



# International society and regional integration in Central Asia

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines the degree of integration in Central Asia by utilizing the international society approach of the English School of International Relations (ES). After addressing the debate surrounding the concept of 'international society' and discussing its contents and application the paper suggests that within the contemporary heterogeneous global international society there exist some more homogeneous regional/sub-global international societies with Central Asia constituting one of them. It argues that during the Cold War the global international society was divided into two sub-global international societies with the Soviet Union and its allies forming one of them. With the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia sought to re-establish its regional primacy through the establishment of a set of international organizations ranging from the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). The paper claims that this range of organizations reflects the existence of a regional international society in Central Asia.

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## 1. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to examine regional integration in Central Asia<sup>1</sup> by utilizing the international society approach of the English School of International Relations (ES). Scholarship, particularly recent scholarship on "integration" typically addresses European integration, with an explicit understanding that the concept refers to

adherence to European values as illustrated by membership in the European Union (EU), North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the Council of Europe or the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). A significant body of literature addresses how, why, or whether Euro-Atlantic institutions, primarily the EU and NATO should enlarge to integrate states formerly behind the Iron Curtain, how far such integration should go, and to what extent this integration benefits or weakens the institutions themselves (Gilbert, 2012; Ginsberg, 2010; Zimmermann & Dür, 2012).

With respect to Central Asia, integration is used by policy makers and politicians to refer to two possible outcomes: 1. a reconstitution of the Soviet space mostly in the framework of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), that is integration championed by Russia, according to Russia's priorities and rules of engagement; 2. Euro-Atlantic integration, that is an orientation towards Western organizations such as the EU and NATO. Scholars who adhere to these two interpretations of "integration"

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<sup>1</sup> For the purpose of this paper, Central Asia includes the following states: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan.

identify three major groupings of states in the post-Soviet space: States with an officially declared interest to join the Euro-Atlantic community (the Baltic states, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine), states interested in integration with Russia or in a *de facto* relationship of dependency on Russia (Armenia, Tajikistan; Belarus used to be part of this grouping until recently, when it started pursuing a reorientation towards the EU), and states that prefer a more independent-minded approach, maintaining good ties with both the Kremlin, and Brussels (Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan). This body of literature typically addresses states' readiness for Euro-Atlantic integration, their balancing act with Russia, their rationales for taking sides or wanting a balanced foreign policy towards these two centers of power (Dwan and Pavliuk, eds. 2000, Freire & Kanet, 2010; Korosteleva, ed. 2012).

The focus and analytical framework of ES scholarship addresses 'integration' as part and parcel of a historically-driven process called 'international society.' Conceptually, the ES is noted more for its articulation of a globalist rather than a regional perspective. This is due to the fact that the literature associated with the classical ES focused primarily on the study of the historical expansion of the European international society and its gradual transformation into the global international society of today (Bull & Watson, 1984; Butterfield & Wight, 1966; Watson, 1992; Wight, 1977). Although some historical regional international societies were the subject of examination, they were not, however, objects of attention in their own right. Rather, they were deemed to be important because global international society was seen to be a consequence of the expansion of one particular sub-global (European) international society. This meant that sub-global developments suffered both from conceptual underdevelopment and intellectual skepticism (Stivachtis & Webber, 2011b:110 and 2014:10).

Yet concepts derived from a global perspective still have relevance and application at the regional level (Buzan & Little, 2000). For example, there is general agreement among ES scholars that contemporary global international society is a 'thin' one, in the sense that it is pluralistic and heterogeneous, and that within the bounds of that society, there are several 'more thickly developed' 'regional clusters' in which the solidarist elements of international society are developed to a greater degree. Consequently, contemporary ES literature has paid significant attention to the study of international society at the regional/sub-global level (Ayoob, 1999; Diez & Whitman, 2002; Morgan, 2002; Riemer and Stivachtis 2002; Schouenborg, 2012; Stivachtis, 2002, 2008, 2009, 2010a; 2010b; Stivachtis & Webber, 2011a; 2014).

Although a significant amount of this literature focuses on the study of the European regional international society, a growing number of publications examine the development of international society in other world regions (Buzan & Gonzalez-Pelaez, 2009; Buzan & Waever, 2003; Qiubin, 2007). Due to its growing significance for world politics, Central Asia has attracted the attention of many scholars and analysts. As a result, scholars who employ the ES framework have become interested in studying the

development of international society in Central Asia (Aalto, 2007; Buranelli, 2013; Buzan & Waever, 2003: 397–436; Kaczmarska, 2013; Makarychev, 2011).

If one wishes to employ the ES framework in order to examine the degree of regional integration in Central Asia, one needs first to become familiar with the relevant ES concepts with the starting point being the examination of the distinction that Hedley Bull has drawn between an international system and international society.

## 2. The international system/society distinction

According to Adam Watson (1987:147), Bull's contribution to the theory of international relations is "considerable and nowhere more acute than in the distinction made between the concept of a system of states and that of international society." Bull (1977:9–10) defined the international system as being formed "when two or more states have sufficient contact between them, and have sufficient impact on one another's decisions to cause them to behave as parts of a whole." In this sense, the states of Central Asia constitute an international system since there is certainly sufficient contact between them and they have sufficient impact on one another's decisions to cause them to behave as parts of a whole. During the Cold War, the global international system was divided into two sub-global international systems, with the Soviet Union and its allies forming one of them. The states of Central Asia were integral part of the Soviet Union, and together with their Eastern European allies, formed an international system where they participated in institutions such as the Warsaw Pact, designed as a counter-organization to the international system of the Western states. After the Cold War, the existence of a significant systemic interaction among Central Asian states is demonstrated by the participation of those states in a network of regional organizations including the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), the Eurasian Economic Community (EurAsEC), the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO, includes Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Russia), the Free Trade Area (CISFTA), the Single Economic Space (SES), the Russian-Belarus Union, the Tashkent Cooperation Treaty, the Organization of Central Asian Cooperation (OCAC), GUAM (Georgia, Ukraine, Armenia and Moldova) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) of which the CIS has received that status of 'Guest' (Aris, 2011; Malfliet, Verpoest, & Vinolurov, 2007).

According to Bull, an international society exists "when a group of states, conscious of certain common interests and common values, form a society in the sense that they conceive themselves to be bound by a common set of rules in their relations with one another, and share in the working of common institutions" (Bull, 1977:13). 'Integration' in this theoretical framework thus translates into the ability of states to recognize and abide by common rules of interaction, in the sharing of common responsibilities for the functioning of the institutions they build together.

Before a judgment is made about whether the Central Asian states form an international society, some issues regarding the difference between the concepts of 'international system' and 'international society' should be

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