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Environmental issues can catalyse regional cooperation in Central Asia

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Central Asia is conscious of its history as a region of long-range interconnectivity. Cradle of world empires, this region left ambiguous impressions in the historic remembrances of adjacent territories in Eurasia. In some countries, Chinggis Khan and Tamerlane serve still – and again – as source for history-based contemporary identity.

Having lately given rise to Mackinder's Heartland Theory (Mackinder, 1904) with unlucky political effects such as the 'great game' (Figure 1), complexities of settlement structures versus nomadic mobility did imprint their stamp of repeated destruction of feeble statehood onto the region for millennia. Collectivisation is reported to have cost high number of lives in contemporary museums that do attempt to build up national identities during the past 25 years.

Figure 1: The southern frontier of Russia as of 1885 (death of Nicholas I of Russia) is still visible in the present era. This map includes in grey the alternative south-westwards historic water flow beds of Amu Darya (Uzboy) and Syr Darya (Yanidarya); at least the latter played a role in 19th century power politics (Okar, 2013).

While the idea of "scientific" delineation of nationally discernible territories was successful in many places, the intricate state of interlacing settlement areas produced an almost romantic pattern of snail-like boundaries, similar to three friends giving each other their hands for a symbolic shake-hands in shape of a triangle (at left in Figure 2). This region is at the same time the most densely populated one (at right in Figure 2) in Central Asia (CA); and its name "Fergana valley" oscillates through international news channels as a synonym for ethno-religious tensions that sadly did already erupt numerous times since independence of the five adjacent states.

Figure 2: Complex frontier patterns in the most densely populated area of Central Asia, the Fergana Valley.

Rivers cross frontiers almost every 20km, and planned-to-be-built electricity lines threat to face the same fate – hence remain in the planning stage for too many decades, thus jeopardising economic integration in the region. Railway lines become close to inoperable and remain truncated.

Figure 3: Rivers flow from north-westwards (at left) but chronically lose their water along their way (see blue width at right).

Actually, the water distribution regime along the two main rivers, the Amu Darya and the Syr Darya (Figure 3 at left), was agreed before independence and is still kept as a fragile heritage, including partly huge volumes of water deviated annually into channels (Figure 3 at left), which in fact are of doubtable technological quality and lose most of its precious load until arrival at the intended fields to be irrigated. The "victim" of such situation is the Aral Sea, driven into a desert by largely outdated irrigation schemes and dilapidated technology that no more disposes of measurement infrastructure.

While northern CA approaches were more successful and filled the "northern Aral Sea" to a point that ever-increasing dams are built with international funds to prepare water flowing off into the more endangered "southern Aral Sea", the southern CA plans seem to favour "re-forestation" of the southern Aral Sea bed, the realizability of which has still to be seen – given the at least tenfold salt concentration in remaining waters (compare plot in Figure 4).

Figure 4: The two tributaries of the Aral Sea, the Amu Darya in the south and the Syr Darya in the north, flow through several riparian states before arriving in the Aral Sea.

Another "returning spectre" haunts CA policy making: the large-scale deviation of north-bound rivers such as the Irtysh) into the CA steppe. This approach, however, disregards the problem's root: ineffective usage of water – not absolute water scarcity!

Figure 5: An example of classical technological approach: large-scale deviation of rivers. The solid line represents the existing Ertis-Karaghanda channel and the dotted line symbolises diverse large-scale plans.

However, the author does not propose such plans. The target is to use water wisely and efficiently.

In the framework of the "EU-Central Asian Dialogue on Water, Environment and Climate Change" (as promoted by the project Wecoop2 during 2016-2019), the deeper causes for water scarcity are explored in dialogue. These are to be healed in cooperative projects that search funding through IFIs (International Financing Institutions) such as world Bank, European Bank for Reconstruction and Development EBRD, European Investment Bank EIB, Asian Development Bank ADB, and Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank AIIB (Ahamer Pichugin, 2017) – possibly mediated by a Centre of Excellence on Project Development PPP (CoE, 2017). Wecoop2 (2017) has two concrete targets:

1. Maintaining the political dialogue among CA states (and with the EU) and

2. Identifying ten large environmental investment projects in CA pertaining to water, waste etc.

The social pattern of this dialogue is the strive for the common good, increased regional integration (as is the target of most IFIs in the meantime as well), orientation at environmental targets (has become solid decision criteria for IFIs as well in the meantime) and stepwise consensus building.

Thus, environmental problems (even if these are most severe) are capable of becoming a catalyst for a now, respectful and cooperative approach among riparian states that understand that solutions mean cooperation per se.

Other social and political patterns might be power politics, including power relations based on fossil fuels and their transport lines (Figure 6). There are signs, however, that such policy might not be in the interest of all trading partners but rather in a unilateral interest. This is why fossil-based power politics are not likely to produce long-standing and stable relations among states.

Figure 6: Plans for oil and gas pipelines combine east-west and north-south connectivity in Central Asia.

Additionally, the Paris Climate Agreement (2015) did fundamentally reshape the global investment map: Practically all IFIs rely on climate-relevant values and restrict their funding to climate-compatible projects, such as alternative energy sources, efficiency gains, and related civic responsibility in freedom-oriented civil societies. Thus, climate change does become a game-changer in world politics.

Another virulently emerging power, China, follows a path of economic cooperation in CA that was nicknamed "silk road", or called "One belt, one road". It has still to be seen whether the underlying policy is motivated by equilibrated perception of all stakeholders' interests and views or only uses CA as a through-house for own economic interests. Reality is too complex for a quick assessment.

Patterns of connectivity in and around Central Asia combine several meandering fluxes of "spaces of flows" and are not "1 main line", as the name "silk road" might suggest at first sight. A possible view centred on a rather northern region is displayed in Figure 7.

Figure 7: Neither the "silk road" strategy of the "one belt – one road" strategy are clearly defined single roads, but a network of bundled connectivity, notably including sea ports from a Chinese viewpoint.

In brief, this article supports a dialogue-oriented approach in mutual respect that might show the highest chances to heal tensions in historically conflict-prone world regions in durable manner.

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