



The Evolution of the Central Asian Regional Order

Dr Filippo Costa Buranelli,
University of St Andrews, UK



Structure of the talk and its thesis

1. Statement of the thesis and illustration of the theory used
2. Analysis of three different periods
 1. 1991-2004
 2. 2004-2016
 3. 2016-?
3. Possible future scenarios
4. Final considerations

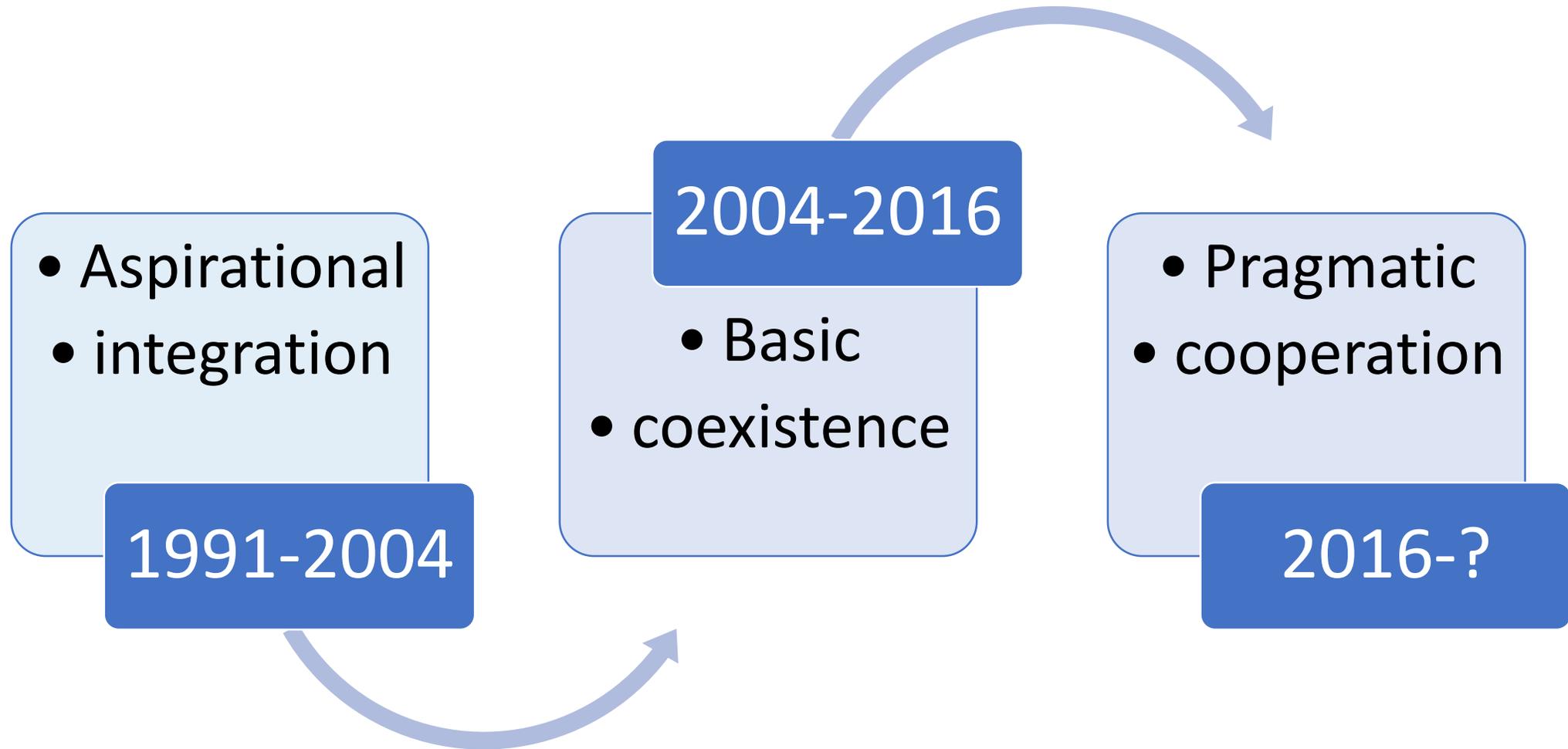
Thesis

- Rather than a failed integrated region, Central Asia is an example of an international society, or **order**, defined as *a group of states that, conscious of some common interests and common values, lives together in the share of common norms and institutions*
 - “A good neighbour is better than a distant relative”
- Institutions, in this context, are defined as ***durable social practices that define the actors of a given social group and the standard of behaviour to observe in that social group, giving it stability and predictability (e.g. funerals, weddings, lectures, the market etc.)***
- Order, by definition, is not fixed but is subject to **change** and allows for **both** cooperation and competition, peace and conflict, and amity and enmity
- “Evolution”, in this presentation, is not linked to any normative connotation (such as “getting better”) but is simply related to the changing nature of the abovementioned order

More on 'international society' / 'order'

- It is a social concept, and hence it focuses on both the cooperative and the uncooperative behaviour actors
- It is grounded in history, so it takes into account time and change
- It relies on meanings and practices of the actors involved
- It is not synonym with integration or regionalism per se, but it is more flexible and it emphasises order, coexistence, pragmatism and stability
 - Order is the hardware, regionalism is the software
- It is a sociological approach to state-behaviour in international relations
- It is not prescriptive or causal but descriptive, emphasising what is legitimate (and not) in a specific social context
- How to study it?
 - Archival research
 - Discourse analysis of available sources
 - Interviews with (former) diplomats, experts, and academics/experts from the region

The evolution of international society in Central Asia



1991-2004

Aspirational integration

