences. So, they decided to rename it as Central Asian Economic Community. The Central Asian organization was again renamed in 2001. Leaders of its member countries decided to continue their cooperation efforts within the Central Asian Cooperation Organization which would focus on general questions of cooperation and building regional consortia for public goods rather than strive to establish a regional economic union.

As well as this Central Asian framework, these four countries were also participating in broader cooperation frameworks involving mostly former Soviet republics. Among them, the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) established in 1992, the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) which they joined in 1992, and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) created in 2001. Within CIS itself, there was the Eurasian Economic Community which grew out of the Customs Union Agreement between so called CIS-5 with Russia regrouping around itself Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Most of these organizations had overlapping objectives and competences. In this context, the persistence of an exclusive Central

Asian framework was a reminder of the unity and singularity of Central Asia as one coherent region. The only dark spot in this image of Central Asia as a region with its own regional structures was the absence of Turkmenistan from the group since its beginning. In their devotion to establish a foreign policy based on positive neutrality, Turkmenistan's leaders always chose to stay away from different regional and supra-regional associations.

This idea of the existence of Central Asia as coherent region with a real chance to integrate, the affirmation supported by the existence of Central Asian institutions, suffered a blow when Russia joined Central Asian Cooperation Organization in 2004 and Uzbekistan joined the Eurasian Economic Community in 2005. Soon after this event, and before the similarity in objectives and memberships of CACO and the Eurasian Economic community (EAEC), the political leaders decided to merge CACO with EAEC in 2005. The rise and fall of CACO was interpreted as the clearest proof of the failure of regional integration in Central Asia. From the perspective of local experts, it illustrated the inability of Central Asian states to come up with a successful regional cooperation framework and its willingness to surrender to an outside force – Russia. As Farkhad Tolipov from Uzbekistan, notes: “Russia’s entering into CACO as a full-fledged member and the opening of its military base in Tajikistan was in fact not a Russian offensive but rather a Central Asian surrender. [...] Unfortunately, the states of the region were able to demonstrate neither their full independence nor their own long awaited unity, but instead demonstrated their need for a mediator in the conflict-prone regional affairs, undermining and overlooking thereby the self-value of the integration of solely Central Asian countries” (Tolipov, 2004).

For many analysts, the failure of Central Asian regional institutions is something normal, considered the nature of Central Asia as a ‘region of almost triumphant authoritarianism’ (Panarin, 2000) with ‘regional non-cooperation pathology’ (Spechler, 2000). Due to proximity to Afghanistan and the presence of several great powers in regional politics, Central Asia is also increasingly becoming an object of securitization. Central Asia’s image as a region harboring high conflict potential or, in the words of Z. Brzezinski, a candidate to become a “Eurasian Balkans” continues to persist (Brzezinski, 1997). In the regionalism literature, it is described as “a weak sub-complex of Russian regional security complex” under high geopolitical pressure

(Buzan and Waever, 2003), or as a “preregional area in which the US and Russia competes for influence” (see Björn Hettne in Telo, 2007). The continuing existence of regional organizations other than CACO, namely the Eurasian Economic Community (Eurasec), or Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) doesn’t contradict the “non-cooperation pathology” of Central Asian states because these regional structures are seen as lacking substance (Allison, 2008) and consisting only of rhetoric for foreign policy purposes (Pomfret, 2009). They are also a function of political alignments of Central Asian states with great powers surrounding the region or their concern for regime survival and protection (Allison, 2008; Collins, 2009). These organizations are also seen as products of outside-in agencies of external powers (Kazantsev, 2008). Following this assessment, subsequent studies increasingly focus on the involvement of external actors (mainly Russia, China, and USA) as geopolitical contenders in Central Asian regional space and the impact of their relationships on the evolution of the region.

## **Other images of Central Asia**

At the same time, the disappearance of the Central Asian regional organization brings to the fore the third set of arguments related to Central Asia. These arguments question the viability of Central Asia framework and point to several factors to support their explanations. These arguments advance also contending images of Central Asia which do not necessarily fit the image of Central Asia as one region capable of achieving effective regional integration. These images have always accompanied the concept of Central Asia as one region. They constitute an essential part of the “Central Asia” argument. It would be impossible to make sense of political processes around the Central Asian regional organization without taking into account these theses questioning the idea of Central Asia. I will now present three other images of Central Asia.

