



Globalizing local understanding of fragility in Eurasia

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Abstract

The article aims to introduce the underlying motivation and conceptual underpinning to the special issue entitled “Globalizing Local Understanding of Fragility in Eurasia.” The main purpose of this article is to problematize the popular opinion and portrayal of Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan) and more generally the countries of Eurasia and the Caucasus as inherently fragile states which are politically unstable and thus on the brink of collapse. This article also seeks to question narratives of modernity that are singular and constantly out of reach for large swathes of the world’s populations because of the narrowness and hegemonic nature of the architecture of global governance. By carefully considering the ways and means through which international institutions categorize countries as fragile and/or failed, the article aims to provide the theoretical foreground for the special issue which focuses on locating inherent community resilience strategies. We explain how the non-participatory norm making behavior of international organizations privilege certain actors, largely the Global North, and simultaneously ignore the majority of Eurasian states. In other words, a demand predicated in the linear evolution of institutions and norms dictated by global institutions clash with the Eurasian model of inherent complex adaptive capability and introduce fragility. The focus thus is on understanding the ‘local’ based on the historical analysis of development in the region, nodal points of urban development and community life, forms of social capital, and community resilience strategies in the wider Eurasian region.

Keywords

Central Asia, Eurasia, fragile states, international world order, nation-states, security-development complex

Introduction

The region of Central Asia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, burst on to the scene following the dismantling of the USSR. They have established themselves as sovereign independent countries with their own set of unique national symbols along ethnic, linguistic, religious, and social lines since then. Historically, these countries and surrounding areas have been variously called the pivot or heart of Asia (Mackinder), Inner Eurasian societies (Christian, 1994), and the Turko-Persian Islamicate cultural zone (Canfield et al., 1991), and they make up the bulk of the ancient and modern Silk Road(s). Given their cultural affinity to Islam, in Soviet and post-Soviet times, these countries have been viewed as unstable

and at the tipping point of turning into radical societies. In Soviet times, it was a commonly held belief, within and outside, that Soviet Central Asia would sound the death knell of the Soviet Union. However, this did not come to

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pass, and significantly, Kazakhstan was the last Soviet republic to declare independence. After the immediate aftermath of what can be described as a disruptive moment, most of the Central Asian states found themselves in circumstances where they had to overhaul their entire political and economic systems along with setting themselves apart as sovereign independent nation-states. The international order with actors ranging from the World Bank to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), and other international institutions along with the developed countries in the world, namely the United States, the United Kingdom, and the European Union, welcomed these nation-states and assumed that they would naturally adopt their model of formulaic liberal government.

Here, we explore Central Asian nation-states in the post-Cold War order, especially the prevalent notion that they are fragile states, to examine the uncontextualized formulation by global institutions in their interactions with Eurasia. First, we consider the political concept of fragility and its ties with securitization especially after the events of 9/11. The section on the underpinnings of fragility as a political concept draws on the connections between security and development aid in formulating the categories of fragile and/or failed states. This is followed by a summary of events in the making of Central Asian nation-states and their positions vis-à-vis international actors and organizations that make up the core of global governance today. The subsequent section provides the historical underpinnings of the neo-liberal agenda and questions whether these same attributes and characteristics should be viewed as universal in the context of developing countries, especially in Central Asia and the Caucasus. We then give a summary of where Central Asian countries fall on the most widely accepted fragile state indexes. The argument is then extended into considering the context of Central Asia with its specific geographic position and history to understand how to effectively engage with accommodating the “local” (society, economy, and politics) in global governance. To summarize, we highlight Central Asia and Eurasia’s inherent complex adaptive capability which emerged in strongly interacting social, economic, religious, and trade relations over time and are relevant for overcoming fragility. However, these adaptive capabilities are superseded in favor of global institutions and norms which introduce more fragility. The main categories of analyses are the indicators used in a number of fragility indexes, namely governance, economics, and society. The article uses the nation-state as the principal actor because the concept of fragility and fragile states is deeply connected with it. The notions of connected and disconnected spaces are invoked to further explain how the category and imposition of Westphalian nation-states and consequent borders are making states in Central Asia and Eurasia fragile.

