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Regions, Power, and Conflict

Constrained Capabilities, Hierarchy, and Rivalry

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Chapter 4

In Search of Super Asia

4.1 Introduction

Examinations of¹ regional politics typically assume that the regional level of analysis is compelling because most actors confine much of their behavior to their immediate geographical niche. Many actors may interact only with adjacent states, but since they usually have multiple proximate states, the resulting clusters of interaction can quickly become more complex and multilateral than a simple pair of states with shared borders. Furthermore, complementary and competing security and economic interests characterize these complex interactions alongside varying degrees of hierarchy amongst engaged actors. These regional niches constitute the areas within which most states' politics occur,² so given the potential importance of regional niches, how are we to know which clusters are most appropriate and how they might change over time? Where does one region begin and another end? What should we do with states that participate in more than one regional cluster? What should we do with groups of states called regions by practically everyone but fail to cluster?

Determining the proper contours of regions is a challenge, and no clear consensus appears to exist. However, potentially more challenging is determining how regional spaces change over time and how the evolution of space affects our understanding of both the international politics of that space as well as comparative regionalist research more broadly. We focus on this last question in this chapter, although it overlaps with questions of identifying subsystems and problems surrounding states that participate in multiple regions. Contrary to most regional lists that fix regional

¹ An earlier version of parts of this chapter were first published as Manjeet S. Pardesi, "The Indo-Pacific: A 'New' Region or the Return of History?" *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 74, 2, 2020.

² See, for example, the importance of regional engagement to identifying regional powers in Cline et al. (2011). For the large variety of regional categorizations but with no emerging "gold standard" in empirical analyses of international political phenomena, see Volgy et al. (2017).

boundaries,³ there appears to be a far greater degree of flexibility and movement. In constructivist parlance, regions are intersubjective creations (Ruggie 1999, 225); while physical geography changes slowly, states' political, economic, and strategic behavior can override locational realities.

We explore in this chapter the evolution of a "Super Asia" region, which we designate as those sovereign states from the contemporary "stans" east. This selection is based on the traditional discussion of a possible Super Asia, originating in British economic and strategic interests in the nineteenth century, but also consistent with contemporary dialogue surrounding the American "pivot" toward a single Super Asia as the space that "spans two oceans—the Pacific and the Indian" (Clinton 2011). To evaluate the evolution of this region, we use two complementary tools: a brief review of the foreign policy history of the space over the past two hundred years, and, using available data since 1950, we illustrate the decline and rise in regional cohesion using network analysis to identify politically relevant subgroups (see Chap. 2; Ramey 2012, 2019; Volgy et al. 2017). Underlying this development are global and regional shifts in hierarchy, which we identify descriptively as being an important factor driving the cohesion of all states in the potential Super Asian space. Global major powers' and rising major powers' interests may nudge foreign policies into more ecumenical behavior within the space during some periods while creating deep fragmentation and localization of politics in others.

Some suggest that the internal politics of regions are significantly impacted by the extent to which a space is "porous" or penetrated by the interference of external powers' engagement with regional powers and their neighborhoods (Katzenstein 2005). In this chapter, we offer the possibility that the effects of penetration in a space by external powers extend to the evolving geographic contours of the politically relevant region itself. Furthermore, through this initial exploration, we develop a preliminary evaluation of regional transition over time that might be employed more broadly toward developing theories of regional change globally. As such, this chapter is but one preliminary step in a broader comparative regionalist endeavor that seeks to generate theoretically interesting findings surrounding regions as substantively relevant to our understanding of the international system.

4.2 Whither Super Asia?

How many regions are there in the eastern half of Eurasia, and how does it affect international politics? An uninformed student might hazard the guess that there was something called Asia. A better-informed student might rattle off the following candidates: Northwest Asia, East Asia, Southeast Asia, Central Asia, and South Asia, with an ambiguous South Pacific grouping including Australia and New Zealand lurking over the southern horizon. Surprisingly, the uninformed student may be closer to the truth. There are certainly many references in the literature to the six, and there

are certainly many scholars who have built their careers around understanding these entities as significantly different "areas" for inquiry. However, the compartmentalization of the eastern half of Eurasia into separate regions, we will argue, was a momentary Cold War blip in time. Furthermore, the degree of fragmentation has important consequences for the level, and scope, of international order.

Will Asia's past become its future or will a variety of dynamics in this broad geopolitical space prevent that fragmentation? Before the Cold War and afterward, a Super Asia stretching from the Pacific to India appears to be the more accurate way to envision the geographical arena in which east Eurasian states interact, corresponding with the dominant security thinking of both major and regional powers. It has not always been that way: coalescing in the early nineteenth century, it disappeared for a few decades during the Cold War and now seems to be re-emerging.

Preventing a return to that past lies in competition between regional powers and the penetrating behaviors by external powers, both hindering the development of broader regional order.