### **Divided Central Asia**

The idea of the countries of Central Asia as having a common identity is usually considered to be an essential element facilitating the construction of effective regional integration. The Central



Asian common identity would be based on many common factors uniting the five countries: common geography, common ethnic origin, commonalities in language, customs and mentalities (Tolipov, 2002; Telebayev and Oumirseitova, 2002). Despite the existence of critical evaluations of the discourse on common regional identity, the discourse of unity prevailed during the 1990s. However, the unsuccessful attempts at institutionalizing the unity of Central Asia give way to other images of Central Asia which underscore the lines of division separating the states and societies of the region.

In his recent book, Asylbek Bisenbayev, once Press Secretary for the President of Kazakhstan, has highlighted the existence of “the other Central Asia”, which is characterized not by unity but by division of culture and civilization (Bisenbayev, 2002). He criticizes prevailing contemporary approaches to Central Asia which view the region as “a system of *n*-Stans with common economic, political and social basis as well as unique civilizational origin” (Bisenbayev, 2002:9). This all-inclusive approach has engendered, according to the author, a number of prejudices which do not correspond to reality. He argues that the so called Central Asian region is clearly divided into two parts: the region of Eurasian steppes, uniting mostly Kazakhs and Kirgizs, and muslim Middle Asia. The first belongs to nomadic civilization while the latter represents sedentary civilization. As these two civilizations are situated next to each other, there are by definition close interactions between them. However this should not, according to Bisenbayev, “ignore the essential- the profound differences on civilizational basis which continue to influence seriously contemporary processes” (Bisenbayev, 2002:21). Consequently, Central Asian countries are slowly asserting their distinct identities. In particular, Kazakhstan is starting to situate itself as a Eurasian country (IPP, 2007). For some representatives of the Kazakh elite, Kazakhstan is a Eurasian country bordering on Central Asia, but not part of it (Jukeyev and Kasenova, 2007). For them, Central Asia is a collection of undeveloped *Stans* and as such it is not an attractive option for Kazakhstan. The country should instead orient itself toward Europe (Nazarbayeva, 2003).

Another argument going against the image of “one Central Asia” consists of underscoring the ethnic distinctions between Central Asian peoples into Turkic speaking and Persian speaking

groups. Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Turkmen and Uzbek languages are part of larger Altai-Turkic language group while Tajik is a Persian language. This ethnic difference can have political consequences in the case of Central Asia. This is most felt in the relations between Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. The frictions on the basis of ethnic difference between these two countries go back to the Soviet period. At the beginning of the Soviet Union, Tajikistan was created as an autonomous republic within the republic of Uzbekistan. It was only in 1929 that Tajikistan was accorded the status of Soviet republic by Moscow. However, some cities with large Tajik populations (Bukhara and Samarkand) were left as part of Uzbekistan. According to some Tajik authors, the abandoning of Tajik speaking groups outside of the republic of Tajikistan resulted in the “de-Tajikization” of these populations. This phenomenon gave birth to the sentiments of injustice toward Tajik people within political and intellectual elites of Tajikistan which continue to this day (Masov and Dzumaev, 1991). Their reaction to ideas of Central Asian unity and regional integration remain lukewarm to this day. According to Rashid Abdullo, an effective Central Asian regional integration will mean the emergence of an integrated expanse without borders that could have dire consequences for Tajik people. As the Central Asian region is “dominated by ethnicities that are ethnically and linguistically different from the Tajiks”, the realization of regional integration could result in the spreading of “De-Tajikization” to Tajikistan itself (Abdullo, 2007:65). This kind of regional unity where Tajik people - ‘the only representative of Iranian group of Indo-European family’ - finds itself in “an exclusively Turkic world” would constitute a threat to the identity of Tajiks (Masov and Dzumaev, 1991).

