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Is There a Central Asia? State Visits and an Empirical Delineation of the Region's Boundaries^{*}

Leila Zakhirova

Asian Security, Monterey, CA USA

Abstract: This article assesses the extent to which post-Soviet Central Asia is emerging as an interactive regional subsystem focused more on problems and actors within the region than on those outside the region. The answer to this question has important implications for policy, because in the presence of a strong subsystem the important sources of change in the region cannot be exclusively domestic in nature. Yet no empirical analysis of the international relations of the Central Asian states in any systematic way exists. In this article, I delineate the regional boundaries of Central Asia using intergovernmental visits data to uncover whether the region serves as an entree point for analysis. I analyze the results of the visits data using three structural models to assess the degree of fit for each. The findings suggest that a highly interactive subsystem does not yet exist; instead a Moscow-centric subsystem of interactions still persists in the region

Keywords: regional subsystem, central Asia, state visits

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1. INTRODUCTION

Where exactly is Central Asia (CA)? Does the region extend from the Caspian Sea to Mongolia, or should the line be drawn somewhere in between? Is Turkey, which is socio-culturally closer to the CA states, but is physically on the European continent, part of CA? What about China's eastern province of Xinjiang, which is more Turkophone than Chinese? And finally, there is Afghanistan which, though right in the middle of any geographic delimitation of CA, does not fit by any socio-cultural criterion. Different criteria often produce different regions, so no two analysts may fully agree what the appropriate regional delimitations are. The result can be inefficient foreign policy making. According to one CA scholar (Starr, 2005, p. 167), a good example of this is the inconsistent geographical delineation used by the U.S. government

which has impeded the development of a coherent CA policy. The State Department groups the five former Soviet states of CA with Russia and considers Afghanistan part of South Asia, while the Defense Department's Central Command treats the six countries together. Such uncoordinated arrangements have reduced the United States' ability to build regional success on the national success in Afghanistan.

The aim of this study is to minimize the distinctions between various ideas of what CA is. In order to stop assuming CA the article seeks to make a systematic attempt to identify it using

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Zakhirova is the Managing Editor of the journal *Asian Security*, Monterey, CA. E-mail: lzakhiro@gmail.com

concrete data.¹ I begin with the commonly assumed boundaries of CA as comprised of the five former republics of the Soviet Union's southern tier² and identify its boundaries based on interstate interaction. The conventional approach is to assume that groups of states that are considered to be "natural" regions, or are perceived as constituting a region, will form regional subsystems in world politics. Such regions tend to focus more on problems and actors within the region than on extra-regional issues and actors. In a regional subsystem, states "maintain a relatively regular and intense pattern of interaction" (Thompson, 1973). Identifying the boundaries of CA is important for it provides information about the internal nature of regional international relations that can help us assess the manner in which the CA region is related to the international system as a whole. In the absence of a common regional delineation we can never be certain that regional studies are treating the proper or even the same regional unit of analysis even when scholars claim that they are.

Whether the five CA states constitute a single region or not is an empirical question; however, there is little empirical study on the subject. There are two possible explanations for this gap in the literature. First, as William Zartman has pointed out back in the heyday of the regional studies movement in the 1960s, generally "regions tend to be assumed first and identified later" (as cited in Thompson, 1981a, p. 213). Second, within CA, critical questions of international relations have been pushed into the background by a heavy emphasis on domestic issues. As such, the relationships among the five CA states have not been fully or systematically studied. Thus, two decades after the Soviet Union's collapse and despite the urgency of such international issues as regional security, border disputes, and conflict over natural resources, we know very little about how the CA states interact at the regional level to resolve various regional problems.

I delineate the geographic boundaries of CA using a type of interaction data—intergovernmental visits.³ An analysis based on such data begins with the assumption that visits between heads of state and government officials reflect a serious form of international politics which has important utility in establishing subsystemic boundaries of a region. State visits generally serve as indicators of foreign policy interests. While some visits are ceremonial, the majority involve a deliberate interaction with other countries for the purpose of obtaining assistance, bargaining leverage, and in some cases compliance (Thompson, 1981a). Government representatives, however, do not tend to visit all of their counterparts. Their selectivity determines who interacts with whom in a given region. As such, visit patterns can help us identify regional boundaries based on interstate interactions.

Such data provide a reasonably reliable proxy for identifying the extent to which a subsystemic pattern is emerging. They also can help identify a nuanced view of interstate interactions both in terms of regularity (i.e., who interacts with whom) and intensity (i.e., how often states interact with each other). The aim is to discover the basic patterns of interstate relations to see whether a bloc exists. In other words, is there a CA? If so, what does it look like?

¹ The most recent and perhaps the first systematic treatment of CA as a regional unit is found in Buzan and Waever (2003). They describe CA as a distinct regional *subcomplex* within a greater Russian security complex. However, Buzan and Waever's definition of CA is based mainly on security relations. For a greater discussion see their chapter 13, pp. 423-429. See also Allison (2001), who claims the five CA states constitute "a loose security complex."

² Specifically, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. Throughout this article, these states are referred to as the CA states.

³ For other works using intergovernmental visits as a proxy for interstate interaction, see Thompson (1981a); Nitsch (2007); Volgy et al. (2011); and Kastner and Saunders (2012).

More specifically, to what extent are the foreign policies of the CA states primarily oriented toward the region in which they find themselves? Is there one bloc or are there multiple, overlapping, nested subsystems of various types that seem to be forming? Depending on what the structure of the international relations is, they all have different foreign policy implications.

The logic of the argument presented in the article is straightforward. First, I provide a brief background on regional subsystems. Second, I discuss several theoretical approaches about the type of structures one might expect to find in CA. Third, I discuss the strengths and limitations of the data. Finally, I analyze the empirical findings vis-à-vis the structural models and end by offering general conclusions about the structure of international relations in post-Soviet CA.

2. BACKGROUND ON REGIONAL SUBSYSTEMS

The study of regions as a distinct unit of analysis first became popular in the 1960s when scholars became increasingly uneasy with explanations of world politics in terms of an exclusively bipolar model (Binder, 1958; Brecher, 1963; Zartman, 1967; Banks, 1969; Berton, 1969; Hellman, 1969; Robinson, 1969; Sigler, 1969; Cantori and Spiegel, 1969; Cantori and Spiegel, 1970). Among the many reasons for this dissatisfaction was the assumption that regional or local politics was nothing more than a miniature interplay of great-power politics. Regions, in other words, were perceived to be mini international systems that behaved in ways similar to the global system. This was particularly the case in the post-World War II period when the global overlay of the Cold War masked regional variations (Buzan, 1991). It took an area specialist to challenge this analytical bias before scholars of international relations began to view regions as entities distinct from the international system. Binder (1958) disagreed with the claim that international politics takes place in a single global system. He instead claimed that it is comprised of a network of systems operating at the global, regional, and domestic levels. Any model containing a great power bias cannot, he argued, effectively explain the behavior of less than great powers. This is because, “insofar as a situation of mutual deterrence obstructs great-power intervention, the smaller powers are free to act” (Binder, 1958, p. 409). In many respects, Binder’s revolt against the abstractions of generalist international relations explanations marked the beginning of the regional subsystem idea urging scholars to study regions in their own right rather than as part of a global system.