Underpinnings of fragility as a political concept: security-development nexus

Fragility as understood as a fragile state political concept arose in the 1990s in the context of the post-Cold War era. In the 1990s, the Fragile State Agenda came to be associated with a security-development nexus increasingly applied by countries like the United States, the United Kingdom, and later by the European Union, along with development and international institutions like the World Bank and the OECD. While the concept of fragile states along with failed states had been applied more generally previously, in the 2000s, especially after 9/11 these states were categorized as dangerous and thus open to interference (Grimm et al., 2014). The merging of security and development in this way led to demanding political security as a precondition to development and created a language and terminology which is far reaching and has real-time consequences for countries that are categorized as “dangerous” and/or “insecure,” softening the ground for “intervention” or providing “help.” Accordingly, “analysts agreed that new policies for international security would require a focus on the capacity of national governments in the South to control security within their territories and to provide essential services to their citizens” (Grimm et al., 2014, p. 200). This particular post-1991 world order was created on the shoulders of the end of the Soviet Union and led to an American world order that is fast proving unable to accommodate the multiplicity of peoples and cultures globally.

Development paradigms since the 2000s have seen a sea change in the way development aid was tied to security and the focus turned to state and peacebuilding. For example, the World Bank established two units, The Fragile State Unit and Conflict Prevention and Reconstruction; while the OECD organized a number of forums and created the Fragile State Group in 2003. In addition, the principles and features of ‘Good International Engagement in Fragile States and Situations’ was first tasked to a London Forum in 2005 and later the UNDP produced a list of top-priority and high-priority countries that needed support based on low human development and poor performance (Grimm et al., 2014, pp. 200–201). The creation of an index of states that were considered fragile or failed meant that the international community, whether individual countries like the United States and the United Kingdom, or the European Union, or collectively as international agencies, were in a position to force independent sovereign countries to act in specific ways. These policies have fast become tied to western agendas that are incognizant and lacking empathy toward the local conditions and specificities within which they are exercised and are increasingly viewed as impositions by the (non-west) developing countries. The problem is exacerbated by agencies like the World Bank and OECD

who play the essential role in creating knowledge that promotes (predominantly) Western standards and key concepts and perpetuates hegemony of certain actors in the international system (Nay, 2014).

International Relations scholars are increasingly challenging the notions of pre-determined Western-centric models that fail to capture the nuance of developing countries, not only in Asia and Africa, but after 1991 in the post-Soviet space, especially in Central Asia and the Caucasus. The inability of the international system to accommodate local characteristics and priorities even in the face of outward calls and assertions by the European Union and international agencies is palpable. There is a general failure or myopia on the part of international actors that have helped create ever more inequality and insecurity worldwide. The real sense of failure has been evident in the roll out of neo-liberal policies and capitalism in the post-Soviet space which not only brought on a painful transition for the local populations but has also evidently not led to prosperity and equality (Jahn, 2018). In the euphoria of the collapse of the Soviet Union, key aspects of development, economic, and social were not only missed but deliberately ignored and have continued to grow over the years. They have become tied to the notion of the victory of particular western doctrines and a way of life that is peddled as universally aspirational. These have led to the creation of sovereign nation-states entering the global arena that now have to express nationalism and national exceptionalism giving rise to fissures and cleavages within multi-ethnic societies (Shin, 2015). In Central Asia, there is a dual process unfolding, one creating a strong identity as a nation-state, especially devoid of Soviet characteristics, and a collective identity as part of the international community. This would be a tall order for anybody but for Central Asian and the Caucasus countries, it has been instrumental in upending the delicate balance of societal interactions that have characterized the region for millennia. The creation of physical borders in 1991 is the first time since as far back as Mongol Eurasia (13th century) that the region has become comprehensively disconnected (Kalra, 2018). The next section provides a snapshot of Central Asia as the countries entered the post-Cold War world order.

Post-Cold War world order

The end of the Soviet Union led to a number of newly independent sovereign states that, at least in the case of Central Asian states, simultaneously needed to assert their independence in ways that told them apart from their immediate neighbors and that also found resonance in the international community as full-fledged members. All the countries in the post-Soviet space, including Russia, suffered in the 1990s in their transition from Soviet Republics to independent nation-states. The infrastructural, financial, and economic