Fundamentally, a region in international politics is a cluster of states whose characteristics and interactions are somehow unique from the broader international system. To identify such clusters in a way usable to an analysis of regional cohesion and change, we assess both descriptively and analytically the on and off again presence of a Super Asia region by evaluating the behaviors of states within the potential regional space along two dimensions: (1) to what extent do states in the potential Super Asia space engage one another, creating increasing regional cohesion, and how does such cohesion change over time? And (2) to the extent there are changes in regional cohesion, what possible causes may relate to these changes? We answer these questions descriptively and analytically, providing a narrative analysis of pre-World War II Asian strategic engagement and then complementing a continued narrative discussion of the postwar period with a network analysis of Super Asian interactions from 1950 to 2010.

Regions are neither fixed structures nor ontological truths "out there" in world politics (Lewis and Wigen 1997). While cultural cohesion is slow-moving and may provide the backdrop to some foreign policy behaviors, politically relevant regions should be thought of as processes that emerge as a consequence of the "interaction capacity" of the states concerned, whether economic or security-centric (or perhaps both).⁴ While it is widely accepted that a cultural Asia and an economic Asia have a deep historical presence, we contend that a strategic Asia has been in place for much of the last two centuries because of a sequence of policy decisions constructed to achieve decision-maker goals.

In the ideal, whether arrived at descriptively or analytically, a clear, unquestionable identification of Super Asia would be a group of states that actively engage one another, with significant foreign policy activity (cooperative or conflictual) mutually flowing from one state to another, but not engaging any other outside group. Likewise, there is an absence of Super Asia if there are multiple clusters of states that exist which lack ties with one another, or if some number of states lack clear ties altogether with

³ See those by the Correlates of War, the United States State Department, or the World Bank.

⁴ On the interaction capacity in international systems, see Buzan and Little (2000: 91–96).

potential Super Asia region members. Reality is far more fluid than these simple characterizations, but the extent to which the group of possible Super Asia states more closely resembles one extreme or the other may provide some barometer of its evolution.

The story of the rise following the Second World War, decline in the Cold War, and recent resurgence of Super Asia's contours is one of external interference by major powers alongside the emergence of regional powers. As a general trend, the unchallenged strategic engagement of Britain (through British India) and, more recently the United States, grant the geographic space a broader cohesion, whereas the conflictual divisions developed with the defeat of the Japanese Empire and the segmenting of the space into spheres of influence by competing external major powers divided the region into more localized camps. As China and India continue to rise in the context of America's strategic pivot to Asia, will the cohesiveness of a possible Super Asia continue to solidify, or will internal security challenges, along with the interference of external actors, create new fault lines in the twenty-first century?

4.3 British India, Qing China, and Strategic Asia

While scholars have long recognized the "East Indies" stretching from "Calcutta to Canton" and including "the Indian Ocean and the East Asian littoral, fading into the South China Seas somewhere over what we would call the Western Pacific," a single economic unit (Fichter 2010: 3), the extant literature has ignored the fact that this region also constituted an integrated strategic unit. The origin of this strategic system has its roots in Britain's command over India's finances (through taxation) and manpower (in the British Indian army).⁵ Recent scholarship on Britain's global empire (Darwin 2009: 1, 4) has recognized the crucial role played by the "sub-empire" of India that served to maintain the region's porousness "as the main base from which British interests in Asia could be advanced and defended. Indian soldiers and a British garrison paid for by Indian revenues were the 'strategic reserve' of the British system in Asia."

India was crucial to maintaining British military and economic influence in the Asian space. While British India managed its own foreign affairs, especially as they pertained to Southeast Asia and China, it remained subordinate to the interests of Britain and was the locus of British control extending into Southeast Asia. From 1808 onwards, Indian soldiers participated in every Anglo-Chinese military encounter until the Second World War (Harfield 1990), providing roughly half (10,000) of the troops during the First Opium War (Matzke 2011: 41).

⁵ In contrast, the Ming naval expeditions did not create a single strategic unit here, for there was no meaningful interaction between the Ming Empire and the Delhi Sultanate, the most important power on the subcontinent. Even the later Portuguese thrust into this part of Asia did not create a single strategic system as Portuguese (and European) power remained marginal to Asian strategic affairs until 1750. See Lach (1965, xiii).

Later, with 18,000 troops, India (as a part of the British expeditionary forces) provided the second-largest number of allied troops after Japan to suppress the Boxer Rebellion from 1898 to 1901 (Harfield 1990). Indians also worked in all of Britain's treaty ports in China as policemen, watchmen, and security guards (see Thampi 2005: 140–178). In fact, by the 1930s, Indians were the "fourth largest foreign community" in China behind the Japanese, the Russians, and the British (Markovits, 2000: 59). So crucial was the role of India in British strategy towards China that the noted French Sinologist Louis Dermigny (1964: 781) has argued that Britain dominated India simply to use its resources against China.