The movement prompted regional studies scholars to come up with various criteria about what constitutes a regional subsystem.⁴ Some offered a “kitchen sink” approach (Cantori and Spiegel, 1970) while others thought one or two attributes sufficed (e.g., Zartman, 1967; Brecher, 1969; Hellman, 1969). In an effort to minimize such distinctions, Thompson (1973) classified the various definitions and conceptual attributes of a regional subsystem into four necessary and sufficient conditions: geographical proximity, regularity and intensity of interaction between regional actors, internal and external recognition as a distinctive area, and a minimum size of at least two actors. These categories continue to resonate in the regional subsystem literature today

⁴ It is important to note here that *regional subsystem* is not the same as *regionalism*, which refers more to the economic and political processes of integration among geographically proximate states. *Regionalism* is best understood as “an active process of change towards increased cooperation, integration, convergence, coherence and identity” (Allison, 2004: 465). *Regional subsystem*, by contrast, defines regions based on disproportionate concentration of economic and political flows that are intra-regional as opposed to extra-regional. See Vayrynen (2003) for more discussion on the differences between old versus new regionalism. For other works on regionalism, see Mansfield and Milner (1999), Hettne and Soderbaum (2000), Noble (2004), Salloukh and Brynen (2004), Kelly (2007), Allison (2008), Collins (2009), and Powers and Goertz (2011).

(Buzan, 1991; Lake, 1997; Lake and Morgan, 1997; Buzan and Waeber, 2003; Salloukh and Brynne, 2004; Allison, 2008).

In addition to the four categories identified by Thompson (1973), a regional subsystem is further characterized by “a certain *distinctiveness* and *proximity*, not only in the geographical but also in the economic and political sense” (Vayrynen, 1984: 340). Proximity, in other words, is established by means of mutual interaction. The study of regional subsystems in international relations thus means that the geographical perspective is combined with political, economic, and social dynamics. In the presence of a subsystem the important sources of change in the region cannot be exclusively domestic in nature, as changes in one part of the subsystem can become the catalyst of change in other parts of the region. In the presence of a strong regional subsystem, in which the regional identity is presumably stronger than individual national identities, there are no national solutions to regional problems.⁵

The end of the Cold War paved the way for the emergence of new regional groupings of states, especially in the territory of the former Soviet Union. Studying states grouped into such regional clusters is advantageous for two important reasons. First, it provides a level of analysis midway between the nation-state and the global system. By focusing on intermediate groups, we reduce the number of units to be analyzed and therefore lessen the complexity of world politics. At the same time we increase the subtlety of analysis in an otherwise quantitatively oriented field. Second, it provides a broader perspective on the international politics of regions without undermining their unique characteristics. It does so by forcing us to look at the larger picture as well as making us aware of the interconnectedness of developments (Noble, 2004). Ultimately, knowing who interacts with whom on a regular basis will help international actors devise effective policies in resolving existing and future regional conflicts.

3. STRUCTURAL APPROACHES

There are a number of prevailing abstract approaches about the type of structures one might expect to find in CA; however, they are not all mutually exclusive. Rather, they are iterative in the sense that first, I assess the *extent* of the interaction in the region: is it high, medium, or low (model I); if the interaction is low, I then examine the *nature* of the interaction: is it fragmented (model II), or is it skewed toward an external actor such as the former metropole or an alternative patron (model III). I will now discuss each model separately.

Model I: The structure of international relations among the five CA states could be high, medium, or low; however, what volume of interaction deserves ‘high’ versus ‘low’ measure? To determine the extent of the interaction among a group of states in close geographic proximity to one another we must first assess how inward focused the interactions are. What percent of the state visits are concentrated among the five CA states? To deal with these questions objectively, the obvious solution is to compare the intra-CA interaction to other groups of states that are interactive regional subsystems. Unfortunately, we lack objective benchmarks about other subsystems against which we can judge the data on CA interaction. Thus, in the absence of comparable information, it is necessary to adopt a minimum threshold by which CA intra-regional activity can be measured. One straightforward threshold is to view the distribution of state visits in terms of percentages (75, 50, and 25 percent). While such thresholds are often arbitrary, they do help organize big datasets in such a way as to reveal important patterns of

⁵ For a critique of the earlier works on regional subsystems, see Boals (1973).

activity. For example, 75 percent of interaction is greater than 50 percent and if more than 50 percent of the CA activity is intra-regional as opposed to extra-regional, it is then possible to argue that CA constitutes a *highly interactive* regional subsystem (model I).

Model I, essentially, is based on the assumption that in an increasingly global world while all places are somewhat related to each other, near places are more related (O'Loughlin and Anselin, 1992). Such regions are sustained by at least two or more generally proximate actors which tend to focus more on problems and actors within the region than those outside the region.⁶ Western Europe, ASEAN, and the Mashriq region⁷ of the Middle East are examples of such subsystems, in which interstate relations tend to be more inwardly oriented. If there is a semblance of a *highly interactive subsystem* emerging in the region, the CA states will likely shift their foreign policies away from dealing mainly with local politics toward more regional issues. However, this does not mean that their relations will necessarily become more cooperative. Rather, an increase in interstate interaction will link the subsystemic members in such a way that the actions of one state will have serious consequences on the actions of the other members of the subsystem. If the subsystem is characterized by cooperative relations, the CA states might actually be able to resolve a number of problems plaguing the region such as water-energy regulation, transport infrastructure, border disputes, and regional security. If, on the other hand, regional relations are mainly conflictual, competing national interests of the CA states in the economic and foreign policy areas are likely to pose the greatest danger to regional stability. In short, the *highly interactive* subsystem approach presupposes that regularly interacting proximate actors are likely to form one subsystem.

Model II is an alternative approach with an underlying assumption that in the developing world, especially in the post-colonial period, regional subsystems are unlikely to form because states are often preoccupied with domestic concerns and, thus, their foreign policies tend to focus mainly on local issues (i.e., border disputes) with their immediate neighbors. Such states are less likely to join larger collectivities and to deal with relatively distant issues even within their respective regions, resulting in a *fragmented subsystem*. This thinking is consistent with Dominguez (1971), who argues that as peripheries break away from the imperial center, they are likely to face severe resource limitations and an increase in the probability of local conflicts. Border disputes are often the inevitable outcome of imperial dissolution shaping the foreign policies of the newly independent states in ways that keep their interests mainly local rather than regional. Thus, the collapse of colonial empires initiates a trend toward the fragmentation of the world into pockets of smaller-scale subsystems. In such a world order, states are likely to deal mainly with adjacent neighbors, often forming bilateral relations, for overloaded by domestic pressures and demands, they lack the resources to engage in regional projects. Fragmented subsystems in general tend to be more numerous than their highly interactive counterparts. The Caucuses (i.e., Armenia-Azerbaijan), parts of sub-Saharan Africa where the Democratic Republic of the Congo often clashes with its neighbors Rwanda and Uganda, and many of the subregional clusters in South America such as Argentina-Brazil, Chile-Peru-Bolivia, or Columbia-Venezuela are just a few examples of fragmented subsystems.⁸

⁶ The number of regions that can satisfy high thresholds of interactive autonomy is few in number.

⁷ The Mashriq region refers to the Arab countries east of [Egypt](#) and north of the [Arabian Peninsula](#), i.e., Iraq, Palestine, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, and Syria. Iran has been increasingly involved in this region since 1979.

⁸ For a good summary of Dominguez's argument, see Pickering and Thompson (1998).

If interstate interaction is limited (i.e., if regional activity is neither high nor medium), model II is more likely to characterize regional boundaries. In a fragmented region, the existing dyadic disputes are likely to persist unresolved and the presence of extra-regional actors (e.g., Russian border guards, U.S. air bases, or international organizations) will be needed to resolve interstate conflicts. A subsystem marked by fragmentation is characterized by a low degree of interaction. This means that the existing tension among the CA states over natural resources such as water and energy will only escalate and possibly destabilize the region in the future.

