Rustam Burnashev

Securitization of Terrorism in Weak States: The Case of Central Asia

The transformation of the NATO military presence in Afghanistan in 2014, the appropriate use and development of the infrastructure capacity of Central Asia, involvement Central Asian countries in the development of Afghanistan, and possible re-formatting of the Central Asia regionalisation[1] raise questions about some challenges to the security of Central Asian countries coming to the fore such as drug trafficking, weak governance, porous borders, and *terrorism*. In the dominant discourses of Central Asian countries, the challenges from terrorism are seen primarily as external destructive religious (Islamic[2]) forces trying to undermine Muslims' confidence in the states and to destabilize the situation. In fact, securitization of terrorism in Central Asia has less to do with national or state security than regime security. The basis of this understanding of the challenge of terrorism is that all Central Asian countries are weak states. The multitude of power centres compete to acquire and preserve a dominant position for its own discursive and non-discursive practices (Laclau and Mouffe 1985). As each of these centres seeks to improve its own security at others' expense, insecurity spreads in the rest of the system (Job 1992) and the dominant discourse pushes competing discursive practices from discursive space. With increasing limitations on personal and social space as well as public policy discourse some special interest groups lose 'the right and possibility to speak' and get into a situation described as 'security as silence' (Hansen 2000). There are several possible responses to this: (1) non-traditional communication channels built on the networks; (2) taking to the streets, a call to non-discursive actions, for example through extremist protest actions.

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The key feature of the Central Asian states' behaviour in the sphere of security is the securitisation[3] of issues, which can be interpreted not only as threats or challenges to security, but can also have a significantly less intense interpretation – that of being considered as political or social ones. At the same time, threats are usually regarded as being external. For example, in Central Asian countries there is popular the concept of *the New Great Game*[4] that describes the current geopolitical situation in Central Asia as a *competition* between external forces (regional and great powers) for "influence, power, hegemony and profits, often referring to the oil and gas industries and reserves in Central Asia and the Caucasus" (Edwards 2003: 85). Another concept often used to describe the security situation in Central Asia and around her is *the Eurasian Balkans* (Brzezinski 1997: 124).

However, the analysis of the policy of the global powers, as well as regional centres of power shows that Central Asian countries situated into the periphery of the modern system of international relations, in which the interests of regional and great powers are not evident and, consequently, do not intersect each other in any significant way (Burnashev and Chernykh 2005). The presence of great powers in Central Asia is always of a temporary nature. The position of these countries in the respective discursive formations is also peripheral. There is no

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[1] See, for example, the concepts of the *New Silk Road* (Secretary of State 2011) and *Afghanistan's region* (Afghanistan Policy Group 2013).

[2] Islamism is using Islam as a way for social and political mobilization and "the belief that Islam should guide social and political as well as personal life" (Berman 2003: 258).

[3] *Securitisation* is "the discursive process through which an inter-subjective understanding is constructed within a political community to treat something as an existential threat to a valued referent object, and to enable a call for urgent and exceptional measures to deal with the threat" (Buzan and Wæver 2003: 491).

[4] The term *the New Great Game* is an allusion to the so-called Great Game – the 19th century rivalry between the British and Russian Empires for dominance in Central Asia.

doubt that such situation may undergo changes under the influence of a number of factors; for example, in the event of a regime change in one or several Central Asian countries, involving one of the great or regional powers; or in the event of an escalation of relations between Russia and the West. In view of these events, Central Asian countries and, consequently, the issues of security (both international and regional), related to these countries, may become the focus of quite wide discussions. Revealing in this respect is also the growing interest in Central Asia in connection with the contemplated transformation in 2014 of the format of the military presence of NATO countries in Afghanistan. However, these changes in any case will have a temporary character, just as it was at the beginning of the 2000s, when the Anti-terrorist coalition first deployed its forces in Afghanistan.