As evidence for the relative strategic unity of the region, Qing China realized that the threat the empire faced along all three of its major frontiers—on land in Xinjiang and Tibet, and the maritime frontier in the South China Sea—emanated from British India (Mosca 2013). Writing immediately after the First Opium War, Hsü Chi-Yü, the foremost Qing "barbarian expert", noted that Britain, which consisted merely "of three islands, simply a handful of stones", had suddenly become "rich and strong" because Britain's "power ... lies in the five Indias."⁶ Wei Yuan, another notable Qing "barbarian expert", even conceived of a grand alliance with the western powers in Asia (Russia, America, and France) and with Qing tributaries in Nepal, Burma, Siam, and Annam to destroy the British power in India by land and at sea (Mosca 2013: 287–288). While this alliance remained in the realm of wishful thinking, prominent Chinese leaders continued to think of this region as a single strategic unit even in the early twentieth century.⁷

4.4 Rise of Japan and World War II

Maintaining the preliminary cohesiveness of the region, Japan managed its rise as a regional and then major power through an alliance with Britain. While Russian expansionism was certainly one of the motivators for the Anglo-Japanese alliance in 1902, it had clear implications for the regional space: recognition of the "independence" of China and Britain's position in India. In fact, between 1905 and 1911, Japan even agreed to come to the defense of British India if its security was threatened (Best 2004: 236–248). By 1923, however, the Anglo-Japanese alliance was terminated, ushering in Japanese expansion into China and Southeast Asia and creating the coming strategic theater of the Second World War.⁸ One day after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on 7 December 1941, British India declared war on Japan. Notably, Japanese grand strategy in the Second World War was conceived at the

⁶ Quoted in Teng and Fairbank (1965: 42–43). Since ancient times, the Chinese had divided India into five regions—north, south, east, west, and central.

⁷ See, for example, Sun Zhongshan's argument of the centrality of India to British power (Zhongshan 1994: 161–162).

⁸ While India and Australia were never a part of the Japanese Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere (even as India featured prominently in the cultural "pan-Asia" of Japanese thought—see Bharucha 2006), the Indo-Pacific was the strategic theater of the Second World War in Asia.

Indo-Pacific level and included the separation of India and Australia from Britain as well as assisting Indian independence.⁹ However, Japan was finally defeated in Burma (and in Imphal and Kohima in northeastern India) with Indian resources, and it “was Indian soldiers, civilian laborers and businessmen who made possible the victory of 1945” in this theater (Bayly and Harper 2005).

During this period, the porousness of the region from external major powers began to experience a transition from British economic and security interests toward those of the United States. However, much like Britain, the U.S. continued to view the Super Asian space as a relatively singular geopolitical unit. For example, the Indian Agent-General in Washington stressed during the war the strategic importance of India in the context of the developments in the “Far East” and as a supply base to China in his conversations with American government officials (as opposed to the British who saw a more prominent role for India in the Middle East, see U.S. Department of State 1942: 593–598). Furthermore, between 1942 and 1945, American soldiers trained up to 66,000 Nationalist Chinese troops in Ramgarh, India, who re-entered China by air over the Himalayas, or via the Ledo/Stillwell Road (from northeastern India into southwestern China via Burma) to fight the Japanese (White 1972: 136–137). British India underwrote the cost of training and supplying these soldiers in return for America’s defense and industrial assistance.

4.5 Evaluating Region-ness in the Post-World War II Era

Beginning in the 1950s, data on the capabilities and foreign policy interactions of independent states emerges, allowing for an analytical assessment of relative “region-ness” of Super Asia in addition to a historical account. In so doing, we evaluate regional cohesion in the potential Super Asia space using network measures to descriptively identify the extent of mutual engagement in the foreign policy behaviors of potential Super Asia members and external major powers, consistent with previous evaluations of regions in Chap. 2 and elsewhere (Cline et al. 2011; Rhamey et al. 2014). To identify this engagement, we follow the approach of the Regions of Opportunity and Willingness (ROW) data (Rhamey 2012, 2019; Volgy et al. 2017) outlined in Chap. 2.¹⁰ Table 5.1 provides the total number of clusters, or regions, identified by this method. While other chapters employ region identification by decade from the ROW data, we determine the periods of interest substantively to coincide with periods of American strategic engagement: in the Cold War, before (1950–1960), during (1961–1972), and after the Vietnam conflict (1973–1978); and after the Cold War, before (1990–2000) and after 9/11 (2001–2010).¹¹

⁹ On this Imperial Conference decision of 15 November 1941, see Lebra (2008: 64).

¹⁰ We use the 0 to 14 scale from most confictual to most cooperative for COPDAB and the 20 point –10 to 10 scale from Goldstein (1992) for IDEAS.

¹¹ The gap from 1979 to 1989 is an artifact of events data availability so far in the ROW dataset. COPDAB ends in 1978, and IDEAS begins in 1990.

We also provide a measure of Super Asia’s “regional cohesion”, defined as the proportion of non-isolate states that are members of the largest region in the “stans” east, denoting the extent to which a cohesive, unbroken Super Asian space may exist or if the space is alternatively fragmented across separate unique clusters.¹² The maps in Fig. 4.1 illustrate the progression of the space (See Table 4.1).