Model III: Fragmentation is not the only structural form that regions with low interaction activity can take. An alternative approach was advanced by Cooley (2005) who suggested that hierarchical institutions left by an imperial core have lasting influence over the structure of regional interactions within the former empire. This *metropole-centered* approach, which envisions “all roads leading to the former metropole,” (or in the case of the five CA states, to Moscow) is likely to characterize the initial stage of regional interactions in post-Soviet CA. Literature on post-colonialism suggests that security and stability concerns often keep the metropole involved in the political, economic, and military affairs of its former colonies. While such interactions are expected to diminish over time, path dependence makes it advantageous for the newly independent states to continue interacting with the former metropole long after imperial relations have dissipated. In some instances, the metropole may actually seek to return to its peripheries for economic benefits. Building upon existing bilateral relations with the former colonial power maximizes the new states’ strategic and economic benefits. This is clearly more beneficial than building new relations with former peripheral neighbors in the region. In a system characterized by core-periphery relations, the post-colonial system maintains this hierarchical trend, and the tie to the core remains strong long after the peripheries have broken away from the metropole. For example, the Francophone states of West Africa have been variably francocentric since independence. This is different from other post-colonial regional clusters such as South Asia that became decidedly unfriendly to the former metropole.

In a region characterized by limited interaction, an alternative to fragmentation is a metropole-centered region. If model III is in operation, the CA states will continue to lie within Russia’s sphere of influence, which means any conflict resolution in the region will require the intervention of Russia. Similarly, in cooperative relations, Moscow will continue encouraging bilateral relations over multilateralism, and as a consequence, dictating the terms of bilateral interactions. This may not be a bad thing in the short term but if the CA states are serious and uniform in their aspirations to minimize their dependence on Russia in the long term, then institutionalizing mutual interaction within the region may be their only way of marginalizing Moscow. Of course, a subsystem characterized by hierarchical interactions does not need to be metropole-centered. With enough power and influence, alternative patrons can easily assume the former metropole’s role. In CA, China, Iran, and even the United States could play this role.

Since no systematic empirical analysis yet exists regarding all five CA states, the interaction data examined through the three models should help steer us in the right direction toward filling that gap. It is an opportunity to watch new subsystems emerge in a region whose successful development cannot take place in isolation. More importantly, the structural models provide a better understanding of the “regional” context in CA. Whether the CA states are moving toward a more interactive regional subsystem or still holding on to pre-1991 Moscow-centered forms of interaction provides important insights and clues about their foreign policy making.

4. RESEARCH DESIGN AND STATE VISITS DATA

Intergovernmental visits have proven to be a useful and a fairly reliable measure of interstate interaction for the purpose of identifying regional boundaries (Modelske, 1968; Brams, 1969; Christopherson, 1976; Hughes and Volgy, 1970; Pearson, 1970; Kegley and Wittkopf, 1976; Thompson and Modelske, 1977; Thompson, 1970; 1981a; 1981b; Nitsch, 2007; Volgy *et al.*, 2011; Kastner and Saunders, 2012). Since intergovernmental visits are all public information printed in the press, I use *Foreign Broadcast Information Service* (FBIS) reports to compile the data.⁹ While generally it is always better to rely on originals and not translations to get all the nuances of events, for the purpose of simply identifying when and where government visits took place and between what countries, *FBIS* is by far the best single source that offers broad coverage of intergovernmental visits.

This type of data, however, has an important shortcoming: it tends to be biased toward cooperative relations more than conflictual ones (Kegley and Howell, 1975). This is because visits, presumably, are more likely to take place between friendly dyads than hostile ones. Thus, any pattern of intergovernmental visits so identified should reveal only cooperative regional subsystems. Yet, in a regional subsystem in which all interactions count, adversaries can be just as important as friends. By the same token, in his delineation of the Middle Eastern subsystem, Thompson (1981a, p. 234) argues that conflict is well imbedded in visit patterns because it is not uncommon for “relatively active visit dyads (e.g., Egypt and Libya or Algeria and Morocco) to engage in military hostilities with each other.” In the case of CA, the distinction between conflict and cooperation is less important (at least for the purpose of identifying subsystemic boundaries) than the general volume and direction of interactions. State visits, while at best a proxy for foreign policy priorities, do provide information about which states are more important to CA.

There are three other characteristics of the research design that require elaboration. First, on the matter of *case selection*, an ideal way to identify the subsystemic boundaries of a given region would be to look at the whole world and see if the five CA states emerge as a subsystem. Unfortunately, the existing datasets do not all cover the same time frame in question (namely the 1992-2006 period), nor do they contain complete information on the CA states.¹⁰ Another way to assess the boundaries of CA is to start inductively with the five CA states and then to look at *all* their interstate interactions with every actor in the world over several years. By looking at a region this way, we should be able to discern how well the five CA states are connected among themselves relative to non-regional actors.

Second, the *unit of analysis* is a dyad where only bilateral visits are examined. Visits made solely for the purpose of attending a multilateral meeting are dropped from the dataset, unless there was a clear indication that bilateral relations took place on the sidelines.¹¹ Using dyads may potentially blur the distinction between local interactions and the more comprehensive interactions among the CA states. However, by looking at each country one by one, we can determine with a reasonable degree of certainty whether the orientation of individual states is dyadic or pan-regional. The dyads are further restricted to the CA states as either visitor or visited.

⁹ *FBIS* is a U.S based news source that monitors and provides translated transcripts of foreign radio and television broadcasts, newspapers, periodicals, and government statements.

¹⁰ Gary King's events data (King and Lowe, 2003) is an example of a dataset that lacks information on CA states.

¹¹ For the purpose of identifying which states are high priorities to a given state, it is not uncommon for scholars to focus on bilateral rather than multilateral relations. See for example, Kastner and Saunders (2012).

Third, the *timeframe* of this study is limited to the 15 years (1992-2006) following the collapse of the USSR. Looking at 15 years rather than focusing on certain points in time help reveal general structural patterns of interaction over time. Furthermore, this period is aggregated into five-year intervals (i.e., 1992-1996, 1997-2001, and 2002-2006). Temporal aggregation of data is crucial for identifying general structural tendencies over time (Thompson, 1981a). Such aggregation also helps account for the influence of major events on the international politics of the region. For example, during the first five years immediately following independence, the CA states assigned a key role to the development of new ties with the international community. For the first time in the history of the region, the CA states inaugurated embassies both at home and abroad, forming foreign policies without Moscow's intervention. Escaping from Russia's hegemony through the cultivation of new partners to generate the needed capital for economic development took precedence in each CA state's foreign policy formulations.¹² Thus, during this period, I expect to find more diplomatic visits and more interstate interactions in general.

By the mid-1990s, however, the leaders of the CA states realized that no matter how much they tried, the old economic ties to Moscow could not be broken overnight (Anderson, 1997). Moreover, foreign governments became disillusioned with the potential of the region's oil and gas reserves rivaling those of the Persian Gulf, and the consolidation of *superpresidential* systems¹³ with concentrated power and weak legislatures made the region unattractive for much of the outside world. Even Kyrgyzstan's quasi-democratic regime, which had facilitated much of the visit networks during the early years of independence, had by the mid-1990s become increasingly authoritarian and the number of intergovernmental visits declined. Tajikistan was the only CA state which continued to see more visitors to and from its neighbors and the international community due to the bloody civil war that plagued the country until 1997.

The events of 9/11 and the subsequent basing of US troops in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan marked a major restructuring of international politics in CA, and thus it serves as an appropriate starting point for the third period. The US "war on terror" has served to revitalize regional alliances with Russia while simultaneously strengthening bilateral relations with the United States. I choose 2006 as an end point for data collection because it marks a significant political turning point for the region with the death of the Turkmen president in office, the ousting of the Kyrgyz president by a popular revolt the year before, and the severing of the US-Uzbek relations in the aftermath of the brutal repression of the Andijan riots by Karimov's regime in Uzbekistan. Due to the post-9/11 changes in the region, I expect more inter-governmental visits in this period than during the previous period.

4.1 Data Restrictions

The analysis of intergovernmental networks is restricted to visits to and from three groups of CA government officials: presidents, prime ministers, and cabinet-level ministers. I

¹² For a more detailed discussion of each CA state's foreign policy priorities during the early 1990s, see Olcott (1996).