### **Central Asia as a victim of internal and external rivalries**

The viability of regional unity and integration is compromised by the existence of another image of Central Asia as a victim of both internal and external rivalries. These rivalries are undermining the realization of effective regional cooperation and integration. Intra-regional rivalry is mainly focused on relationships between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. In their analysis of Central Asia’s regional security dynamics, Lena Jonson and Roy Allison have defined this phenomenon as a “structurally built-in competition” for leadership between Kazakhstan, with the biggest territory, and Uzbekistan, with the biggest population and military organization. (Allison and Jonson, 2001). According to a recent commentary on this topic, the sources of this rivalry

between two most important countries of Central Asia in fact lie outside the region (Laumulin and Tolipov, 2010). The rivalry for leadership originated in the efforts of certain foreign powers to identify a Central Asian country with the most material, ideological and geopolitical resources. This country would serve as a core state for realizing those foreign powers' Central Asian policy. The perspective of Zbigniew Brzezinski, an influential American geostrategist and former advisor to US president, is given as an example. In his book on Eurasian geopolitics, published in 1997, Brzezinski had identified Uzbekistan as the core state of the Central Asian region harboring regional leadership ambitions independently from Russia. This independent stance was convergent with the US aim of preventing the reestablishment of Russian hegemony in the post-Soviet space. According to Farkhod Tolipov, from Uzbekistan, Kazakh-Uzbek rivalry is largely a myth with external origins. But, Murat Laumulin, from Kazakhstan, does not share his colleague's opinion. For him, the presence of rivalry is a fact and it stems from historical rivalries between sedentary (Uzbekistan) and nomadic (Kazakhstan) civilizations, differences between modes of life as well as confrontations between ambitions of republics' leaders since the period of the Soviet Union.

Alongside intra-regional rivalry, Central Asia as a regional space is at the heart of strategic rivalry relationships involving several external players. In world politics, Central Asia is identified as a region of geostrategic and geopolitical importance. It is identified as a strategic backyard both by Russia and China. At the same time it is located in the proximity of Afghanistan, Iran and Afghanistan, main spots of strategic instability and uncertainty in Eurasia. This element creates interest for Central Asia in countries involved in military operations in Afghanistan and in negotiations dealing with Iran. The US and other NATO countries are among the most interested. Moreover, Central Asia is being increasingly viewed as an important component of the global energetic system. Central Asian resources in gas and oil, mainly situated in the Caspian Basin, were defined as second only to Persian Gulf reserves. The Central Asian energetic complex is said to become a defining factor in global energy policy (Dorian, 2006). Due to these features, the Central Asian region is attracting many major powers of Eurasian

politics, with Russia, China and the US being the most prominent.<sup>3</sup> They are involved in a complex web of relationships defined by the logic of rivalry and designed to shape the evolution of the Central Asian regional space and to control its strategic and energetic resources.

These intra-regional and external rivalries are having constraining effects on regional union perspectives and leading to the defragmentation of the region. In this context of partition of regional space, the interstate relationships increasingly follow the logic of a zero sum game. On the one hand, the prevalence of perceptions of rivalry is pushing Central Asian states to adopt a traditional balance of power strategy as their main foreign policy tool. According to Farkhop Tolipov, Central Asian countries have adopted the balance of power policy as their major foreign policy instrument vis-à-vis foreign great powers and among themselves (Tolipov, 2004). On the other hand, external powers “fight for the identity of the region, for integrating it to this or that part of Eurasia” (Kazantsev, 2008:242). This state of affairs leaves no space for effective regional union and collective action perspectives. According to Ulughbek Khasanov, from Uzbekistan, “the struggle for influence over Central Asia involves more or less all leader countries of Central Asia. The new states of Central Asia should give up illusions about the new world order and accept controversial rules of political survival in the contemporary world. They are situated in Mackinder’s Heartland, the arena of international confrontation, and should act accordingly” (Khasanov, 2005).