- *'Our roots are one, our languages similar, our religion the same. The Soviet Union cut us into five pieces. These five states will remain. But relations should be as strong between them as one state. Tactics may differ, but the strategy is one'* (Ahmadjan Loukmanov, Uzbekistan's Foreign Ministry spokesman, 1993)
- *'The Central Asian union has passed from words to deeds [...] Trade turnover between the three nations doubled last year, a sign that our union is working very successfully'* (Askar Akaev, 1997)
- *the development of regional relations in the framework of the agreement is not a show of fashion or an invention. It is not an integration for the sake of integration, but is a natural and objective process which has deep historical roots* (press secretary of the Tajik Presidency, Zafar Saidov, 1998)
- Endogenous creation of 'Central Asia' as a rhetorical expression and political space (1991-1993)
- Creation of intergovernmental structures
 - Central Asian Union
 - International Fund for the Aral Sea
 - Central Asian Economic Cooperation
 - Central Asia Cooperation Organisation
 - Central Asian Bank
- Management of regional security (Tajik civil war and terrorism)





МЕЖГОСУДАРСТВЕННЫЙ СОВЕТ
РЕСПУБЛИКИ КАЗАХСТАН, КЫРГЫЗСКОЙ РЕСПУБЛИКИ
И РЕСПУБЛИКИ УЗБЕКИСТАН

ИСПОЛНИТЕЛЬНЫЙ КОМИТЕТ



СБОРНИК
ДОКУМЕНТОВ И МАТЕРИАЛОВ

Institutions in the 1991-2004 period

- **Sovereignty** – allowing for the creation of regional organisations
- **Diplomacy (summitry)** – diplomatic relations between states were established and diplomacy was used, alongside military support, in the Tajik conflict – mediation was present, often in Ashgabat
- **International law** – *uti possidetis* and no territorial conflicts
- **Strong rule** – understanding between leaders that stability was the ultimate value
- **Great Power Management** – Russia was involved in security issues, but less in other spheres
- **Logic of order** – recreation of brotherly ties while favouring nation- and state-building processes

2004-2016

Basic coexistence

'God himself orders us to unite - "why [Central Asians] can't...build such a union?' (Nazarbayev, 2007)

'The plan is ill-prepared and built on sand' (unofficial Uzbek reaction, 2007)

- Demise of all formal regional structures
- Bilateralism over multilateralism
- Centripetal integration
 - Eurasian Union
 - Shanghai Cooperation Organisation
- Presence of the great powers
- Conflicts in Osh and over Roghun



...совещанием депутат А. Акаев отметил, что ительные материалы - це-
мент, стекло и другие, не-