As another reason underpinning the importance of external threats to the security of Central Asian states is used the point that the international structures, which involve Central Asian states, do not form fully-fledged security systems, and as a result, cannot provide effective security guarantees for these states and for the region as hole. This primarily concerns the quasi-regional formations, such as the Collective Security Treaty Organization and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (Chernykh 2013). However, in reality, Central Asian countries are protected from traditional security threats (mainly related to the possibility of 'territorial disappearance' of these states) by the norms of the modern system of international relations (Job 1992: 12-13; Jackson and Rosberg, 1986). Virtually none of the conflicts in Central Asia and around it has spread beyond the national borders and acquired an interstate dimension. The most revealing examples are:

- the civil war in Tajikistan (1992-1997), which had very limited involvement of other Central Asian countries as peacekeepers;
- the confrontation in Afghanistan between the Taliban movement and the Northern Alliance in 1996-2001, which affected Central Asian countries only in that it caused a limited number of refugees and the deployment of the United Tajik Opposition on the territory of Afghanistan;
- the ethnic conflict between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks in the southern provinces of Kyrgyzstan in June 2010: even Uzbekistan, which had all good reason and the prerequisites to become involved, distanced itself from the conflict, and limited its involvement to temporary sheltering of refugees.

Obviously, the situation is changing influenced by the events around Ukraine and Crimea. These events have shown that not all the actors of the post-Soviet space keep to the norms of modern international law. Russia is inclined to consider this space in terms of spheres of influence. The fundamental problem is the fact that Russia and the West are describing the situation in the two incompatible discourses. For the West, Ukraine's problem is a local or regional conflict that can be resolved with a sincere desire of major players. In this case, for the West it is obvious that any powers (except Russia) do not have any interests to maintain the conflict. Russia describes the conflict as a major geopolitical conflict in which Russia's interests clash with the interests of the West. This perception could spread to Central Asia. Moreover, now any Central Asian country can percept region in terms of spheres of influence. However, in connection with these events Central Asian states once again reaffirmed a commitment to the basic 'Westphalian norms' of international law, such as the inviolability of borders and non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries (Uzbekistan 2014).

Securitization of terrorism in Central Asia as a whole also has a significant binding to external sources, which are positioned as *international terrorism*. Equally important is the *religious (Islamic) character*, which is attached to terrorism in Central Asia. In this, in Central Asian analytical works the terrorist (Islamist) threats and challenges are usually linked to Afghanistan.[5] However, this connection is actually secondary. Groups considered as Islamist and

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[5] The official positions of the Central Asian states are more complicated, see Burnashev (2014).

operating in the Central Asian countries generally lack intrinsic connections with Afghanistan. When the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan focused its activities on the Ferghana Valley (until 2000) it had no ties with Afghan Islamists. After 2001, when the movement got more involved in Afghanistan, its interests moved away from Uzbekistan. *Akramia*, that emerged in the 1990s and involved into the Andijan events in 2005, has a local character and represented almost exclusively in the Ferghana Valley. *Hizb ut-Tahrir,* whose cells operate in the Central Asia, is a global organization. In Kazakhstan, the group *Jund al-Khalifa*, allegedly based in Afghanistan, claimed responsibility for several failed terrorist actions in 2011. The group, however, has a phantom character. After posting a series of statements on the internet in 2011, it has not shown any activity.

Therefore, the specifics of securitisation in Central Asian states are determined by internal factors; above all, by the special positioning of *a referent object* and *a securitising actor*[6]. *The securitizing actors* here are the governments/ regimes having "a relation of singularity and externality, and thus of transcendence, to his principality" (Foucault 1991: 89-90). Accordingly, the purpose of exercising power is to maintain, strengthen and protect *not the state, but the regime*. Regimes in Central Asia have thus become the primary *referent objects* eligible for long-term legitimacy and special protection to be provided through *stability* and *security*. The country's top leadership thus cannot be 'replaceable' even through a democratic process. It cannot be criticized within the framework of a liberal procedure, since liberal-democratic procedure could blur the 'unity' of the nation and the state under the regime.