### Contested Central Asia

These images of Central Asia as a region subjected to logic of division and defragmentation bring its contested nature to the fore. Different parties involved in the struggle for influence over Central Asia engage in questioning not only the action and interests of other parties, but also the conceptualization of the region as a whole. They contest contemporary understandings and

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<sup>3</sup> The list of contenders varies according to the author. The texts of immediate post-Soviet era used to put Russia, China, and US as the first circle of powerful players of Central Asian regional geopolitics, while Turkey, Iran and Pakistan were identified as players of regional importance which could yield considerable influence in Central Asian politics. Beside these countries, texts on Central Asian geopolitics can refer to countries as Japan, India, the EU or even South Korea among the players of the new Great Game. Another trend is to identify Central Asian countries themselves as subjects, as players rather than objects of the modern Great Game.

perceptions concerning the geographical scope of Central Asia and propose to redefine the region's limits and boundaries. This insistence on concepts is justified by the simple fact that perceptions and conceptualizations have quite practical and material implications. A prominent example showing the image of "contested Central Asia" is illustrated by a recent debate around the concept of "Greater Central Asia".

In the region, the idea of "Greater Central Asia" is seen as representing the US Central Asian policy and has been closely associated with the Central Asia and Caucasus Institute at John Hopkins University chaired by Frederick S. Starr. In a 2004 *Foreign Affairs* article, Frederick Starr criticized the geographical perceptions held by US policy makers who used to view Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan as a part of a post-Soviet group while they identify Afghanistan as a South Asian country. This disconnection of Afghanistan from Central Asia in the geographical approach of the US to the region had been reducing the potential for American foreign policy to make a positive contribution to the general situation in the region. However, according to the author, these five post-Soviet countries of Central Asia have always been part of the Greater Central Asian region together with Afghanistan. Hence, the author advised US policy makers to "redraw the region" and set up a Greater Central Asia Partnership for Cooperation and Development, a "region-wide forum for the planning, coordination, and implementation of an array of U.S. programs", which included all six countries and would enable the US to transform "the entire region into a zone of secure sovereignties sharing viable market economies, enjoying secular and open systems of government, and maintaining positive relations with the United States" (Starr, 2004). The priority of this new regional framework would be to seek to encourage transport and trade among Greater Central Asian countries and also between them and other major Eurasian destinations, like India Pakistan, China and even Iran (Norling and Swänstorm, 2007).

Later, Frederick Starr widened his definition of Greater Central Asia which could include according to him "Xinjiang region of China, the Khorasan province of Iran, the northern part of Pakistan, Mongolia, such Russian areas as Tatarstan, and even that part of northern India extending from Rajasthan to Agra". For him, this definition is based "on the character of the

region itself’, with its distinctive geographical, cultural, and economic features (Starr, 2008). Since then, the US administration has taken some practical steps directly and also by supporting ongoing multilateral initiatives in conformity with the suggestions of Greater Central Asian initiative. First change was to transfer Central Asia from the responsibility of Europe and the CIS Department to the department of South Asia at the US State Department. In the region, USAID has set up the Regional Energy Markets Assistance Program. The latter is intended to help Central Asian states deliver better service and prepare the institutional and regulatory framework for new regional trading arrangements. The US has also been actively supporting the ADB financed project “Central Asian Regional Economic Cooperation” (CAREC) (Feigenbaum, 2007).

The merit of the Greater Central Asia proposal lies in the fact that it represented an attempt to break out of Soviet-related visions of Central Asia by re-conceptualizing it. The reading of Frederick Starr’s proposal underscores two main ways for this. First, it intended to broaden the geographical scope of Central Asian region. Second, it called for the reorientation of trade and political orientation of the region, based on its cultural features, to the South. However, this call for reconceptualization created uneasy feelings among both Central Asian countries and their neighbors like Russia and China. The perspective of broadening the scope of the region to include Afghanistan did not encourage Central Asian countries. A blunt assessment of the perspective of integration with Afghanistan was given by Aleksandr Knyazev. He argues that “any kind of liberalization of border regimes with a country producing 90 % of opium and heroin (of the world), remaining a harbor of extremist and terrorist groups and continuing to war will transform the whole region into one big Afghanistan” (Knyazev, 2007). More restrained reactions called the initiative a ‘premature proposal’ as “enlarging the participants of Central Asia would extraordinarily complicate the already patchy regional mosaic” (Saifullin, 2007). The second component of the proposal calling for reorientation of the trade links of the region was also associated with quite practical political and economic underpinnings and linked to the rivalry of Russia, China and the US in Central Asia (Imanaliyev, 2006). China’s People Daily described Greater Central Asia in quite hostile terms. According to the Chinese daily, the reason which pushed the US to promote a Southern option for Central Asia is the American

determination to “change the external strategic focus of Central Asia from the current Russia-and-China-oriented partnership to cooperative relations with South Asian countries”. This would harm both Russian and Chinese interests, undermine the coherence of the regional organizations like the SCO and lead to the establishment of US dominance in the region (People Daily, 2006).