strains of the 1990s brought to bear different reactions from the national leaders in the region, with some (Kazakhstan and Kyrgyz Republic) choosing shock therapy, others (Uzbekistan) choosing a more cautious approach, while others still (Turkmenistan) closing their borders, and one descending into a state of civil war (Tajikistan, 1992–1997). The Central Asian states, with the exception of Tajikistan, did not descend into conflict, and in some cases even fared better than expected (Uzbekistan and later Kazakhstan). By the early 2000s Kazakhstan with its large oil and other mineral resources stabilized. Uzbekistan took an almost diametrically opposite view to Kazakhstan and steered a course which allowed the country to bypass the initial shock that Kazakhstan suffered especially in the late 1990s. Tajikistan's civil war lasted from 1992 to 1997 and then welcomed a coalition government under the now President Rahmon that even managed to include the Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP), banned in all other Central Asian states. While Tajikistan continues to struggle after the destruction and fragmentation of the civil war, there have been some economic developments over the years (Olimova & Olimov, 2001). Tajikistan is home to ample natural resources, especially water, and has attracted investment from abroad to restrain the economic collapse in the last three decades. The Kyrgyz Republic in many ways is the most open of all states but also the most unstable, with revolutions more common than elections, it continues to be affected from changing leadership. While it was celebrated by many for its openly democratic proclivities, the last decade has seen more conflict within and on its borders than any other part of Central Asia (Reeves, 2014). Turkmenistan has remained regionally oriented and has close ties with the Middle East and partnerships with its neighbors, near and far, as the domestic situation demands (Radio Free Europe Free Liberty [RFERL], 2021).

Central Asia on the fragility scale

Fragility is described as a set of constraints and conditions which can cause socio-economic vulnerability. These can be caused by any number of external and internal factors from political instability to environmental disasters. The OECD defines Fragility “as the combination of exposure to risk and insufficient coping capacity of the state, systems and/or communities to manage, absorb or mitigate those risks” (OECD, 2020b, p. 15). According to the Fragility of States 2020 report which has gathered data through the States of Fragility platform launched in 2019, OECD measures the intersection of fragility, resilience, and risk. The 2020 report categorises 1.8 billion people or 23% of the world population as currently living in fragile contexts (OECD, 2020b, p. 17). The categorization is based on a complex set of characteristics in which fragility can lead to violence, poverty, inequality, displacement, and environmental and political

degradation. Out of the 57 countries and communities identified, 35 are referred to as authoritarian regimes, 17 hybrid regimes, and 2 flawed democracies. Tajikistan is clearly mentioned as a fragile country within this context with high fragility in the following sectors: economic, environmental, and security. Tajikistan is also categorized as having severe fragility in two spheres: political and societal (OECD, 2020a). Uzbekistan is noted as fragile country, but one that has made the most improvement, dubbing it the “quiet achiever,” especially since 2015 (Fragile State Index, 2020). Achievements aside, Uzbekistan continues to be seen as a developing country that needs “help,” with the “country’s State Legitimacy indicator score of 9.4 is among the world’s worst” (Fragile States Index, 2020). In 2019, the Fragility State Index categorized the Kyrgyz Republic, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan in “elevated warning,” while Kazakhstan falls into “warning” (FSI Annual Report, 2019). In addition, the Crisis Group has pinpointed the Kyrgyz Republic specifically in its inquiry on fragile communities in Central Asia (International Crisis Group, 2016). The reports all point to the vacuum in the Kyrgyz Republic which is leading Kyrgyz and Uzbek youth in this region toward a radical version of Islam and lay out the multiple ways in which religion has been used by external and internal actors to sway the populace. In the case of Central Asian countries, they have all invariably been included in the list of Low Income Countries Under Stress (LICUS). The LICUS countries are identified as those countries with “deteriorating governance, states in prolonged political crisis, post-conflict transition countries and those undergoing gradual but still fragile reform processes.” (World Bank, 2019) However, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan fall under marginal and/or core from 2006 to 2009, despite some of the country-specific data not being available and Turkmenistan was also included in the list of marginal/weak countries despite limited data available for the country (World Bank, 2020).

In summary, for a variety of reasons, not least of which is the make-up of the countries’ political systems, throughout the last three decades international organizations and actors have continued to categorize these countries as variously “fragile” and/or “failing” (Reno, 2017). The reasons include a variety of indicators like economic and societal impoverishment, cross-border conflicts, infrastructural and institutional weaknesses, Islamic radicalism and/or curbs on religious freedoms, and widespread corruption. Generally speaking, they are all considered fragile (mild or severe) states and while the United States moved in with military bases in their war against Afghanistan immediately after 9/11 labeling them partners, there has been little to no change in the perception or labeling of these countries by international institutions. Politically, economically, and socially the Central Asian nation-states continue to be described, in policy circles and by academics, as difficult regimes which “need” political and economic opening up to

become more reliable partners in the international world order. The next section briefly describes the liberal world order which relies heavily on international institutions. The Central Asian states and societies are relative newcomers to this world order and thus were unable to participate in its making.

