China’s Normative Power in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and Great Game Politics
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Research Question
How does Chinese influence in Central Asia, particularly as exerted via the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), shape the policy decisions of Central Asian states? How does this influence impact Central Asian states’ relationship with the United States and Russia?

Objectives

- Methodology:
  - To conduct the first data-driven analysis of the normative positions of Central Asian states, by using UNGA voting ideal points
  - To use Chinese-language sources to inform a scholarship based almost entirely on Russian-language sources

- Theory:
  - To apply the theories of macrosecuritization and regime complexity to the normative interaction between the SCO and the Global War on Terror
  - To address the research agenda advanced by Buzan & Wæver (2009) on the durability and interactivity of the Global War on Terror macrosecuritization, as it applies to Central Asia

- Implications:
  - To link Chinese normative influence via the Shanghai Cooperation Organization with the processes of securitization at the domestic level in Central Asia
  - To determine under which conditions external influences affect the normative movements of Central Asian states

Background and Literature Review
China’s involvement in Central Asia was greatly limited by its own domestic insecurity for much of the past century. However, China has entered Central Asia since the collapse of the Soviet Union to build trade routes (Escobar, 2014), open markets (Laruelle & Peyrouse, 2012), and advocate for a stable neighborhood along its most insecure borderlands, thereby preventing the spillover of Islamism and instability to Xinjiang province (Clarke, 2010). Given the high levels of Chinese aid and investment in Central Asia, some scholars have even claimed the vassilization of Central Asian states to China (Swanström, 2005), resulting in both Sinophilic opportunism and Sinophobic backlash among local populaces (Laruelle & Peyrouse, 2012). On the other hand, China is one of many patrons in Central Asia, including the United States, Russia, India and Turkey (Cooley, 2012; Laruelle, Peyrouse, Huchet, & Bayram, 2010). Competition between powers – particularly the United States, Russia and China – allows Central Asian states to pit powers against each other and enjoy disproportionate agency to pursue independent policymaking (Cooley, 2012).

China participates in the regional organization of Central Asia through the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, a Eurasian regional security institution founded after the collapse of the Soviet Union and led by China and Russia. Its stated mandate is to combat the ‘three evils’ of terrorism, extremism and separatism. The organization is loosely legalized, espouses non-
interference in domestic affairs and rhetorically aims to bolster states’ legitimacy and authority (Allison, 2004; Aris, 2009, 2011).

The membership of China and Russia in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization has spurred much debate on whether the SCO is anti-West and anti-NATO (Aris, 2009; Aris & Snetkov, 2013; Cohen, 2006; Weitz, 2006), especially in a region disposed to anti-Americanism (Schatz, 2008). One scholar has argued that the sovereignty-enhancing norms of the organization have spread autocracy and repression in Central Asia and thereby countered U.S. influence (Ambrosio, 2008), while another has argued, more modestly, that the organization is strategically sought by Central Asian states as normative shelter from Western criticism in their pursuit of repressive policies (Safiullin, 2010). In both analyses, the organization’s efforts to secure Central Asian governments against dissent and Islamic fundamentalism serves China’s interest in a secure and authoritarian Central Asia (Clarke, 2010). In a region where Islamism and dissent are closely related, Central Asian states have strategically framed political threats to their regime legitimacy as terrorististic and extremist Islamist threats to regional and global security, thereby enjoying the normative support of the United States (Cooley, 2012). Indeed, it is widely held the United States and its allies have driven securitization of Islam in Central Asia and around the world (Abrahamsen, 2005; Buzan & Wæver, 2009; Jourde, 2007; Omelicheva, 2013).

**Theory**

Despite the large body of literature addressing separately the Shanghai Cooperation Organization’s normative character on a global stage and the Global War on Terror in Central Asia, there is little theoretical exploration of how the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and American unilaterality specifically interact in shaping the often repressive policies of Central Asian states. Although Cooley’s thesis (2012) provides an international-level explanation for the general prevalence of authoritarianism in Central Asia, it does not provide much explanatory or predictive power for movements in Central Asian states’ normative and policy positions over time, such as Uzbekistan’s foreign policy vacillations and Kyrgyzstan’s recent illiberal turn.