Dominant discourses in Central Asia describe domestic security incidents as Islamic terrorism, although they often can be explained by other factors not religious. For example, activities of militants in Tajikistan's Rasht valley 2012 can be explained by a harsher regime policy towards members of the former United Tajik Opposition, a warring side in the Civil War (1992-97) and by aggravated inter-clan rivalries. Another example are events in Kazakhstan, such as the suicide bombing on 17th May 2011 inside the Aktobe offices of the National Security Committee and two failed bombing acts on 31st October 2011 in Atyrau, both considering the political context as well as the character of the events, can be explained by an intensification of the struggle for power between several special interest groups rather than Islamism. It is easy to agree with Chausovsky that "any developments on the militant front in the region need to be examined within the context of the internal power struggles and political dynamics of each country in addition to the Islamist angle" (Chausovsky 2012).

Portraying any violent activity ('terrorism') as Islamist justifies stronger political control of all aspects of public life. Securitisation of Islamism in this case is used by regimes as the grounds for tightening control over all areas of public life. The population thus becomes the object of control through the minimization of both personal and social (non-politicized and non-securitized) as well as public policy spheres through securitization. This makes politics in Central Asian countries virtually non-public. The securitization of Islamism in Central Asia is not related so much to national or state security as to regime security. Criticism of Islamism is largely linked to attempts to reduce the variety of ideologies competing with dominant discourse, in other words, to insulate regimes and state power from competition.

The foundations for the securitization of Islamism, i.e. creating a perception that Islamism is primarily a security problem, in Central Asia were set up in the late 1980s-early 1990s. Leaders of the Central Asian states (mainly belonging to former Soviet Communist Party elite) merged the dominant and competing nationalist and statist ideologies together by emphasizing 'elite –

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[6] *Referent objects* are entities which are thought to be existentially threatened, and which, in this discursive field have a legitimate and well-grounded claim to survival; *securitising actors* are actors that declare an existential threat to a referent object, and call for the security action on behalf of it; in doing so, securitising actors lay claim to a special right to use extraordinary means in order to tackle the threat (Buzan et al. 1998: 36).

state – nation-culture /ethnicity' as core values. Thus, former party elites seized the initiative from nationalist movements and pushed them to the periphery of political struggle.

Religious opponents proved more difficult. Islamic ideology questions the legitimacy of secular power. An inclusion of Islamist currents in the dominant political discourse would hence limit the freedom of manoeuvre of the regime. Islamic ideology also opposes nationalism. All this displaced religion from the political space.

Securitization of Islam in Central Asia is much linked to the civil war in Tajikistan (1992-97), where one of the warring sides, primarily the Islamic Renaissance Party, wanted a bigger role for Islam in the country's social and political life.

After that, Islamism became increasingly linked to two types of actors in the region:

- illegal structures operating in the countries of Central Asia with the aim of spreading Islamism as an ideology such as the international and pan-Islamic *Hizb ut-Tahrir* and its local counterparts, such as Uzbekistan's *Akramia*;

- groups that emphasized the use of force to spread Islamism such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan that took part in clashes in 1999 and 2000 in the border zones between Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan.

The activity of these and some other movements were also linked by media and Government agencies to terrorist attacks that took place in some Central Asian countries in the second half of the 1990s - the first half of the 2000s. One example is the alleged links between terrorist attacks in Tashkent 16th September 1999 and Tohir Yuldashev who later became known as a leader of the IMU (Turkiston-Press 1999).

In recent years, both governments, analysts and public opinion tend to associate Islamism with events such as an attack on a military convoy in Tajikistan's Rasht Valley 19th September 2010 (Avesta.Tj 2011; Le Figaro 2010) and a series of acts in Kazakhstan 2011-12[7] (Institute of Political Solution 2011; 2012).

Today's political elites in Central Asia generally see radicalization of Islam as one of the most important challenges that can transform in their countries.