International institutions and the liberal world order

The context of the historical realities within which the current international system (Jahn, 2018) has originated is important and forms an essential backdrop in which to understand that the “the ability to set norms and standards that determine the validity and acceptance of knowledge regarding state fragility” (Brinkerhoff, 2014, p. 338) is comprehensively in the hands of external actors and continues to be so even in the present day. Even large emerging economies like China, India, and Brazil have been unable to demand plurality in global governance which should include an “openness coupled with domestic difference” (Kahler, 2016, p. 72) to accommodate a “multiplicity of values in the contemporary world” (Kahler, 2016, p. 73). The American world order, synonymous with the liberal world order, promotes the changing of social, cultural, and political constitutions of states (especially those considered non-liberal) with tacit consent because development based on an Anglo-Saxon and/or European model is assumed to be the natural culmination of the highest form of human development (Jahn, 2005, p. 178). In principle, the current international order relies on international institutions like the OECD, World Bank, and IMF to “harmonize political institutions, rights, and practices across societies, irrespective of local histories and cultures” (Kahler, 2016, pp. 56–57). The dark underbelly of these international institutions is that “private interests within liberal capitalist states continue to pursue the opening up of markets abroad, and they continue to enlist their government’s support, through multilateral and bilateral conditional aid, IMF and WTO” (Jahn, 2005, p. 192).

Accordingly, the post-Cold War world order is closely associated with western contextualized liberalism and the United States. Specifically, the end of the Soviet Union was viewed as a moment of triumph for the western liberal democracies. Consequently, Central Asian nation-states became the poster children for the failures of the Soviet Union in their governance and leadership choices. The European Union and other international organizations continue to fund programs to effect change in Central Asia with little to no engagement with conditions on the ground. The local is indeed invoked, but there is a bid to redefine the local to a time capsule that is pre-Soviet to determine the needs and desires of local communities. However, there can be no understanding of the modern local culture (political, social, and economic) in Central Asia without the Soviet

experience to inform it. The norm making imprint of Soviet institutions and lived experience cannot be cast aside but that is in essence the neo-liberal internationalism (universalism) of the current global order, because the Soviet is deemed fundamentally illiberal. According to Jahn, liberal thought in international relations is imperialist at its core because it justifies intervention (military or otherwise) changing a society by first calling it illiberal and then demanding its (without consent) transformation (Jahn, 2005, p. 178). In this way, the local in Central Asia and wider Eurasia is subjected to global norms and practices without regard for the Soviet legacy which holds within it a set of toolkits and strategies still prevalent in the region.

To deconstruct the neo-liberal western policies which have come to define the current international order, we must first consider where they originated. The current order originates in the philosophy of liberalism which is a complex cultural phenomenon that has its roots in a specific European historical reality and is deeply associated with Locke's ideas steeped in the crisis of Europe in the 17th century. Consequently, private property, individual freedom, and government by consent are the pillars of Locke's theory that underpins European liberalism (Jahn, 2018, pp. 48–49). This is the paradox where liberalism first developed in a non-liberal environment. In other words, actors needed to be illiberal abroad to create benefits for the population at home (Jahn, 2018, p. 50). Scholars, like Kahler (2016) also bring up the inherent contradictions in liberalism as it evolved in the European and then in the American context in the 20th century which came to first conflate it with European superiority at the expense of non-Western ordered societies and later in its embrace of nationalism and the nation-state which offered a similar but singular model of development (Kahler, 2016, p. 58). European colonization and the rise of the United States in the early part of the 20th century extended imperialism and neo-mercantilism into a system of control and exploitation in other societies expressly to provide stabilization and prosperity at home. This was evident in the post 1945 world order but has continued to find resonance and is even louder in the post 1991 world order. Specifically, it is prevalent in the form of “conditional aid, IMF and WTO policies, [aimed] at changing the cultural, economic and political constitution of a target state clearly without its consent” making it a kind of imperialism (Jahn, 2005, p. 192). Global governance, originating under these specifically western and European experiences, is unable to capture and accommodate the experiences of Central Asians and the majority of the world's population.

Central Asia is fragile under certain conditions

Here, we explore the indicators used by institutions of global governance, for example, political governance,

economy, and society which are used to categorize states as failing, fragile, or otherwise weak and contextualizing them for the region of Central Asia. The fragile state agenda is tied intimately to aid allocation whether in academic literature or in policy making. Decision making thus depends heavily on the data and information that is serviced by research and reports conducted on locating and identifying weaknesses and possible solutions (Grimm et al., 2014, p. 200). The most common reasons for creating metrics of this kind are to simplify decision making, introduce transparency and consistency, a level of objectivity and reliability because the indicators are based on science and empirical evidence which further add to the indicators being understood as “facts” and finally reduces the problems into manageable issues (Brinkerhoff, 2014). However, the main contention with laying out norms and standards in this way is that there is little to no room for anything other than a European and/or western standard against which all non-western nation-states, old and new, can be viewed. In many contexts in the world these metrics and solutions come to naught because of their inability to capture, accommodate, or navigate the local environment. The value of knowledge of societies and their particular evolution and historical trajectories is not under enquiry, thus in the spirit of advancing understanding, the following categories of analyses use local histories and lived experience to emphasize the gap between perception and reality. The article considers three aspects accordingly that explore the question of fragility in the Central Asian context. The categories are the political system(s), economy, and societal interactions in Central Asia.