## Reconsidering Central Asia

This plurality of images associated with Central Asia shows the constructive nature of regionalisms in the world and highlights complex political, economic and strategic logics behind them. The case of Central Asia is quite interesting. Apart from highlighting competing logics, the above-mentioned images call us to pay attention to more subtle logics at work in the region, which questions our established understanding about Central Asia and pushes us to reconsider the “Central Asia argument”. In what follows, I will briefly mention the factors which could serve as starting point for this work of reassessment.

### Weren't the extent and the finality of 'Central Asia' too deterministic?

Since the early post-Soviet years, Central Asia has always been considered as a static region comprising of five states. This approach supposed that any Central Asian organization should eventually comprise all five countries of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan (Kushkumbayev, 2002), and necessarily exclude all other countries, including their closest neighbors, China and Russia (Tolipov, 2005). The constant isolation of Turkmenistan in regional frameworks has been considered a temporary phenomenon as the country is “a fragment of Central Asian space” which should one day join the Central Asian integrationist group (Kushkumbayev, 2002:139). Another element of the deterministic approach to Central Asian regionalism was fixing a static *finality* to Central Asian regionalism, i.e. regional integration framework with supranational elements. In addition, what is meant by regional integration was the end state, i.e. the establishment of full-fledged working regional integration organization with supranational prerogatives. However, after almost two decades of independence and despite the change of President, the stance of Turkmenistan towards regional organizations still remains

very restrictive. The country did not participate in the Central Asian Cooperation Organization nor in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. It also downgraded its participation in other regional groupings like the CIS to minimum level. All these organizations include the other four Central Asian countries. As for the aim of regional integration, it has also been being increasingly questioned recently. According to these perspectives, the term of “regional integration” recalls too much the European experience and as such it could be causing hesitations among Central Asian countries for which ] State sovereignty remains the top priority (Starr, n.d.). The recent UNDP report on Central Asian regionalism has expressly preferred “regional cooperation” as an immediate priority for Central Asia while it has relegated the possibility of “intensive institutional and economic integration” to “only in the long term” (UNDP, 2005).

### **Would Central Asia be big enough after integration?**

Exclusive focus on regional integration of the five Central Asian countries is also called into question by factors of size and relevance. Almost all Central Asian countries represent small scale economies. Only Kazakhstan stays out of the group, given its impressive economic output, largely due to its oil and energy exports. But, its demographic situation does not match its economic power. Moreover, even after the possible regional integration, the Central Asia Five would still represent a group with relatively modest economic and demographic indicators in comparison to neighboring markets and it will still face the challenges of economic, geographical and geopolitical handicaps. A quick look at the CIA World Factbook indices comparing Central Asian potential with its two most immediate neighbours and biggest trade partners Russia and China may highlight why some of Central Asian countries, like Kazakhstan, are being drawn to Russia and China rather than to their peers in the region.



	Population (million)	GDP	GDP per capita
Kazakhstan	15,399,437	\$182.3 billion	\$11,800
Kirghizstan	5,431,747	\$11.66 billion	\$2,100
Tajikistan	7,349,145	\$13.8 billion	\$1,800
Turkmenistan	4,884,887	\$33.58 billion	\$6,900
Uzbekistan	27,606,007	\$77.55 billion	\$2,800
Central Asia 5	68,020,368	\$318.89 billion	\$5082,36
Russia	140,041,247	\$2.116 trillion	\$15,100
China	1,338,612,968	\$8.789 trillion	\$6,600

Source: The CIA World Factbook <https://www.cia.gov> Accessed on 7 May 2010

Analysts are also questioning whether the Central Asia Five Framework is pertinent for framing a variety of regional processes in economic or political spheres. A recent study by Center for European Policy Studies based on 18 months of monitoring of Central Asian regional processes has concluded that many important issues traditionally considered as Central Asian should rather be reconceptualized as Eurasian (Emerson and Boonstra, 2010). According to Michael Emerson, the coordinator of the study, most actual debates dealing with Central Asia, as with the issues of border management, trade and transport corridors as well as water management, all “have vital cross-border dimensions linking to neighbours external to the region, or have trans-continental dimensions” (Emerson, 2009).