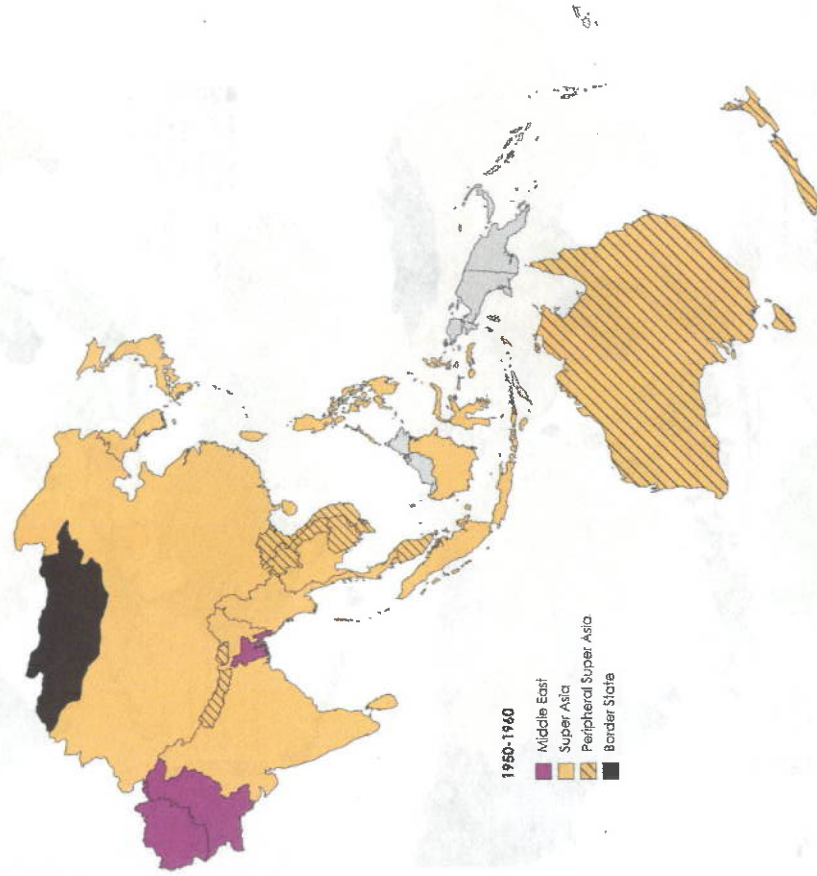


Fig. 4.1 Maps of Super Asia Evolution, 1950–2010¹³

¹² Note, the process of rapid decolonization in the region dramatically expands the number of micro-states, creating a number states with no ties, in later time periods. To prevent these isolates from driving down our assessment of regional cohesion, we drop them from the calculation. The inability of Palau or Nauru to actively engage their most proximate neighbors is not necessarily representative of the extent to which a strategically relevant Super Asia exists to active region members.

¹³ Peripheral states are those that do not actively engage the region in network analysis, but due to contiguity can only be placed in one nearby region. Border states are those that either do not actively engage any region or engage more than one region relatively evenly, and thusly do not cluster with one region or another uniquely. Map made using historicalmapchart.net, governed by an attribution-sharealike 4.0 license (CC BY-SA 4.0).