¹³ *Superpresidentialism*, according to Fish (2000), refers to "an apparatus of executive power that dwarfs all other agencies in terms of size and the resources it consumes; a president who enjoys decree powers; a president who *de jure* or *de facto* controls most of the powers of the purse; a relatively toothless legislature that cannot repeal presidential decrees and that enjoys scant authority and/or resources to monitor the chief executive; provisions that render impeachment of the president virtually impossible; and a court system that is controlled wholly or mainly by the chief executive and that cannot in practice check presidential prerogatives or even abuse of power." For other works on *superpresidentialism* see Colton (1995), Ishiyama and Kennedy (2001).

also include the deputies of these officials because they tend to do the majority of the traveling. This is a common occurrence in developing countries, where the risk of a coup or uprising in the absence of state leaders tends to be more real than in established governments. Because the visits data contain information on governmental representatives of different rank, the visits are subjected to a weight scale. Since a visit involving a president is presumably more politically significant than a visit of a minister of culture, the following weight scale is applied to the data: a visit involving a president is scored as ten visit points; a visit by a prime minister (or vice-president) is scored as eight visits points; a visit by any cabinet level minister (including the foreign and defense ministers) is scored as six visit points; a visit by a deputy prime minister is scored as four visits points; and a visit by any deputy minister is scored as two visit points.

Based on the weighted scale, all visits in the sample are further subjected to three more restrictions. First, since government officials seldom travel alone, often heading a multimember delegation, the visit points are restricted to the *highest ranked official* of the delegation (e.g., if the Uzbek president travels to Iran with his foreign minister and minister of education, that particular visit is coded at the level of the president only). Ideally, one needs to retain as much information as possible on each visit, but news reports are rarely specific as to the identities of the members of a delegation, mostly focusing on the highest ranked official(s) of the delegation.¹⁴ Some officials simply do not receive much coverage in a large entourage. Mixing reports with full versus uneven coverage of visits involves just as much, if not more, data distortion as does the full exclusion of the delegations. By awarding more weight to the highest ranking official, I minimize data bias by treating each visit solely on the basis of the head of the delegation.

Second, because not all visits in, to, and from CA are of equal structural interest, they are further restricted to a minimal threshold of one visit per year by either member of a dyad.¹⁵ This is because the occasional exchange of visits between Turkmenistan and Vietnam does not possess the same subsystemic significance as the intense interaction between Turkmenistan and Iran. Thus, any dyad with less than five visits in a five-year period is dropped in my analysis. This threshold eliminates a large portion of the visit pattern “noise,” thereby focusing analysis on the more significant and general patterns of interaction.

Third, the visit points are restricted to bilateral visits only. Multilateral visits are treated separately but in conjunction with bilateral visits for several reasons. First, multilateral visits greatly inflate the influence attributable to host nations (Brams 1969), thereby skewing visit points in favor of the host nation, unless there is a policy of rotating locations. Second, attendance in multilateral meetings tends to be passive, especially if the meetings are large and take place somewhere outside the region. It is often difficult to know how much effect such meetings exert on subsystemic interaction. For example, a meeting of a hundred foreign ministers at the annual meeting of the United Nations says a lot less about the subsystemic interaction of a group of proximate states than a regular meeting of CA foreign ministers in the region.

¹⁴ For example, news reports emanating from the Middle East usually list all the important ranking officials, but reports from Moscow focus exclusively on whoever is heading the delegation.

¹⁵ For the application of this rule of thumb, see Brams (1969); Kegley and Wittkopf (1976); and Thompson (1981a, 1981b).

5. EMPIRICAL FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

The final state dataset consists of 31 active participants in the CA visit networks. For the purpose of analysis, I sum the paired interactions of each dyad within each five-year period so that each unique dyad represents the total number of interactions. For example, if Kazakhstan visited Russia 10 times during the 1992-1996 period and received 15 visitors from Russia during the same period, the Kazakhstan-Russia dyad is coded as having a total of 25 visits. While such aggregation of data blurs the distinction between those who visit and those who receive visitors between a pair of states, it helps focus the analysis on the regularity and intensity of interactions between a dyad. Table 1 lists the participants in the CA network for each five-year period ranking states with the highest number of visits on top to states with the lowest number of visits toward the bottom. As expected, all the CA states are part of the subsystem since the visits data are restricted to the CA states as visitor or visited. However, not all five CA states are as active in the region. At the high end, Kazakhstan is much more active than Turkmenistan at the low end.

The most obvious feature of Table 1 is that the network size in the second interval is nearly half the size of those in the first or third periods. In the first period (1992-1996), 25 states are listed as members. In the second period (1997-2001), the network size decreases to 14. In the third period (2002-2006), the network size reaches its highest with 28 members. The downturn in the middle period could be partly attributed to the consolidation of super-presidential regimes but mainly to the relative lack of instability in the region which led to the decline in intergovernmental visits. The events of 9/11 and the subsequent invasion of Afghanistan generated significant number of state visits in the region. The establishment of U.S. military bases in CA and Russia's efforts to counterbalance American power by strengthening its own military presence in the region, as well the 2001 founding of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization—intergovernmental security organization established by China, Russia, and four of the CA states¹⁶—contributed to the general increase in regional interaction during the third period.

A second feature of particular pertinence is that major powers Russia and China, and mid-level powers Turkey and Iran, remain prominent in each interval. To what extent the actors involved in the CA network of visits constitute a full-fledged interactive subsystem, or several fragmented smaller subsystems, or a small regional structure within a larger subsystem of the former imperial core is the subject of the following sections. By examining the visit patterns with a focus on the degree of fit for each of these models will help identify which actors are politically more salient to whom, which is in some ways what the subsystem idea is all about.

5.1 Highly Interactive Subsystem (Model I)

At a January 1993 meeting, leaders of the five CA states agreed to refer to the entire region as *Tsentralnaia Aziia* (CA), which for the first time included Kazakhstan. Since then, much scholarship has been generated focusing on various aspects of CA states' domestic and international politics as if the five states constitute a distinct region. If the CA states indeed

¹⁶ Turkmenistan is the only CA state which did not join the SCO claiming its positive neutrality status as a basis for abstaining from any multilateral security organizations.

Table 1: Principal Participants in the CA Visit Networks, 1992-2006

1992-1996	1997-2001	2002-2006
Kazakhstan	Russia	Kazakhstan
Uzbekistan	Kazakhstan	Russia
Russia	Tajikistan	Kyrgyzstan
Turkmenistan	Uzbekistan	Tajikistan
Tajikistan	Kyrgyzstan	Uzbekistan
Iran	Turkey	China
Kyrgyzstan	Turkmenistan	Iran
Turkey	China	Turkmenistan
China	Iran	USA
Pakistan	Ukraine	Ukraine
India	USA	Turkey
Ukraine	Azerbaijan	Afghanistan
Germany	Pakistan	India
USA	Belarus	Germany
Afghanistan		France
Egypt		Poland
Israel		Pakistan
Georgia		South Korea
Azerbaijan		Azerbaijan
Armenia		Georgia
France		United Kingdom
South Korea		Egypt
Bulgaria		Croatia
United Kingdom		Bulgaria
Vietnam		Japan
Slovenia		
Latvia		
Israel		
25 states	14 states	28 states

constitute a distinct region, we should be able to delineate its boundaries by looking at the volume of state visits that stays in the region relative to the volume that goes out. At the high end, we expect about 50 percent or more of the state visits to take place among the five CA states. At the low end, at least 25 percent of the total visits would have to be intra-CA in order to feel that there is some sense of regional belonging. Overall, the greater the concentration of visits among the five CA states, the greater the support is for the highly interactive subsystem model.