Political, economic, and social realities

The region of Central Asia has been home to a multitude of peoples from nomadic, semi-sedentary, to sedentary civilizations in history. The places that are now divided between the five countries have been part of multi-ethnic, multi-denominational, and politically diverse political entities ranging from small communities to empires of a variety not commonly found in other places (Rouse, 2020). From pre-Islamic Persian and Islamic empires, medieval nomadic empires like the Mongol Empire and the Timurids, and even European empires like Tsarist Russia, Central Asian peoples have experienced a multitude of political and economic systems. These societies entered the modern world as part of the Soviet Union and for 70 years participated in socialist (still European) modernity. Whether as part of one of the largest empires in the pre-modern world, the Mongol Empire, or citizens of one of two superpowers (Soviet Union) in the modern world, Central Asians have remained at the heart of world civilizations and major moments in history (Kalra, 2021). While the prominence of Central Asia and its peoples remains obscure in popular imagination, they were the mercantile communities on the historic Silk Road(s) which connected the entire old world

(Abu-Lughod, 1989; Levi, 2020). The importance of connectivity in Central Asia and wider Eurasia is a story that is significant because the disruption caused by national borders in 1991 has been instrumental in the making of fragile societies in this region. Principally, connected spaces in the form of medieval nomadic empires and the Silk Road(s) are marshaled here to inform the region in historical terms. This is followed by a discussion of the divisive nature of nation-states in the modern era that has fundamentally disconnected the region since 1991 and has attributed western-oriented understandings of how society should be organized causing these state-societies to be deemed fragile.

Connected spaces. Medieval nomadic empires were crucial in the making of the region and provide a convenient basis of understanding, both in terms of governance and government, in Central Asia. Politically, the nomadic medieval empires brought together customs and practices of the steppe and the Perso-Islamic world which were codified, acculturated, modified, and translated in the region by Central Asian actors (McChesney, 2009, p. 278). The early interactions between steppe and sedentary societies meant that nomadic rule over largely sedentary agricultural communities relied on a mixed system of governance which accommodated both steppe and sedentary characteristics (Neumann & Wigen, 2018). This led to a system which can best be described as flexible and adaptable, especially when it was faced with some of the world's oldest civilizations, for example, the Sinic and the Islamic world. Institutional and infrastructural connections first enlivened by the Mongol Empire, supported and expanded by the Timurids and the Khanates (Uzbek and Kazakh, later Bukhara, Khiva and Kokand), continued to bridge different civilizations (nomadic and sedentary; Asian and European) with their unique political and cultural systems (Kalra, 2020). The Chinggisid (international) world order lasted well into the 19th century in terms of influences in the military, administration, court and ceremonial activities, and in the projection of political power itself, forms the basis of connected histories in Central Asia and wider Eurasia (McChesney, 2009, p. 302; Zarakol, 2022). Furthermore, the flexible and encompassing nature of these political entities remained in place even under Russian colonization and existed in modified ways during the Soviet era as well. The Central Asian world order can thus be described as one that was informed by the medieval nomadic empires and most recently by the Soviet Union. Taken together these influences exert considerable pressure on governance and government in the region even today.

Economically, Central Asia has been the heart of the Silk Road(s) and the locus of trade networks since antiquity. From the earliest nomadic empires to the Mongol period and into the period of Tsarist Russian colonization (Levi, 2020), trade in the Eurasian region has been in the hands of mercantile communities and peoples of Central Asia. Historically, merchants from the Arab world, the Middle East, and India have long interacted and connected

with Central Asian merchants—Sogdians, Bukharans, Samarkandis to name a few—and participated in long distance trade. These merchant communities have operated in “bazzars” in Central Asia and traveled to and from China and Europe creating modes of connections with producers across the territory of Eurasia (Allsen, 1997). The resilience of trading and merchant communities through the ages which have navigated a complex and constantly evolving landscape provide an interesting lens through which these countries and wider Eurasia can be understood (Marsden, 2020).