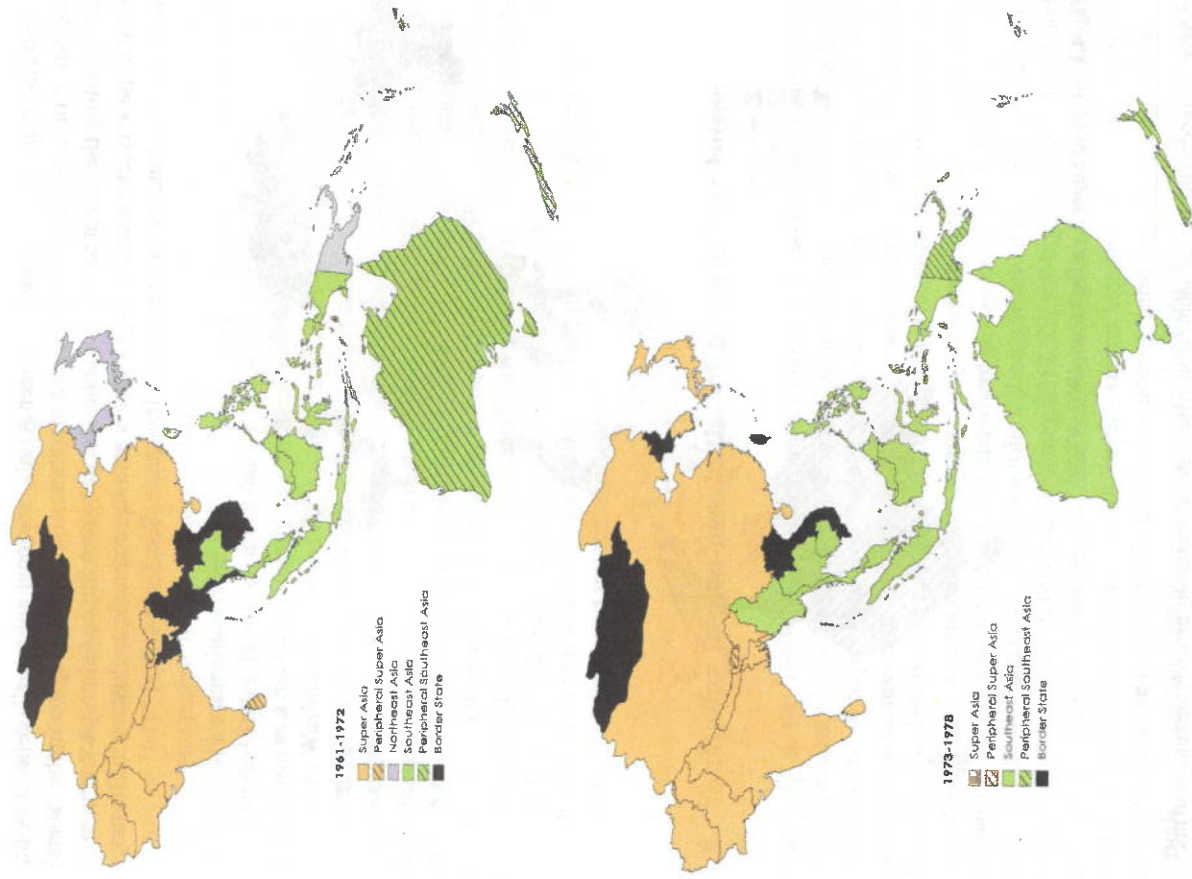


Fig. 4.1 (continued)

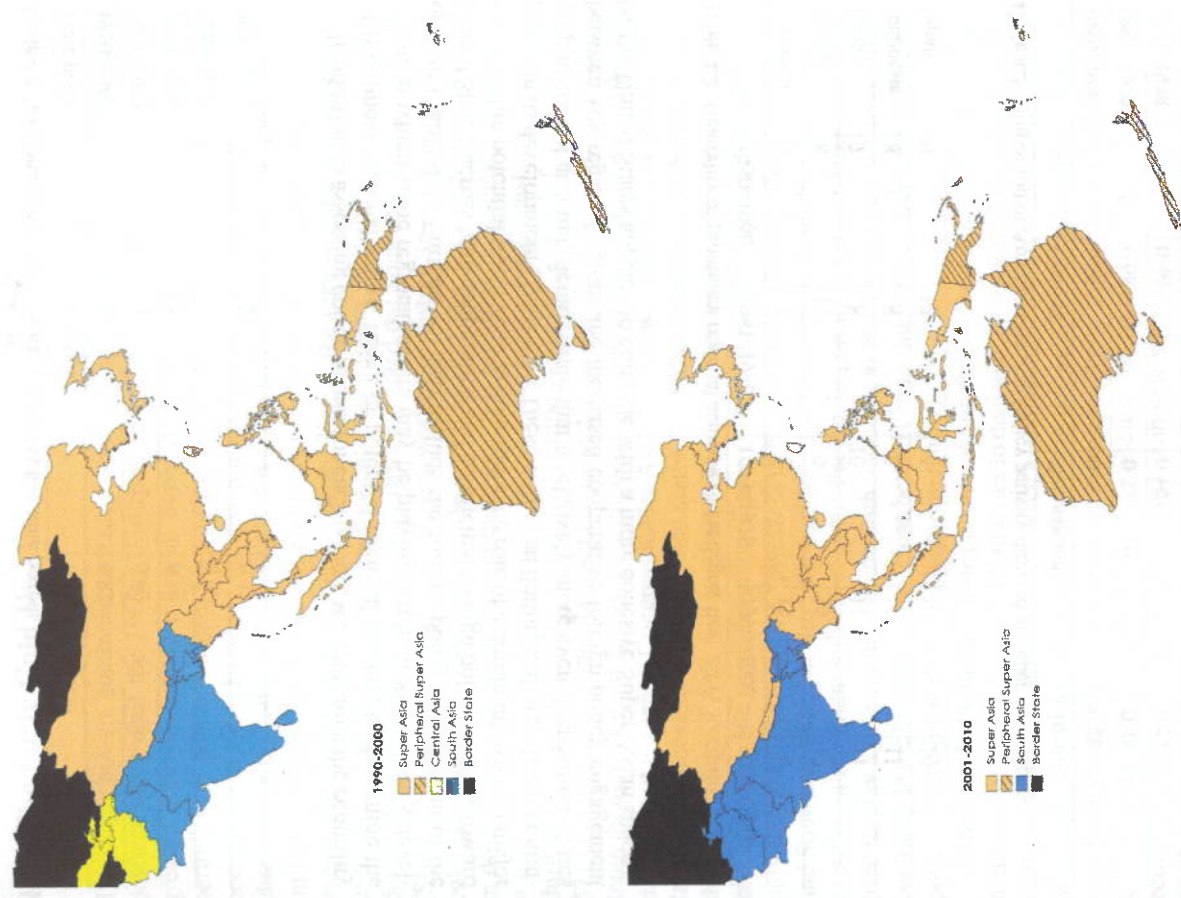


Fig. 4.1 (continued)

Table 4.1 Regional cohesion in Super Asia across five time periods

Time period	Regions	Region cohesion
1950-1960	2	0.82
1961-1972	3	0.40
1973-1978	2	0.53
1990-2000	3	0.60
2001-2010	2	0.71

In addition to assessing cohesiveness for each period, we determine the centrality of prominent regional actors, rising or potential regional powers, to determine the extent to which some regional actors may be playing a role in Super Asia's development (Table 4.2). Further, we also include the foreign policy engagement of the United States, across both cooperation and conflictual foreign policy, flowing toward states within potential Super Asia to determine the role of a dominant external major power in its development (Table 4.3). These analytical findings, alongside our continuing historical account, demonstrate that a relatively more even distribution of ties between key regional actors and increased cooperative foreign policy engagement by the United States appears to coincide with a more cohesive Super Asian space.