Table 2 breaks down the total number of visits into three categories with visits involving (a) only CA states, (b) a CA state and its immediate neighbors, and (c) a CA state and one other state not included in the first two categories. Surprisingly, the visits distribution is less biased toward the CA states. While some CA bias was expected since the visits data were restricted to CA participation as either visitor or visited, the outcome, nevertheless, suggests that there are fewer intra-CA visits taking place than one might expect. The intra-CA visits constitute at most 10 percent of the total visits over 15 years. By the turn of the century, over 95 percent of the

Table 2: Highly Interactive Subsystem (Model I)
visit points/(percent)

Years	Intra-CA		Neighbors		World		Total
1992-1996	530	-9	2752	-48	2408	-42.3	5690
1997-2001	336	-10	1914	-57.1	1100	-32.8	3350
2002-2006	258	-4.2	3644	-59.7	2204	-36.1	6106

Note: In Table 2 three categories of bilateral visits are used: intra-CA, neighbors, and the rest of the world. The intra-CA category refers to the interactions among the five CA states, namely, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. A state is considered a “neighbor” if it shares a land border with one of the CA states; thus, Russia, China, Iran, and Afghanistan constitute the neighbor category. The third category refers to all other countries with which the CA states interacted over a 15-year period that do not fall into the first two categories.

CA states’ intergovernmental visits were with non-CA countries. Overall, Table 2 suggests a pattern of low interstate interaction among the five CA states and thus weak support for model I.

Perhaps more indicative of the weakness of the CA region is the presence of an overwhelming support in favor of the neighbors. In each five-year period, interaction with the neighbors captures at least 50 percent of the CA network of visits. This is particularly significant considering there are only four countries that share a land border with the CA states (namely, Russia, China, Iran, and Afghanistan). Moreover, the overall percentage of interaction captured by the four neighbors increased over time from 48 percent in the first period to nearly 60 percent in the third period. If a highly interactive subsystem refers to a relatively regular and intense pattern of interactions among proximate states, then the CA subsystem would need to be defined more broadly. What the visit patterns suggest is that any delineation of subsystemic boundaries of CA cannot ignore the neighbors, particularly Russia and China. By the same token, the existence of two major powers in the region may partly explain the low intra-CA interaction levels by constraining the development of a regional subsystem.

However, not all of the 31 actors active in the region are of equal subsystemic significance. By distinguishing among the actors on the basis of relative involvement within the subsystemic network we can separate the core from the periphery members. As summarized in Table 3, three groups of states are distinguished according to the extent of each state’s participation in the CA subsystemic network. The subsystemic *core* consists of those states which are involved in 10 percent or more of the total network visits. The subsystemic *periphery* is composed of those states with at least 5 percent but less than 10 percent participation. The third group, the subsystemic *fringe*, includes those states which constitute less than 5 percent of the total visits

The proportional divisions in Table 3 reflect the volume of interaction. They also indicate that relative involvement within the subsystem is characterized by some fluctuation. Except for Turkmenistan, all the CA states plus Russia are consistent members of the core. Not surprisingly, Turkmenistan’s membership in the CA subsystem progresses toward less interaction overtime. Its fall from the core to a periphery position in the third five-year period is consistent with Turkmenistan’s foreign policy behavior. Through a form of self-imposed isolation, which Ashgabat adopted after the alleged assassination attempt on the president’s life in 2002, and its deliberate attempt to remain aloof from any regional endeavors, predicated on its neutrality status, contributed to Turkmenistan’s absence from the subsystemic core. Had it not been for

Table 3: Core, Periphery, and Fringe Designations in CA, 1992-2006

	1992-1996	1997-2001	2002-2006
<i>Core</i>	Kazakhstan	Russia	Kazakhstan
	Uzbekistan	Kazakhstan	Russia
	Russia	Tajikistan	Kyrgyzstan
	Turkmenistan	Uzbekistan	Tajikistan
	Tajikistan	Kyrgyzstan	Uzbekistan
	Iran	Turkey	China
	Kyrgyzstan	Turkmenistan	Iran
	Turkey	China	
<i>Periphery</i>	China	Iran	Turkmenistan
	Pakistan	Ukraine	USA
			Ukraine
			Turkey
<i>Fringe</i>	India	USA	Afghanistan
	Ukraine	Azerbaijan	India
	Germany	Pakistan	Germany
	USA	Belarus	France
	Afghanistan		Poland
	Egypt		Pakistan
	Israel		South Korea
	Georgia		Azerbaijan
	Azerbaijan		Georgia
	Armenia		UK
	France		Egypt
	South Korea		Croatia
	Bulgaria		Bulgaria
	UK		Japan
	Vietnam		Slovenia
	Israel		Latvia

Turkmenistan's large reserves of oil and natural gas, which have generated a few visits to and from the outside world, it is conceivable that Turkmenistan may never have been a member of the subsystemic core in the 1990s. Russia's membership in the subsystemic core is probably the easiest to explain. Given the interconnected nature of the Soviet Union, all the republics were dependent on Moscow politically, economically, and militarily. In the period between 1920 and 1991 the CA states were especially likely to be interdependent because Moscow made policy decisions in these areas in ways that kept the republics dependent on Russia. Moreover, foreign affairs with adjoining states were always the exclusive domain of Moscow. As such, none of the CA states maintained representation abroad during the Soviet period. Shared borders between the republics were managed. The Soviet government did not permit direct trade relations between the CA states and their non-Soviet neighbors (Webber 1996). Control of energy supplies was and remains an effective sphere of Russian dominance in CA, whose landlocked geography keeps the CA states dependent on Russian infrastructure for transit routes. In the first years of

independence, Russia used its control of the Soviet era oil and gas pipeline system to seek concessions from energy rich Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan and maintained this monopoly through most of the 1990s. Russia also maintains its influence in the region by strengthening its military presence especially in the aftermath of 9/11 when it established military bases in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan (Olcott 2005).

China is another neighbor whose involvement in the region is fairly easy to explain. Its initial periphery position quickly vaulted to a core position by the mid-1990s where it stayed through 2006. Sharing borders with three of the CA states (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan), China's interest and delayed involvement in the region was shaped mainly by two considerations: security threat and energy. Despite new security threats from its own Uighur Muslim population in Xinjiang, China, was slow to assert its national interests in CA during the early 1990s. As long as the CA states lay within Russia's sphere of influence, China did not feel the need to compete for regional dominance. Even several disputed border issues between China and Kyrgyzstan were resolved peacefully. While intergovernmental visits were exchanged at the high official levels with CA's presidents and foreign ministers visiting Beijing and their visits reciprocated by Chinese Prime Minister Li Peng in 1994, all these visits were regarded more as a publicity effort than a formation of close cooperative relationship between these states (Olcott 2005). Not until the creation of a security organization the Shanghai Five in 1996 that Beijing was able to exert its influence in the region alongside Russia. The 1997 bombings in Xinjiang solidified China's foothold in the region based on the fear that in seeking greater autonomy from Beijing the Uighur population might find sympathizers in CA. As such, Beijing increased its influence in the region through the Shanghai Five, which with the inclusion of Uzbekistan in 2001 was renamed to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). China also befriended the CA states through economic aid designed to develop the region's energy sector. Increased Chinese influence in CA meant that (a) the CA states would gain a new transportation route that would bypass Russia; (b) China would tap into a new source of energy to satisfy its insatiable domestic demand; and consequently (c) new allies in CA would be less inclined to support Xinjiang's demand for autonomy.

Iran's membership in the subsystemic network fluctuates between the core and the periphery by descending from an initial core position to a periphery in the mid-1990s before returning to a core position in the third period. The conventional view is that Iran's high hopes of becoming a major player in CA states' international relations have been largely unrealized (Roy 2000; Olcott 2005). Yet on the basis of the visits pattern, Tehran has exchanged almost as many intergovernmental officials with its CA counterparts as did Russia. For example, during the 1992-1996 period, Iran averaged 33 visits a year to and from CA, which is only 4 visits fewer than Russia's yearly average during the same period. While the number of intergovernmental visits between Iran and the CA states declined to about eight visits a year during the 1997-2001, when the trend is viewed over 15 years the yearly average goes up to 21 visits, all at the ministerial level or higher.