ЗАСЕДАНИЕ СОВЕТА ГЛАВ ГОСУДАРСТВ-ЧЛЕНОВ ШАНХАЙСКОЙ ОРГАНИЗАЦИИ СОТРУДНИЧЕСТВА
上海合作组织成员国元首理事会会议



Institutions in the 2004-2016 period

- **Sovereignty** – rigid and adversarial, prevalence of the *raison d'état*
- **Diplomacy** – diplomatic relations between states were present and diplomacy was used, not for cooperative goals but rather to avoid escalations and to keep the *status quo* – no mediation, prevalence of bilateralism, occasionally trilateralism
- **International law** – *uti possidetis* and no territorial conflicts
- **Strong rule** – understanding between leaders that stability was the ultimate value
- **Great Power Management** – Russia and China have now a presence in the region, but they have been kept out from conflicts
- **Logic of order** – coexistential rivalry

2016-?

Pragmatic cooperation

- *There is no need to call an outsider to resolve issues of the Central Asian nations, we are able to resolve everything ourselves that is why we are meeting...Our mood now is different than it was before.... Today we are meeting with our colleagues, brothers' (Nursultan Nazarbayev, 2018)*
- *Central Asia is in fact a region of unique opportunities and huge unrealized potential. Ensuring sustainable development, stability and prosperity in the region is our common and achievable goal...We believe that the region needs a joint search for ways to deal with common problems...This is not about the establishment of a new international organization of Central Asia or an integration union with a charter and a supranational body...The sole purpose of the regional dialogue platform is to synchronize our watches on key aspects of regional development' (Shavkat Mirziyoyev, 2017)*
- Persistence of 'Central Asia' as a rhetorical expression and political space
- No creation of intergovernmental structures
 - Cooperation becomes voluntary, consensual, informal and flexible
- Emphasis on pragmatic aspects of the regional life
 - Infrastructure
 - Tourism
 - Economic partnership
 - Region-to-region cooperation
 - Border management
 - Water resources
- Progressive inclusion of Afghanistan in the regional picture?
- Creation of a 'regional sovereignty' discourse





Institutions in the 2016-? period

- **Sovereignty** – non-compromisable, yet allowing for dialogue – formation of a *raison de système*
- **Diplomacy** – diplomatic relations between states are present and diplomacy is used to keep dialogue alive on fundamental issues of the regional order – bilateralism is mixed with multilateralism + rise of second-tier diplomacy
- **International law** – *uti possidetis* but first territorial conflicts (KG-TJ in particular), flexible tools and no legal impositions
- **Strong rule** – understanding between leaders that stability was the ultimate value
- **Great Power Management** – Russia and China have now a presence in the region, but they are still kept outside of regional issues. They drive macro-regional processes
- **Logic of order** – efforts to establish a code of conduct to manage relations between sovereign, independent states

Future scenarios?

1. The Central Asian scenario
2. The Eurasian scenario
 1. Russian vector
 2. Chinese vector
3. The status-quo scenario
4. The Afghan scenario

The above scenarios are meant as 'reasonable speculations' about the future of the regional order, and not as prescriptive or normative indications

Final considerations

- Insofar as we keep on talking of regionalism, we keep on depicting a reality that is not that of Central Asia
- Rather than integration or full-fledged cooperation, regional leaders prefer talking about 'dialogue', 'consultation', 'informal meetings' and 'Samarkand spirit'
- Yet, 'Central Asia' is there to stay in the identity discourses of leaders – it keeps dialogue alive, it creates a sense of belonging, and places the republics on a map at the international level
- Looking at Central Asia as an order allows for historical contextuality, flexibility of analysis, practices and discourses
- Changes in the configuration of an order at a given time in history must be located at the domestic, regional and international levels
- Order is never fixed but is always negotiated, contested, produced, and reproduced through discourses and practices at different levels.
- The Central Asian order depicted in this presentation is a complex, multi-layered one with different worldviews and imaginaries. The state-centric approach of this presentation is one way to look at it, but arguably not the only way.

THANK YOU FOR YOUR ATTENTION!