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The key factor determining such a character of securitisation in Central Asian countries is that these countries are marked by weak statehood[8]: relatively low infrastructural capacity and coercive potential, but most importantly, a low level of societal (identification) cohesion (Jackson 2010). Central Asian states are weak, although not to an equal degree. One may generalize by saying that, to a varying extent, states in the region are typified by a low level of social and political cohesion and a narrow social base of support for existing political regimes. As shown in the research by Grzymala-Busse and Jones Luong, "no one single agent has

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[7] First extremist acts in Kazakhstan, considered as terrorism, took place in 2011:
- criminal group activity in Shubarshi and Kenkiyak villages of Aktobe region in July 2011;
- explosions in Atyrau on October 31, 2011;
- events in Taraz on November 12, 2011.
Besides physical acts of extremism, verbal acts should also be mentioned. They include:
- Taliban statement of May 22, 2011, warning Kazakhstan to have serious consequences in case sending troops to support NATO in Afghanistan, as it contradicts the interests of all states;
- information on 150 Kazakhstanis, involved in armed conflict in Syria.
[8] On dividing states into strong and weak; see, for example, Buzan 1991: 96-107. In order to define the security issues of each Central Asian country, it is important not only to recognise it as a weak state, but also that its immediate surroundings, in which its regionalisation takes place, that is Central Asia, is composed of weak states. This, in turn, determines the fact that 'Central Asia' cannot be regarded as an independent regional security complex. It is, at best, an unstructured space fulfilling the functions of an insulator between neighbouring complexes (Burnashev and Chernykh 2006: 336-359).

uniform influence or authority across all state sectors, and state action is neither centralised nor coherent" (2002: 533). There is no consensus in Central Asian countries regarding what the state is; in other words, the state does not exist as a "hegemonic idea" (Migdal 1998: 12). Identification along nation lines is weak here, and is forced to compete with other forms of self-identity. Despite a well-developed state repressive machine (particularly in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan), Central Asian countries are all experiencing one drawback of statehood: their governmental and national bodies are self-sufficient, and serve more as forums in which sub-state actors compete among themselves to ensure their own security and/or to exert influence over the country (Burnashev and Chernykh 2005: 134).

Another key feature of weak states is a lack of generally agreed codes and rules for coexistence and competition in the public discourse. Consequently, there is no continuity of discourse and it is rather fragmented. As a result, the dominant discourse centres not so much on the state and the nation, but the regime. Power structure in weak states is not built on the 'centre-periphery' pattern. The multitude of power centres compete to acquire and preserve a dominant position for its own discursive and non-discursive practices (Laclau and Mouffe 1985). Each special interest group acts as one of many centres of power and seeks to improve only its own security. This produces insecurity in the rest of the system. This situation is described as *the insecurity dilemma* (Job 1992), which is self-sustaining. When a regime attempts to strengthen its security and establish effective state governance, other groups resist and challenge the regimes' authority, thus undermining the institutional basis of the state and security of society as a whole (Job 1992; Jackson 2010: 187).

With increasing limitations on personal and social space as well as public policy discourse, some special interest groups lose 'the right and possibility to speak' and find themselves in the situation characterized as *"security as silence"*, i.e. "a situation where the potential subject of security has no, or limited, possibility of speaking its security problem", when "raising something as a security problem is impossible or might even aggravate the threat" (Hansen 2000: 294, 287). Thus, due to securitisation of the issues of social stability in the dominant discourses of Central Asian countries, the articulation of a number of problems of a societal (identification) character can create additional difficulties for the speaker in question. Possible responses to the loss of the right and possibility to speak are:

-   resorting to non-traditional communication channels built on the networks. One example is religious cells, typical for *Hizb ut-Tahrir* and *Akramia* or the social networks used by Islamist groups, and others, in the Arab Spring;

-   "going onto the streets", resorting to non-discursive actions, for example through extremist protest actions typical for the *Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan*.

Sometimes governments have staged such actions to discredit Islamist groups based on non-violent methods.

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The transcendence of Central Asia regimes provides them with security, but at the same time they also destroy the possibility of reaching consensus on policy issues by distancing both interest groups and the general population from the regime. The structural features of discursive space of Central Asian countries make it likely that challenges from social groups based on identities competing with the regimes' – ethnic, religious, kinship and ideological – will be subject to a securitization process and, simultaneously, be unappreciated (external) for the dominant discourse, i.e. being framed primarily by regimes as a security issue, rather than a legitimate political challenge. The regimes limit the special interest groups' ability to express their positions and, consequently, limit the possibility to hear them, what pushes these groups to non-discursive actions. The lack of a public policy debate either forces groups and movements underground and/ or onto the streets.

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