Tehran views CA as its natural geopolitical sphere of influence, yet the ideological nature of the Iranian regime has disadvantaged its relations with its secular neighbors to the north. In the first years following the Soviet collapse, Iranian officials relied on rhetoric of historical and cultural affinity to advance their economic and geopolitical interests in the region. It hosted numerous multilateral meetings with the CA leaders. Yet it enjoyed a close relationship with only two of the CA states. Its relation with Tajikistan is bound by cultural and linguistic

affinities. The evolution of Iran's relations with Turkmenistan has its roots in mutual interests in the energy sector. Iran offers the most direct outlet for Turkmenistan's landlocked energy resources. However, Tehran's efforts of serving as a transit route for CA energy resources were stifled by the late 1990s due to US policy toward Iran, which denied to CA the least expensive pipeline route. This is arguably a reason for Iran's descent from the CA subsystemic core to the periphery during the 1997-2001 period. However, Iran's ascension to the subsystemic core by the turn of the century reinforces the less popular conviction among some CA scholars that Iran is a significant power in the region whose influence is not likely to wane any time soon. And the sooner the United States changes its policy toward Iran, the sooner the potential of the Caspian basin will be realized, with benefits to the CA states and the energy dependent world (Starr 1997).

Turkey is another mid-level power in the region whose visit patterns placed it in the CA core all through the 1990s. However, at the turn of the century the visit patterns changed, with Turkey assuming a more peripheral position. Like Iran, Turkey viewed the newly independent states in CA as offering great opportunities for expanding its geopolitical influence on the basis of historical and cultural heritage. For Turkey under president Turguz Ozal partnering with the newly independent states presented new opportunities for extending Ankara's influence. Ozal gathered the leaders of the new Turkic states for a series of summit meetings both at home and in CA. The first such meeting was held in Ankara in 1992 after which Ozal made a well-publicized trip to the region in 1993. After Ozal's death, President Suleiman Demirel continued the initiative, holding summits in 1994, 1995, and 1996 and traveling to the region in 1996 (Olcott 2005).

For CA leaders, Turkey's secular model of development was particularly attractive, and they welcomed Ankara's advances to the region with open arms. In the early 1990s "Turkish politicians were attracted to the romantic image of a Pan-Turkic commonwealth of nations, an embracing of the 'Turkic' peoples of CA" (Allison 2001). As such, Turkish delegations hurried to the region, offering scholarships to CA students, extending technical and financial support for replacing the Cyrillic alphabet with Latin, making Turkish media television programs available at preferential rates, and offering expertise in modernizing infrastructure (Anderson 1997; Olcott 2005). Nonetheless, as the 1990s advanced, the CA leaders realized Ankara's limitations as a regional power and turned their attention to more influential powers such as the United States and the EU. Moreover, Russian policy makers played a major role in putting considerable pressure both on the CA states to keep a balanced policy toward Turkey and on Ankara to loosen its pursuit of regional dominance. Turkey was sensitive to Russian concerns because despite its cultural links with the CA states its trade with Russia was much larger than its trade with all the CA states combined (Olcott 2005). Thus Turkey's visits to and from CA dwindled in the 2002-2006 period, and its membership in the visit networks dropped from a core to a periphery position for the first time in 15 years.

Apart from the CA core states, of equal interest is the information supplied by Table 3 on the composition of the periphery and fringe states. In the aggregate, these consist of several European states, a South Asian wing (India and Pakistan), a Middle Eastern wing (Egypt and Israel), and the United States. The less than five percent participation threshold for fringe status usually means that a fringe member interacts with only a few members of the core or periphery. In general, fringe connections to the larger subsystem are tenuous, owing to their outlying geographical positions and to the ups and downs of specific bilateral relationships (Thompson

Table 4: Relative Positioning of the CA States within the Subsystem, 1992-2006 (percent)

1992-1996		1997-2001		2002-2006	
State	Visits	State	Visits	State	Visits
Kazakhstan	30.4	Kazakhstan	31.5	Kazakhstan	33.9
Kyrgyzstan	14.3	Kyrgyzstan	17.3	Kyrgyzstan	21.2
Tajikistan	16.3	Tajikistan	18.8	Tajikistan	21.2
Turkmenistan	19.9	Turkmenistan	17.5	Turkmenistan	6.6
Uzbekistan	19.1	Uzbekistan	14.9	Uzbekistan	17.1

1981a). Still, this did not preclude concerted efforts on the part of the fringe actors to expand or enhance their subsystemic status as in the case of Ukraine and the United States, which began as fringe states and slowly moved up to the periphery (see Table 3).

Table 4 summarizes the relative positioning of the five CA states within the subsystemic core, which is less than constant. Based on their participation in the visit network, Kazakhstan with a population of over 15 million was unequivocally the sole leader in all three periods accounting for one-third of the region's total visits distribution. Surprisingly, Uzbekistan, with a population twice the size of its northern neighbor (27 million) was less successful in achieving leadership status. Despite being the most populated country to the south of Russia, self-sufficient in energy and gold, and the world's second largest exporter and fifth largest producer of cotton, Uzbekistan's share of visit distributions was only half the size of Kazakhstan. In interstate relations, Uzbekistan accounted for between 15 and 19 percent of the total visit distributions (see Table 4). This places Uzbekistan in the regional pecking order even lower than its resource-poor neighbors to the west (Kyrgyzstan) and to the south (Tajikistan). To the extent that this is indicated by participation in the visit network, regional leadership is likely to remain a distant reality for Uzbekistan as long as President Karimov's regime remains in power and the country's borders remain relatively closed to international trade and influences. Turkmenistan was the only CA state whose share of visits dropped so low that it resulted in its expulsion from the subsystemic core. Its share of nearly 20 percent of total visits in the early 1990s declined to six percent by the third period. As mentioned above, President Niyazov's isolationist policy figured prominently in this decline. What is remarkable about the two remaining resource-poor CA states is their ability to visit and receive more visitors than their better endowed counterparts.

Overall, the scale of visits among the CA states was limited in the post-Soviet period amounting on average to some 8 percent of total visit networks. By comparison, the CA states visited and received more visitors from Russia (22-37 percent), the Middle East and North Africa (18-33 percent), China (7-15 percent). Even Europe sent and received more visitors from the CA states (6-15 percent) than the total number of visits exchanged among the CA states themselves (see Table 6).

5.2 Fragmented Subsystem (Model II)

In the absence of a highly interactive regional subsystem, we need to reexamine the visits data for possible existence of several smaller-scale local subsystems. One way to test this model is to examine each CA state's visit share with its adjacent neighbors relative to that of geographically distant states (see Table 5). If the CA states are dealing mainly with neighbors, they are likely engaged in smaller local subsystems and thus more support for model II.

Table 5: Fragmented Subsystem (Model II)
visit points/(percent)

	1992–1996		1997–2001		2002–2006	
	Neighbors	World	Neighbors	World	Neighbors	World
Kazakhstan	736 (40.6)	1,076 (59.4)	706 (62.0)	432 (38.0)	1,108 (49.6)	1,124 (50.4)
Kyrgyzstan	344 (37.6)	570 (62.4)	240 (38.8)	378 (61.2)	428 (31.6)	928 (68.4)
Tajikistan	282 (28.9)	694 (71.1)	232 (33.3)	464 (66.7)	372 (28.1)	952 (71.9)
Turkmenistan	468 (38.7)	740 (61.3)	106 (19.3)	442 (80.7)	106 (27.7)	276 (72.3)
Uzbekistan	338 (25.8)	972 (74.2)	218 (34.3)	418 (65.7)	202 (18.9)	868 (81.1)

Note: Numbers in parenthesis reflect the share of visit distribution for each country.