## Who is “the other” of Central Asia?

According to one dominant perspective on Central Asian regional politics, Central Asia is perceived as being subject to constant pressure from Russia and should therefore develop regional integration in order to tackle this overwhelming Russian influence. Just as the Soviet Union was the “other” which pushed European countries to integration, the presence of Russia as “the other” would eventually lead Central Asian countries toward unity. Central Asian states’ efforts to build regional solidarity could also be interpreted as efforts to balance Russian influence. However recent studies call for more prudence in using the ‘balance of power’ interpretations for the post-Soviet space as neither internal balancing nor external balancing is likely to work against Russia in at least the near future. Nor have there been efforts of this kind on the part of Russian neighbors (Wohlforth, 2004). Moreover, Central Asian states rely heavily on the Russian military industry for supplies. Other studies correctly point to ongoing regionalization tendencies which bring Russia closer with Central Asian countries on an economic level (Libman, 2008; Libman, 2009). On the level of identity, the menace factor coming from the inside rather than outside Central Asia may be perceived more acutely by some Central Asian states. Thus, as small states of the region, both Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are more afraid of intra-regional hegemony; in the case of Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan the fear is of Russian hegemony (Bohr, 2004). As noted above, Tajik authors increasingly voice concerns about their country’s uneasy and uncomfortable situation within an exclusively Central Asian framework (Abdulla, 2007). Tajikistan sees Central Asia in terms of a ‘Turkic union’ and cannot associate itself with this concept (Masov and Djumaev, 1991). Due to frictions between Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, it is the latter which substitutes Russia as ‘the other’, the outside enemy (Khudonazar, 2004; Kazantsev, 2008).

A recent poll realized by the Russia Center for Studying Public Opinion (WCIOM) researched the perceptions of friendliness vis-à-vis foreign countries among the populations of post-Soviet countries. According to its results, Russia was identified as the friendliest country by the absolute majority of populations in Central Asian countries: Kazakhstan – 67%, Kirghizstan- 74%, Tajikistan- 89% and Uzbekistan- 74%. Major segments of populations were also in favour of a

union with Russia (WCIOM, 2008). Another poll conducted among Central Asian experts tried to determine which countries Central Asian states should develop regional projects with. 50 % of respondents identified regionalism with Russia (Eurasec and CSTO) as a priority for countries of Central Asia next to exclusive Central Asian regionalism. Other regional groupings, including China, Turkey or Muslim countries received 5 % or less of experts' favorable opinions (Abdrakhmanova, on file with the author). These findings highlight a need to question the established idea that considers Russia to be an external powerful element threatening the identity of Central Asian region.

### **Is “Central Asia” sought by Central Asians?**

One of the main features of current literature is to present the Central Asian region's material features (difficulties, problems, challenges) as the regional identity of Central Asia. This approach has led to the consolidation of the image of Central Asia as a peripheral region in world politics. We have mentioned Central Asia's image of “Eurasian Balkans” (Brzezinski, 1997) which continue to persist. It was also described as “a weak sub-complex of Russian regional security complex” under high geopolitical pressure (Buzan and Waever, 2003), or as a “preregional area in which the US and Russia competes for influence” (see Björn Hettne in Telo, 2007). Moreover, both great game and institutionalist perspectives on Central Asian regional politics attribute little or no agency to Central Asian states. From the perspective of great-game/outside-in approaches, Central Asian states are passive objects of conflicting regional projects promoted by outside powers (Kazantsev, 2008; Troitskiy, 2006). From the point of view of institutionalists, Central Asian countries are for the moment incapable of elaborating working institutions. They are attained by a path which renders any collective action impossible (Spechler, 2000). It can be argued that it is indeed the continuing association of ‘Central Asia’ concept with the image of a “complex economic, political, cultural and ideological vacuum and the (passive) object of so called “the new great game” (Golunov, 2003) that is leading Central Asian countries to look towards other regional frameworks free of stereotypes, like that of the Eurasian space centered around Russia or that of “a space of harmonious development based on the spirit of Shanghai” promoted by China.