Table 4.2 Centrality of prominent regional actors, # of 1st degree ties

	1950-1960	1961-1972	1973-1978	1990-2000	2001-2010
Australia	3	7	7	15	9
China	8	10	9	15	12
India	7	8	10	11	11
Indonesia	8	8	6	11	11
Japan	9	12	5	16	10

Table 4.3 Proportion of American Foreign Policy activity directed at Super Asian Space

	Conflict	Cooperation	Total
1950-1960	0.35	0.27	0.28
1961-1972	0.63	0.33	0.43
1973-1978	0.40	0.19	0.24
1990-2000	0.26	0.30	0.29
2001-2010	0.31	0.36	0.34

4.6 The Early Cold War

The major powers continued to treat Asia as a single strategic unit from the early postwar years until the 1960s. Unsurprisingly, the 1950s represent the period of greatest cohesion among potential Super Asian states across our sixty-year time period, with post-war Japan playing the most central role after the end of Allied occupation in 1952. However, the division between the two superpowers that would characterize the latter half of the Cold War, including decolonization and external military intervention, began to develop as post-World War security concerns gave way to the challenges of global bipolarity. Within the region, India also continued to focus on Asia as a singular strategic entity as a legacy of British strategic policy during World War II. During the war, Britain created the Southeast Asia Command (SEAC)¹⁴ where British-Indian soldiers worked to restore Indo-China to French colonial rule and the East Indies to the Dutch in 1945-46. They were also involved in disarming Japanese soldiers in the region and repatriating Japanese prisoners of war (Prasad 1958). Furthermore, the Indian soldiers of the Raj constituted almost a third of the British Commonwealth Occupation Force in Japan itself (Prasad 1958: 57). Given the important role that it had played in the war, the soon-to-be independent India thought of itself as the “policeman and arsenal of the East” in early 1946, in the words of the senior Congress leader Asaf Ali who was appointed as independent India’s first ambassador to the United States. Soon after independence, Nehru asserted that “the future of Asia will be powerfully determined by the future of India. India becomes more and more the *pivot* of Asia (Gopal 1979: 59). Nehru (1950: 329) not only thought of India as the “pivotal centre ... in terms of [the] defence” of South and Southeast Asia, but also believed (Nehru 1985: 536) that India “would inevitably exercise an important influence” in the Pacific. Importantly, early independent India tried to play a role commensurate with that idea, as evidenced by its relatively high centrality in the broader region, close behind China and Indonesia, despite its foreign policy challenges with its contiguous neighbors.

In January 1949, India’s strategic view of a unified Asia remained consistent, organizing the first conference of Asian states to deal with an Asia-specific issue: Indonesian independence. India not only played a leading diplomatic role, but Indian aircraft also made several sorties in the late 1940s in defiance of the Dutch air blockade. A month following the Conference on Indonesia, India organized a Conference of Commonwealth countries on Burma to discuss that country’s internal security and economic issues, leading to military and economic support (Ton 1963: 150-184). In 1951, India signed friendship treaties with Burma and Indonesia that had security-related undertones, and the friendship treaty signed with the Philippines in 1952 was tantamount to a non-aggression pact. Not surprisingly, China believed that India was in the process of creating an “Asiatic Military Alliance” to check the spread of Communism in Asia (China Digest 1949: 13).

¹⁴ The SEAC was headquartered in Sri Lanka and included India’s Andaman and Nicobar Islands, Australia’s Christmas Island, the not-yet-independent Maldives, and all states that comprise “Southeast Asia” today.

That Asia represented a single strategic unit at this point was also apparent during the creation of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) by the United States in 1954 to check Chinese Communism (Fenton 2012). Apart from the United States, Britain (in Malaya), and France (in Indo-China), the rest of the member states of SEATO were the Indo-Pacific states of Pakistan, Australia, New Zealand, and the Philippines, along with only one state from what we consider Southeast Asia today: Thailand.

The Korean War (1950–53) highlights the porous yet unified nature of a strategic Super Asia during the early part of the Cold War. Given that China and the United States did not have formal diplomatic links, India played the role of an interlocutor between these states during the war. New Delhi also played a leading role at the United Nations during the postwar Korean settlement. Notably, 6000 Indian troops and administrative personnel led by Indian officers landed in South Korea and implemented the exchange of some 23,000 prisoners of war (Heimsath 1956). At the same time, India also signed a separate peace treaty with Japan in 1952 after rejecting the “unequal” San Francisco Peace Treaty (SFPT). New Delhi not only waived all wartime reparations owed by Tokyo, but India also granted Japan the most-favored-nation status, which was refused to Tokyo by the signatories of the SFPT. This treaty heralded Japan’s “return to Asia” after the war as it helped Japan in its negotiations with Burma, Indonesia, and the Philippines, which were then underway (Sato 2005), highlighting the multilateralism of the Super Asia space.