Overall, in all cases but one, interaction with immediate neighbors was offset by an overwhelming interaction with non-neighbors (Table 5). Only Kazakhstan interacted as much with its neighbors as with non-neighbors over the 15 years. The 40 percent representing Kazakhstan's interaction with neighbors in the first period rose to 62 percent by the second period before declining to nearly 50 percent in the third period. This pattern is not surprising considering that two of Kazakhstan's neighbors are Russia and China. Of Kazakhstan's five neighbors, Russia alone captured more than half of the total visit points. Other CA states tended to interact with adjacent neighbors roughly a third of the time. Exceptions were Turkmenistan in the second period and Uzbekistan in the third period where each interacted with neighbors less than 20 percent. Both states' skepticism toward any mechanisms of multilateral interaction and their subsequent policies to remain isolated explain much of the visit patterns.

Another way to check for the presence of a fragmented subsystem in the region is to start with the most centrally located CA state and to examine its relations with neighbors. Uzbekistan is the only country in CA that borders all other CA states. According to the fragmented subsystem model, Uzbekistan is expected to interact more with the four CA states than with non-neighbors. Yet according to the visit patterns, the volume of state visits to or from Uzbekistan was not concentrated between Uzbekistan and its littoral neighbors. In fact, Uzbekistan's interactions with its neighbors were relatively small compared to its interactions with relatively distant states. Not only did Uzbekistan interact less with its neighbors in each five-year interval, its share of interaction with non-CA states increased over time. Out of Uzbekistan's 1,310 total visit points in the first period, its share with immediate neighbors accounted for only 25 percent of total interaction. While this percentage increased to 34 percent in the second period, it dropped to a mere 10 percent by the third period with its visits limited to and from only Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. This was largely due to Uzbekistan's stance to remain uncommitted to any regional frameworks. Chilled relations between Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan also

contributed to the decline in visits during the third period after the Turkmen president accused Uzbekistan of aiding in the assassination attempt against Niyazov's life.

Uzbekistan's global leanings provide weak support for the Dominguez model. It visited and received more nonlocal actors than one might expect. Despite being the most landlocked CA state with at least two countries separating it from the open sea, its relations with adjacent neighbors were limited during the post-Soviet period. Self-sufficiency in energy and as a global producer of cotton and gold, Uzbekistan gained little from interacting with its neighbors. This might explain why during the 1992-1996 period it opted to visit countries far away such as India and Pakistan, Germany and Ukraine, Egypt and Turkey more than it did its immediate neighbors.

Based on information supplied by Table 5, in none of the three periods examined can the relative activity with neighbors be considered sufficiently significant for the presence of relatively autonomous local subsystems within a larger regional subsystem. Even Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, which have a tendency to interact with their adjacent neighbors more than might otherwise be expected, can hardly be called the hub of a separate subsystem containing China, Russia, and Iran. It is more likely that Kazakhstan is operating in a Russia-dominated subsystem, while Turkmenistan seems to be operating in and out of the Iranian subsystem.

5.3 Metropole-centered Subsystem (Model III)

The visits data have so far revealed that a highly interactive subsystem (model I) consisting only of the five CA states does not yet exist. As long as Russia, China, and to some extent Iran, continue to play prominent roles in the international relations of these states, an autonomous subsystem is not likely to emerge in CA any time soon. The visits data have also revealed that several pockets of smaller subsystems (model II) do not adequately characterize the current structure of interstate relations in CA either. While local issues continued to dominate the foreign policies of the CA states, they have consistently sought relatively distant actors to resolve such issues.

Cooley's metropole-centered approach (model III) predicts that Moscow's interaction with the CA states should remain relatively high in the post-Soviet period. By examining the CA network of intergovernmental visits, we should be able to discern whether Russia is more salient to the CA states than the other actors in the region. Additionally, by looking at the visit distributions between Russia and the CA states individually will help distinguish whether the structure of regional interactions is entirely Russia-centered or partially so, with some states being more Russia-centered than others.

For analytical convenience, I have grouped those states actively participating in the CA network of interaction into regional clusters to see whether the Russian bias emerges. Thus, MENA includes all the countries of the Middle East and North Africa, including Turkey; South Asia consists of Pakistan, India, and Afghanistan; Europe includes the states of both West and East Europe; and SEA involves all the countries in Southeast Asia except China. Table 6 summarizes the political importance of Russia for the CA states. Overall, Table 6 suggests that Russia clearly held a prominent position in CA international politics. When viewed together, Russia's interaction with the CA states at any given five-year period accounted for between 22-37 percent of total visits. Except for the first period immediately following the Soviet collapse, visits to and from Russia dominated the network of intergovernmental visits compared to other regional groupings. The early 1990s belonged to the Middle Eastern wing (predominately to Iran and Turkey) with 33 percent of total regional visits. This figure is not surprising given the

urgency with which the newly independent states moved to distance themselves from Russia's control. At the same time, Tehran and Ankara took advantage of the void left by Russia to compete for the region's resources by forming a series of bilateral relations with all the CA states. While the Middle Eastern visits to and emanating from CA gradually waned, they continued to capture a sizable proportion of the regional interaction, with 24 percent in the second half of the 1990s and 18 percent by 2006.

The nature of regional interactions changed in Russia's favor by the mid-1990s, as the CA states began to realize that ties to Russia could not be broken overnight. During this period, Russia-oriented visits constituted over 37 percent of the total visit distribution. Perhaps more indicative of the strength of the Russian bias was the increase in the proportional number of Russia-oriented visits by the late 1990s despite the decrease in the volume of total visits by 41 percent (from 5690 visit points to 3350 visit points). In short, Russia alone was able to capture more than one-third of all CA interstate interactions. In the absence of concrete thresholds for what constitutes "centrism" (i.e., what makes a state a high foreign policy priority for the CA states) one can argue that 37 percent, or even 28 percent, is more "centric-like" than is 10 percent. At the aggregate level, then, when the visits of all the CA states to and from Russia are examined together, Russia emerges as the most active participant in the region's international relations.

Whether all five CA states are equally Russia-centered is an empirical question which requires the disaggregation of the visits data. Russia-oriented tendencies, in other words, must be examined on a country-by-country basis in each five-year period. Table 7 breaks down the visit points by the most interactive dyads. A quick visual inspection makes it clear that the entire region was not equally Russia-oriented. Rather, based on visit networks, only three countries (Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Tajikistan) consistently displayed Russia-centric tendencies throughout the three periods. The visit distributions of Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan were more mixed, with a sizable proportion of their visits taking place between other regional powers, namely Iran, Turkey, and China.

For Kyrgyzstan, Russia was unequivocally the most important partner accounting for 40, 45, and 28 percent of Kyrgyzstan's total visits in each period, respectively. No other country came close to replacing Russia's dominance. China in the second and third periods was the second most active partner, with 20 and 16 percent of Kyrgyz visits, respectively. Nevertheless,

Table 6: Metropole-Centered Subsystem (Model III)
visit points / percent

Region	1992–1996		1997–2001		2002–2006	
MENA	1,88	3	81	2	1,11	1
Russia	1,28	2	1,25	3	1,70	2
South Asia	67	1	8		52	
Europe	67		21		92	1
CA	53		33	1	25	
China	40		43	1	95	1
USA	17		12		35	
Caucuses	16		9		13	
SEA	6		-	-	14	

Table 7: Top Interactive Dyads by Visit Distributions, 1992-2006

Dyads	1992–1996	1997–2001	2002–2006
Russia-Kyrgyzstan	40	45	28
Russia-Kazakhstan	24	35	30
Russia-Tajikistan	21	43	26
Russia-Turkmenistan	12	18	26
Russia-Uzbekistan	10	28	20
<i>Other top interactive dyads</i>			
Iran-Turkmenistan	34	19	28
Iran-Tajikistan	18	12	22
Iran-Kazakhstan	10	*	*
Iran-Uzbekistan	*	18	*
Iran-Kyrgyzstan	*	*	10
Turkey-Turkmenistan	18	34	*
Turkey-Uzbekistan	13	14	*
Turkey-Kazakhstan	12	15	*
Turkey-Kyrgyzstan	*	16	*
China-Kyrgyzstan	12	20	16
China-Kazakhstan	*	15	13
China-Tajikistan	*	11	15
China-Uzbekistan	*	*	18
China-Turkmenistan	*	*	14
Ukraine-Turkmenistan	*	11	32
Uzbek-Tajikistan	*	18	*
Tajik-Uzbekistan	*	16	*

Note: * denotes less than 10 percent of total visits

China still accounted for only half the share of Russia's total visits. As the least militarized of the CA states and apprehensive about its larger neighbors' military might, Kyrgyzstan had little choice but to rely on Russia for protection.