Many of the indicators that categorize Central Asian nation-states as fragile stem from the disruptions caused by the closure of connected spaces. Whether under medieval nomadic empires and/or the Soviet Union, communities in the region were able to tap into local and regional strategies and modes of thinking which allowed for these communities to be sustainable (Kalra, 2021). The economic conditions caused by border regimes are no longer in their hands but are dictating the ways in which they cannot operate, rather than finding ways and means through which they can continue to have livelihoods. Being landlocked, or in some cases doubly landlocked (Uzbekistan), these countries have little to no access to the outside world if the border regimes are enforced as they have been since 1991. Even during the Soviet period, the connections in the region were maintained and infrastructure was directed to ensure that the region of Central Asia was physically and institutionally connected with Moscow and other republics. However, growing inequalities and restrictions as a result of nation-states, boundaries/borders, and global patterns of exchanges being enforced as “good practice” have created separate communities.

Nation-states: disconnected spaces. National narratives tied with restrictive economic conditions are evidently playing divisive roles in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and the Kyrgyz Republic. In the neo-liberal world order, nation-states are the only guarantors of security and also the main actors that are legally allowed to use violence. This has become a toxic relationship in many newly independent countries where groups of peoples coexisting for centuries have to negotiate new realities which are highly prescribed and organized by the state. International institutions are meant to serve as guarantors that states do not act in harmful ways, however the very categories of identity that are imposed on many populations around the world, especially in the case of Central Asia, are actually causing many of the problems that are making these states and societies weak and fragile (Reno, 2017). Historically, these communities which are now spread across nation-states, have inhabited a shared geography. These particular political, economic, and social conditions are a result of and a cause for fragility in Central Asia. While there has been a delicate and stable balance that has been struck in these interconnected spaces through empires and state formations, the current global architecture is

unable to view these societies for their own sake. International institutions and actors hankering for political transformations in the region often overlook the geographical restrictions for these societies which have become further ruptured since the collapse of the Soviet Union.

After 1991, all five Central Asian states established themselves as sovereign independent countries with their own set of unique national symbols along ethnic, linguistic, religious, and social lines. These national characteristics are borrowed from western concepts of a nation-state paradigm that necessitates group identity of a particular kind (Shin, 2015). These processes have now, thirty years since independence, come of age and are well on their way to creating and informing norm making behavior that privileges notions of racial and ethnic national identities and separates peoples inhabiting a shared space for centuries, with the imposition of physical and hard borders. The (mis) understandings perpetuated by national histories and nationalisms have created schisms in societies that have lived, operated, and interacted across racial, ethnic, religious, and linguistic lines for well over a thousand years. Furthermore, the predominantly European and western state systems are not able to either understand or marshal the historical lived experience of the region which has constantly created spaces in which to coexist. The following example of the old city of Bukhara, in modern-day Uzbekistan, serves as an interesting case study here to detangle the notions of living together separately.

Bukhara: projected commonality. The Russian scholar Sukhareva describes the make-up of the city in the late 1920s–1950s in much detail (Sukhareva, 1966). The walled old city, with a population of 60,000–65,000 in the mid-1920s, was divided into some 220 *mahallas*, each of which had its own social character. Sometimes this was based on ethnicity or language—there were specifically Jewish, Kyrgyz, and Arab *mahallas*, for example. But most communities were mixed—even in the 1920s the inhabitants would call themselves “Tajik” or “Uzbek” without there being anything clearly to distinguish them, and “Uzbeks” would often speak Tajik and vice versa (Sukhareva, 1966, p. 122). Other *mahallas* specialized in certain artisan work (making leather goods, weaponry, weaving, working with reeds, etc.) or in a particular occupation (soldiering, religious services). Several of the ethnic populations were rather strictly endogamous (the Arabs and Jews, for example, Al’meev, 1998; Sukhareva, 1966, p. 130), while others, such as the Tajik, Uzbek, and Iranian Farsi, tended to marry internally because of their preference for cousin marriages (Sukhareva, 1966, pp. 140–157). Crossing religious boundaries, for example by changing faith, was regarded as even more reprehensible. Most *mahallas* had their own mosque, and many also contained sacred tombs (*mazar*) that were worshipped by diverse people as well as relatives from far away. To simplify a complex reality, we can say that the city consisted of a large number of localities that were at the same time socially inward-looking communities, while members of