This research mainly employs three key theoretical approaches or concepts: (1) securitization theory, particularly macrosecuritization, (2) regime complexity and (3) the logic of consequences. Securitization is the politically-motivated framing of unrelated, or loosely related, issues as threats to the existence of the state (Balzacq, 2011; Buzan, Wæver, & Wilde, 1998). Macrosecuritization describes global or regional security conceptualizations to which ruling elites may strategically ascribe political issues (Buzan & Wæver, 2009). In the lexicon of securitization theory, this research assesses international explanations (macrosecuritizations) for why Central Asian states (securitizing actors) securitize political dissent and Islamism (securitized threats) as threatening the existence of Central Asian states (referent object). I posit that Central Asian states employ these macrosecuritizations strategically, according to the logic of consequences (March & Olsen, 1998). Regime complexity endeavors to understand how overlapping, nested and otherwise conflicting international regimes – in this case the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the community of states involved in the Global War on Terror – affect political processes (Alter & Meunier, 2009). In doing so, this research could answer two key questions raised by Buzan (2006): Is the macrosecuritization of the Global War on Terror durable and how does this macrosecuritization interact with other powers like China and Russia?

**Central Hypotheses**
Central Asian states have aligned their discourse on security with two macrosecuritizations that prioritize security over political and religious liberty: not just the rhetoric of the Global War on Terror, but also the Shanghai Cooperation Organization’s “three evils”. As such, the United States, China and Russia together affirm secular authoritarianism in Central Asia, which precludes budding Islamic identity and dissent from the political sphere.

The unexpectedly compatible normative thrusts of the Global War on Terror and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization have abetted anti-Americanism. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization institutionalized and consolidated the illiberal, and thereby anti-West, norms increasingly touted by Central Asian states. The normative incoherency of the U.S.-led Global War on Terror – an illiberal and repressive set of policies promoted by a rhetorically liberal power (Buzan, 2006) – allowed Central Asian states to adopt these anti-West norms, even as they fulfilled U.S. security priorities and enjoyed the concomitant rents. Indeed, under these macrosecuritizations, Western support for religious liberty and democracy can be construed by Central Asian states as a hypocritical conspiracy to undermine national security through the promotion of terrorist and extremist Islamist elements. Conversely, the increasingly repressive policies of Central Asian states are consistent with Chinese and Russian overtures. Central Asian states have thusly voted with China and Russia, and against the United States, on issues of normative and civilizational import in the UN General Assembly.

Testable Conjectures

1. If the norms and institutional design of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization are dissimilar to those in Russian-led regional organizations in Central Asia like the CSTO, it suggests that Chinese co-leadership explains the SCO’s features. (Comparative analysis)

2. If movements in the UNGA ideal points of Central Asian states correlate with movements in vectors of great power influence, those vectors may explain the normative positions of Central Asian states. (Statistical analysis)

3. If the UNGA ideal points of Central Asian states move in the illiberal direction during periods of unrest or particularly securitized politics, the domestic process of securitization is related to broader macrosecuritizations. (Process tracing)

4. If Central Asian states attribute unrest and dissent to Islamism even when there is little evidence of Islamic design, Central Asian states are securitizing Islam and are conforming to the macrosecuritizations of Islam embodied by the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the Global War on Terror. (Case study analysis and discursive analysis)

5. If the norms of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization are explicit in the “speech-act” or “act-speech” of securitizing actors, the SCO provides the norms used in the securitization of Islam in Central Asia. (Case study analysis and discursive analysis)

6. If securitizing actors criticize Western values and influence in fomenting unrest and instability, the macrosecuritization of Islam in a condition of multiple actors results in an illiberal and anti-West normative position. (Case study analysis and discursive analysis)

Methodology

This research employs mixed quantitative and qualitative methods. United Nations General Assembly voting ideal points reflect the normative positions of states on global, ideological and civilizational issues over time. Statistical analyses of UNGA ideal points over time helps to infer causal explanations for why Central Asian states have grown increasingly anti-West and illiberal since independence. Process tracing of incidents of unrest, discursive analysis of governmental
and SCO releases, and interviews with various stakeholders relates the international-level dynamics to domestic policy.

**Work to Date**

The conference paper titled “The Violence of Secular Authoritarianism in Central Asia: the Shanghai Cooperation Organization’s Macrosecuritization of Political Islam as Extremism and Terrorism” was presented at the Lichtenstein Institute of Self Determination (LISD) conference on “Religion and Violence” in Vienna in June 2015. This paper contains the theoretical groundwork on macrosecuritization on which this research is based.

The thesis titled “Softly Shanghaied: Chinese Norm Diffusion in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization” was defended in May 2015 in partial fulfilment of the requirements of a Bachelor of Arts at the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs at Princeton University. This thesis provides a preliminary statistical analysis of UNGA voting ideal points and some of the case study work on which this research is based.

**Select Bibliography**