Kazakhstan's visit orientations also remained significantly Russia-centered. In each period following Kazakhstan's independence, visits to and from Russia account for between 24 and 35 percent of Kazakhstan's total visits. This interaction can be explained by at least three factors. First, Kazakhstan shares a 1,500-mile border with Russia, which means that Kazakhstan naturally had to maintain close ties with Russia. Second, due to its sizable Russian population (approximately 30 percent), Kazakhstan was the only Soviet successor state where the titular nationality made up less than half the population. To prevent a massive exodus of Russians, Kazakhstan remained on good terms with its northern neighbor. Third, Kazakhstan heavily depended on Russia for transportation of its massive crude oil reserves to the open seas.

Russia's prominence in Tajikistan during the 1990s could be attributed to the civil war which erupted in 1992 and lasted until a peace settlement was reached in 1997. During this period, Russia was highly instrumental in mediating the peace settlement between the warring factions. Moscow also continues to maintain its 201st Motorized Rifle Division to protect Tajik-

Afghan border and to prevent extremist Islamic groups from Afghanistan seeking a safe haven in the mountains of Tajikistan.

Uzbekistan is an interesting case because, unlike its counterparts in CA, no single state dominated its share of visit distribution. Uzbekistan's orientation toward Russia fluctuated throughout the three time periods. Tashkent began the first years of independence slightly more Turkey-oriented, with Ankara accounting for 13 percent of Uzbekistan's total visits compared to Russia's 10 percent during the same period. Russia gained significance in the mid-1990s, with visits to and from Russia accounting for nearly one-third of Uzbekistan's total visits. By the turn of the century, however, Russia's visits dropped to 20 percent of Uzbekistan's total visits. In the same period, for Uzbekistan, both Russia and China held roughly equal weight with 20 and 18 percent, respectively.

For Turkmenistan, regional powers other than Russia were clearly more important, as indicated by the bottom half of Table 7. In the first time period, 34 percent of Turkmenistan's interactions occurred just across the border with Iran, compared to its 12 percent visits with Russia. Both Iran and Turkmenistan have an economic reason to interact more with each other than other dyads. Landlocked Turkmenistan has large reserves of fossil fuels while Iran has the infrastructure to transport those resources to the world market. Thus, Turkmenistan's relationship with Iran remained significant throughout the three periods. While Russia's share of visits distribution continued to increase from the initial 12 percent to 26 percent by 2006, it failed to catch up to Iran's dominance with 34 percent in the first period, followed by Turkey's dominance of 34 percent in the second period, and Ukraine's dominance of 32 percent in the third period.

The visits data as summarized in Table 7 also suggest that Russia was not the only power in the region seeking prominence in international affairs of CA. While it was the most interactive partner of the three CA states, the same cannot be concluded about its relations with Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Nevertheless, the data provide strong support for the presence of model III.

6. CONCLUSION

Two objectives were pursued in this article. First, the delineation of the Central Asian (CA) subsystemic boundaries was treated as an empirical question. Rather than assuming that the CA borders stop with the five CA states, original data were collected over a 15-year period to identify the main actors involved in the region based on interstate interaction. As a result, 31 actors emerged and their intergovernmental visits were analyzed for the 1992-2006 period. Second, patterns of visit distribution were examined in relation to the three models with a focus on the degree of fit for each. The visit patterns revealed several insights about the post-Soviet CA regional interaction.

Model I: Highly Interactive Subsystem: Based on the visits data and drawing on the definitional components of the regional subsystem model, we can reasonably conclude that 15 years after gaining independence from the Soviet Union, the five CA states have not yet evolved into a highly interactive regional subsystem. A semblance of a regional subsystem emerges only when intra-CA visits are viewed in conjunction with the visits to and from their influential neighbors. A substantial portion of the interaction took place between the five CA states and their geographically proximate neighbors. Two major powers in the region, Russia and China,

continue to exert significant influence in the CA states' international relations. Since more than half of the total intergovernmental visits took place between the five CA states and their largest neighbors, any attempt to delineate subsystemic boundaries of CA has to include at the very minimum Russia and China. The visits data further suggested that based on interaction CA comprised of the five CA states is a weak region. While no analyses of regional delineations of CA can ignore Russia and China, the existence of the two major powers in the region is arguably the cause for the lack of high interaction among the five CA states.

Model II: Fragmented Subsystem: The visits data also revealed that several pockets of smaller subsystems do not accurately characterize the CA region. In the post-Soviet period, except for Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, the CA states are not dealing with immediate neighbors as much as model II might expect. While local issues continue to dominate the foreign policies of the CA states they have consistently sought relatively distant actors with whom to interact. In the cases of Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, it is more likely they are operating in the Russian and Iranian subsystems, respectively. However, since the data are limited to the CA perspective as either visitor or visited, this conclusion remains less than robust.

Model III: Metropole-Centered Subsystem: Of the three models, the visits data provided the most support for the Moscow-centric model. While this finding ends up reaffirming what most of the Central Asianists probably already intuitively knew—that a Moscow-centric system of interactions still obtains in the region¹⁷—this article's contribution to the existing knowledge on the subject is its aspiration to quantify this phenomenon. However, the findings reveal one important caveat: not all five CA states were equally Russia-oriented during the period examined. Only Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan displayed Russia-centered orientations in their intergovernmental visits, with Russia accounting for over one third of the total visits. Curiously, the states that initially tried to move away from Russian hegemony appear to be unevenly moving back to that model. Is this a triumph of geography or destiny of neighborhood? Much seems to depend on the location of the CA states at the cockpit of geopolitical struggle among the larger regional neighbors, and who can offer them the most political security and economic benefits. As long as Moscow continues to intervene in the international affairs of the CA states through economic and military aid in a manner consistent with its perceived interests, these states are not likely to evolve into an autonomous region capable of sustaining itself in the near future. The decision by the Kyrgyz government to evict US forces from its Manas air base—a key post for the reinforcement and supply of the US military in Afghanistan—is an example of how Russia's influence over Kyrgyzstan can shape the latter's relations with the outside world.

In short, on the basis of the visits data, the international relations of the CA states seem to be in flux. It is important to note that while conclusions provided by visits data alone are likely to be preliminary, they have provided a first look at the structure of international relations in CA. Combining the visits data with more research tracking and quantifying non-governmental patterns of interaction (such as economic interactions between non-governmental sectors) will surely give us a richer tableau of interstate interactions. For example, even though Uzbekistan has, for all intents and purposes, closed itself off to many of its neighbors, there is still vibrant trade—both legal and illegal—along its borders with almost all of its neighbors (Turkmenistan being the exception). However, such interactions are notoriously difficult to quantify due to the

¹⁷ Moscow-centricism is particularly evident in the type of television channels people are watching in the region. It is often the Russian channels such as ORT, RTR and NTV, that people are watching, not Iranian or Indian television.

secrecy surrounding such transactions. And until we find a way to measure such informal interactions with reliable data, we can at least look at formal interactions as an initial step to identifying regional boundaries with adequate empirical justifications. Without such justifications, we are left with findings that are not comparable across studies and our knowledge of regional politics remains non-cumulative. Finally, without a concrete grasp of the general patterns of interstate interaction we are unlikely to be able to predict, let alone prevent, the sources of future conflict in this volatile yet strategically significant region of the world.

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