these communities also interacted with others in certain specific social, political, economic, and religious contexts. We define this as a form of eastern cosmopolitanism, best understood through the notion of ‘projected commonality’ (Saxena, 2005). This spirit continued into the Soviet period. While the city of Bukhara suffered considerable early Soviet destruction of mosques, madrasas, public baths, cemeteries, and caravanserais (Gangler et al., 2004, p. 72), the major monuments of the old city are still intact and there is relatively little new building there. As a result, there is a feeling of continuity—there they still stand the old houses and alleyways, the mosques and mazars, even some water tanks (*hauz*) and old tea-houses (*chaikhanas*). In addition, in the Soviet era, the population, which already included Uzbeks, Jews, Tajiks, Turks, Armenians, Arabs, Tatars, Iranians, and a few Kazakhs, Gypsies, and Kyrgyz (this is an approximation using the modern terms), was further diversified. Bukhara can be labeled as fragile by one set of standards, other observers might ponder on the resilience of the city which has undergone multiple pressures (natural and man-made) but has retained a unique character with little internal conflicts. Other examples of the geographical landscape of Central Asia that need further consideration include enclaves in Central Asia which are designated as fragile entities both internally and externally.

Enclaves: Soviet peculiarities in Central Asia. Enclaves came up in Soviet Central Asia after national delimitation and the creation of the Central Asian SSRs. They are concentrated in the Ferghana Valley which is shared among Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan and is the most populous part in the region. Sokh, Shahimardan, Chongara, and Jangail are Uzbek enclaves surrounded by Kyrgyzstan. In addition, there is an Uzbek enclave in the Kyrgyz Republic, Baraq (Zafari, 2019). Tajiks have an enclave, Vorukh inside the Kyrgyz Republic which has erupted in violence on multiple occasions. These spaces increasingly represent points of fragility and are crisis prone leading to ethnic strife. These enclaves have grown to be points of contention between the Kyrgyz Republic, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan since independence. Issues concerning border demarcation continuously cause tensions in enclaves. For example, the Vorukh enclave in Tajikistan saw violence between Kyrgyz-Tajik populations in the summer of 2019 (Diplomat Magazine, 2019), previously in 2014 there had been tensions running high as well. Vorukh has persistently remained at the forefront of ethnic tensions on the Kyrgyz-Tajik border (Reeves, 2014). The immediate conflagration oft times is the construction of infrastructure, like roads, which bypass or makes cross-border movement unfeasible. As in the cases of both 2014 and 2019, it was the construction of a road by the government of the Kyrgyz Republic that sparked tensions and led to ethnic strife. Similarly, Sokh is an Uzbek enclave with a majority Tajik-speaking population inside the Kyrgyz Republic which was engulfed in ethnic tensions in 2010. For years there have been tensions regarding local pastures and

grazing rights which led to other pressure points with both sides causing impediments to normal life for each other. In 2013, Sokh saw ethnic clashes which led to closures in Baraq which is a Kyrgyz enclave in Uzbekistan (Gabdulkov, 2013). These episodes of political and ethnic violence are deeply connected with the economic conditions imposed on the region with the arrival of the nation state, particularly rigid border regimes. Norms and border regimes enforced by institutions of global governance have played a crucial role in the making of Central Asian nation-states which has led to increased fragility and divisiveness in this region. The chronic problems of nationalisms and restrictions in economic functions have led to uncertainty and in cases, violence between and within societies. In summary, the security-development complex at the heart of the political concept of fragility is forging and placing these nation-states in categories not of their making by forcing them into positions of vulnerability in the first place.

Conclusion

The purpose here has been to contextualise the fragile state index for Central Asia and wider Eurasia and challenge how Central Asia and Eurasia is perceived as inherently fragile and weak within the current norms of the global governance system. Even a cursory look at the history of the region reveals that disparate communities have managed to coexist and remain relatively stable despite pressure from man-made and natural exigencies. Ironically, the enforcement of global norms and strict border regimes in the region by an increasingly narrow global governance system is where the problem lies. The compulsion to follow these external norms, which has separated Central Asian societies from considering interactions between and within their communities from a standpoint of familiarity embedded in their own history, is making them fragile. Any attempt made by Central Asian nation-states to overcome the challenge posed by the fractures in the connections (physical, institutional, and societal) in the region, for example through the creation of regional cooperative organizations, is vilified in the first instance (Kalra, 2021). Regional initiatives in Eurasia are wide ranging and multifaceted in the ways in which they are created and the issues they address but are overwhelmingly seen as security and political tools in the hands of bigger actors like Russia and China, making them immediately suspect (Allison, 2018; Kaczmarek, 2017). In other words, while the historical trajectory of the region tends towards cooperation and collaboration used to connect across political and social gaps, the modern nation-state and international world order turns a blind eye to those for the sake of separateness. Consequently, Central Asia and Eurasia are now part of an “international community [that] has grown used to having, proposing, and often imposing its own truths” (Tauschweizer & Miner, 2014, p. 39).