## **Conclusions: the persistence of Central Asia?**

Today, one can legitimately ask whether the term “Central Asia” would join the ranks of concepts like “post-Soviet space” as a ‘vanishing reality’ in the future. The presence of multiple images of the region, the majority of which are of centrifugal character makes regional consolidation a difficult task and could ultimately lead to the defragmentation of the region. The disappearance of the institutional form of Central Asia, after the merge of the Central Asian Cooperation Organization with Russia-dominated Eurasian Economic Community is another matter of concern for the further evolution of “Central Asia” as a distinct subject in the world of regions. Combined with the effect of outside powers’ influence, the centrifugal character of Central Asia could result in the partition of the region and the integration of the region or what is left of it into different parts of Eurasia (Kazantsev, 2008). However, one difference between “Central Asia”, on the one hand, and “Post-Soviet space” or “Central Eurasia”, on the other, is that the latter are born out of the need from outside the region to have proper analytical frameworks for processes in a collection of somewhat different states. They are attempts to project the region from the outside in. As their utility as analytically relevant frames of discourse decrease, the search for new analytical concepts to replace them could advance rather swiftly. While the term “Central Asia” represents the effort of a small group of interdependent countries locked between great power dynamics, globalization pressures as well as increasing regional uncertainty to endogenously define their regional space and regional identity by themselves. It is the product of aspirations for independence of newly sovereign countries in an unequal regional context. The presence of “Central Asia” would permit these weak countries to assert themselves as a distinct region to neighboring Russia and China, to have their own regional identity. This will was evident in 1993 when leaders of five post-Soviet countries which only recently had been known as “Middle Asia and Kazakhstan” of the USSR solemnly declared themselves to constitute “Central Asia”. In the event of its successful realization, “Central Asia” was intended to help its members to strengthen their sovereignty, to reduce their dependence on outside markets and to mobilize region’s development potential.

These aspirations could explain the ‘persistence of Central Asia’ argument, despite the continuing ambiguities surrounding regional cooperation and the disappearance of the institutional form of Central Asia in 2005. Despite the inconclusive outcome of the first attempts to develop regional solidarity, many voices from political and academic circles continue to call for “Central Asia”. In particular, calls for Central Asian unity have become a traditional part of the annual address of the President of Kazakhstan to the people. Immediately after the accession of Russia to Central Asian Cooperation Organization, Nursultan Nazarbayev, the president of Kazakhstan, was calling for a new, properly Central Asian framework: “If we would have created common economic area, this would be 55 million people. If we removed internal borders, opened roads for trade, we would have a market in Central Asia which will remove the need to go outside for countries to live normally. Look, Central Asia will cover its energy and food needs by itself. We will not be obliged to ask others to buy our goods, we will sell them here. Could you imagine all the benefits this will offer to us?” (Nazarbayev, 2005). Farkhod Tolipov, from Uzbekistan, calls on “Central Asia optimists” to insist on the right of Central Asia to exist in the “regionalized and multi-sided world” of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Tolipov, 2009).

The case of “Central Asia” points to the constructive nature of the world of regions. In this world of regions, not only do different regions try to identify each other mutually, but also, one given region may be subject to a complex game of definition and redefinition by multiple competing logics and rationalities (Hurrell, 2007). Alongside relevant institutional and other features, the region’s names also acquire an important function in this context. Different regional denominations are associated with both certain social meanings and particular political objectives. The resistance to power in the world of regions also takes the shape of advancing alternative names for regions which allegedly have endogenous sources whereas great powers’ efforts to shape and define the evolution of particular regions are associated with exogenous projections over the regions in question. Whether they be endogenous or exogenous, any regional definition is continually subject to questioning and reassessment on the part of the parties who are directly implicated by it.

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