Under Nehru’s leadership, Japan was also invited to the 1955 Bandung Conference, even as Japan became a member of the United Nations only in 1956. Nehru also introduced Communist China, and its Premier Zhou Enlai, to Asia and the world at Bandung. While Sino-Indian tensions were apparent at Bandung itself, Asia was conceived as a single strategic unit until the early 1960s. In fact, the United States feared that an “Eastern Bloc” led by India and China was emerging at Bandung that would be inimical to America’s Cold War priorities (Parker 2006).

4.7 Regional Fragmentation and the Cold War

On the eve of the 1962 Sino-Indian War, the divisions that would characterize the remainder of the Cold War were apparent. India informed China that the eight-year-long 1954 Sino-Indian agreement on Tibet would not be renewed until status quo ante (as perceived by India) was restored along the Sino/Tibetan-Indian border after arguing that this agreement was meant to maintain peace not only between China and India, “but also ... [in] South East Asia” (Indian Ministry of External Affairs, 1961–1962). As shown in Table 4.3, American conflictual behavior in the region spikes, mainly due to the Vietnam War, but also due to heterogeneous engagement with important regional players. For example, during the 1962 Sino-Indian War, the United States provided military assistance to India and even informed the Chinese that it was sending an aircraft carrier to the Bay of Bengal (Hoffman 1990: 196–210). However, India’s disastrous defeat meant that India could no longer provide military

leadership in Southeast Asia, as New Delhi itself needed external assistance to meet the challenge from Beijing. As such, India was eliminated from the ranks of potential Super Asian regional power, resulting in a corresponding deterioration of regional engagement in Southeast Asia. At the same time, Washington’s focus shifted to the Vietnam War while developing disinterest in South Asia due to New Delhi’s strong objections against American intervention. This interplay further exacerbated regional fragmentation as American strategic interests became more narrowly focused on smaller regional subgroups in contradiction to the broader articulation of singular regional space during the 1950s and the British era.

Internally, the emergence of the Association of Southeast Asia in 1961 and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 1967 meant that Asia was finally being “split” into distinct strategic theaters of South Asia, Southeast Asia, and Northeast Asia that we are all too familiar with today. By the 1970s, following American withdrawal from Vietnam, American engagement reaches a low point in the post-Cold War era (Table 4.3). Internally, while India and China remain strongly engaged (Table 4.2), other key players experienced a rapid decline in their interconnectedness within the Super Asian space. Divisions that developed between subgroups were accentuated by the economic stagnation in South and Southeast Asia, while many of the economies in the Northeast took off, and Australia and New Zealand focused their activity extra-regionally. Finally, the division of Asia (and the world) into distinct sub-regions according to America’s Cold War priorities, and the consequent emergence of area studies programs in American academia, consolidated the boundaries of these sub-regions of Asia (Lewis and Wigen 1997: 157–188).

While strategic links between Asia’s sub-regions continue after the 1960s (for instance, the Sino-Pakistani nuclear and missile nexus), these links are quite limited, and this larger strategic Asia did not form a single geopolitical unit for the major powers for the remainder of the Cold War. However, by the end of the Cold War, Asia was in the midst of fundamental economic transformation. China was more than a decade into its dramatic economic reforms when the Cold War ended, while India had just begun the process of embracing the market after shedding its socialist shibboleths. This economic transformation of Asia began blurring the subregional boundaries and is now heralding the re-emergence of Super Asia.

4.8 Re-emergence of Super Asia Following the Cold War

In 1991–92, India launched its “Look East” policy to promote greater economic and strategic integration with its eastern neighbors (Saint-Mezard 2006). At the same time, given its growing dependence on the sea-lanes in the Indian Ocean for energy resources from the Persian Gulf to fuel its rapidly growing economy, General Zhao Nanqi, the director of the Chinese Academy of Military Sciences, asserted in 1993 that China “was not prepared to let the Indian Ocean become India’s Ocean” (quoted in Roy 1998: 170). By the end of the 1990s, the Japanese Prime Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto was arguing that Japan did not want to see “China and India... struggle for

hegemony in Asia ... in the twenty-first century" (quoted in Togo 2007: 89). Thus, the 1990s demonstrate a peak in both the interconnectedness of region members (Table 4.1) and the centrality of Asia's leading powers (Table 4.2), laying the foundations for Super Asia's re-emergence.