The lacunae and gaps in information about interactions in Central Asia and wider Eurasia belie the strategies used in

creating spaces of interactions through negotiation over the course of many centuries. The pressure exercised by international organizations to standardize, homogenize, and replicate models has considerably narrowed the space for political actors and communities alike. Enquiries surrounding whether failed and/or failing states indicated a problem with the modern international order and whether the order could be fixed have already entered the mainstream (Tauschweizer & Miner, 2014, p. 153). Here, we have shown how the promotion of the liberal international order of a particular kind has helped create the conditions in which Central Asian societies and states, much like the rest of the post-Soviet space, can be considered fragile. In all likelihood they will continue to be seen as such because international institutions and actors feed off impaired sovereignty of weaker states in the first place (Wheatley, 2019). Accordingly, if fragility is understood as a measure which compares the actual practices and customs of a state with an idealized (European and/or western) image (Carment & Samy, 2014), then putting Central Asia and the Caucasus on any scale is essentially suspect and serves purposes other than those that abet development and progress.

The papers in this special issue address fragility in Azerbaijan, Belarus, and Kazakhstan, to provide a snapshot of the societies of wider Eurasia in the post-Cold War world order. Essentially, they reflect a divergence between global governance architecture and institutions and the needs of the specific Eurasian societies. Valiyev and Babayev’s exploration of the mismatch between education and employability in Azerbaijan brings to fore the problems of importing models and metrics. According to them, young people surveyed in Azerbaijan do not feel that their needs and employability is reflected either in the education curriculum or access to higher education. Azerbaijan has signed up to a number of projects with the European Union and international organizations to deliver meaningful and useful education. However, the survey conducted confirms that there is a mismatch between the youth policy in Azerbaijan and sectors of the economy. Higher education in Azerbaijan struggles to be relevant for a large part of the population even though it is increasingly in line with global trends, for example, regularizing metrics for publications in international journals for promotions. While there is a concerted effort to conform to international standards, there is a sense of disconnect between states goals and the realities on the ground.

This is also confirmed by Akhmetzharov and Orazagaliyev who explore how neo-liberal reforms in Kazakhstan have increasingly allowed more state control on institutions like labor unions which have led to fewer avenues for expression of grievances. They argue that state corruption and intervention has reduced the credibility and thus membership in labor unions in Kazakhstan, which is a global trend, and has allowed for more instability because of the close ties between state and business. However, overall the treatment of labor unions in Kazakhstan is in line with the global trend of reducing its usefulness. The liberal trends of governance in Central

Asia can also be seen in the economic transformation of the region, especially as a result of international borders in 1991.

Darmenova and Koo provide a closer reading of social capital and trust in the context of Kazakhstan. They offer a unique view of how businesses and individuals in modern Kazakhstan use personal and intimate connections and rely on networks that have been built over a period of time. Social capital and trust is an essential way of dealing with the exigencies that the society has experienced in the aftermath of Soviet collapse and in the modern era. These relationships follow a set of principles based on the way Kazakhstan's societies behaved historically. Small nomadic communities operated in the wide expanse of Eurasia starting from the 16th century and even earlier as part of the Mongol Empire and relied on exchanges of a wide variety that were based on social trust. However, in terms of the fragile state index parameters, these traditional practices do not express modern modes of economic functions and thus are indicators of instability and fragility. This is in direct contradiction to how economic functions are experienced locally and thus continue to highlight the gaps in Kazakhstan vis a vis the global financial system.

Finally, Korosteleva and Petrova explore the recent civil unrest in Belarus. They consider the harmful effects of government-sponsored control and power in light of the situation in Belarus in 2020. Their paper highlights the ways in which the society and government can become at odds with each other to disastrous expressions of violence and conflict. Aspects of Central Asian and wider Eurasian societies have maintained a delicate balance for many a century, however increasingly they are becoming flashpoints of conflict which are making the region weak. These conditions allow international institutions and actors to label these societies as inherently fragile while being unaware of their own role in making them so. This special issue offers a closer look at the region and engages with local conditions as they continue to evolve in the modern era. We have zeroed in on the importance of contextualizing these societies and their attributes over the long arc of history. These contributions pose questions and solutions with a view to accommodating and marshaling the "local" to inform the "global" by creating the space for a well-informed "glocal."

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