China and India's maritime interests are already well-known in the literature on the Indo-Pacific.¹⁵ For example, China worries about its vulnerability in the Malacca Strait, through which more than 80% of its oil imports pass. More recently, China announced a \$1.6 billion fund in support of its "maritime silk route" project to build commercial ports and enhance connectivity with Southeast Asia and the countries of the Indian Ocean region (Krishnan 2014). More than half of India's total foreign trade passes through the Strait of Malacca as well. India's largest overseas offshore oil and gas fields in Russia's Sakhalin region travel through the South China Sea before passing through the Strait of Malacca to supply India (Dutta 2006). At the same time, India is also engaged in hydrocarbon exploration in the South China Sea: a region disputed with China (Bhaumik 2013). Naturally, Asia's rising giants will invest in their naval and air capabilities in tandem with their growing commercial and energy interests, as all other great powers have in the past.

However, many of Asia's emerging trade and energy corridors are not purely maritime routes. China has cultivated ties with Myanmar and Pakistan in an attempt to reduce its Malacca Dilemma.¹⁶ A natural gas pipeline connecting Yunnan and other parts of southwestern China with Kyaukpau on the western coast of Myanmar became fully operational in late 2013 (BBC News 2013). Similarly, the Karakoram Highway already connects China's Xinjiang with Pakistan's Gilgit-Baltistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa regions, and plans are underway to connect the highway to the Pakistani port city Gwadar near the mouth of the Persian Gulf. Work has also begun connecting southern China with Singapore via several countries in Southeast Asia by a high-speed rail network to ease the flow of goods and people between these countries (People's Daily 2011). China is also planning on connecting Xinjiang with Gwadar via a rail link (Ng 2013). This Chinese power projection into Central and South Asia leads to conflict with growing Indian interests in the space (Rhamey 2020).

For its part, India is also promoting land connectivity with Southeast Asia. A highway linking northeast India with Thailand via Myanmar has been developed (Reddy 2013), and initial plans are also underway to extend this highway to Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam (Livemint 2014). Another ambitious project includes the combination of a maritime corridor from southern India to Dawei in Myanmar and a land corridor from there into Thailand (Mohan 2012a). Both Japan and United States are also promoting better connectivity between India and Southeast Asia (Bagchi 2014). In a significant recent development, India and China have also begun to explore

¹⁵ See, for instance, Mohan (2012b).

¹⁶ While ameliorating China's Malacca Dilemma, China's approach towards Myanmar and Pakistan does not decrease the importance of the Indian Ocean as oil and gas will still need to be shipped via the (greater) Indian Ocean sea lanes to the ports of these countries before being transported overland to China.

overland connectivity through Myanmar and Bangladesh through an initiative that will significantly impact their economies if successfully implemented (Krishnan 2013).

Despite these converging land and naval connections, in the most recent time periods, India has carved out its own space within Asia. However, China has thus far managed to retain the countries of neighboring Southeast Asia within its region through economic and security engagement. For example, the Chinese army has been undergoing intense training near the Myanmar-China border since 2013 due to the ongoing ethnic conflict between Myanmar's government and the Kachin state. While the possibility of the ethnic conflict spilling over into China is real, the gas pipeline to China also passes through this state (Xin and Li 2012; Wong 2013).

These potential territorial conflicts highlight both the re-integration of Super Asia as well as some of the emerging fault lines. Unlike the unified security perspective of the British in the nineteenth century, the high-level engagement between China and India in the most recent time period illustrates repeated conflictual behavior, though sufficiently isolated that South and East Asia no longer cluster in the same space. For example, the Chinese military incursion into Ladakh in Indian-Kashmir in 2013 highlights the continued strategic salience of the world's longest unmarked border. Indian strategists have already begun to debate whether it is in their interests to respond to China's intrusions along their common land frontiers by bolstering India's naval presence on the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, given that India enjoys an edge over China around the Malacca Strait (Joshi 2013).

The Tibet-factor also affects the contours of strategic Asia and highlights the continental dimensions of military power. Indeed, Tibet may present something of the dividing line that currently prevents the coalescence of South and East Asia. Any Chinese military activity in Tibet has consequences for Sino-Indian relations. The China-India border is essentially the Tibet-India border, because the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan government-in-exile reside in India along with thousands of Tibetan refugees. However, given that most of South and Southeast Asia's major rivers (such as the Brahmaputra, Mekong, and Salween) originate in Tibet and that China has plans to build dams and divert these water resources, it has been argued that China's growing military infrastructure in Tibet "complicate[s] the planning of other water claimants downstream, in much the same way as more robust PLA [People's Liberation Army] presence in the disputed areas of the East and the South China Sea raise concerns by other disputants" (Kamphausen 2012).

We have argued that except for the last three decades of the Cold War, Asia's three subregions (South, Southeast, and Northeast Asia) and two oceans (Indian and Western Pacific) have predominantly constituted a single strategic unit for close to two centuries. This broader strategic Asia that emerged as a consequence of sustained politico-military interactions between its constituent units was a continental as well as a maritime system. Similarly, the Super Asia reconstituting itself since the end of the Cold War is re-emerging due to the growing politico-military processes. As such, Super Asia is hardly "new" or "unnatural"; in fact, it represents the return of history. While fault lines have emerged between a region with India in the south and a much larger Asia-Pacific space with China in the east, we would not be surprised if future

updating of the regions data demonstrates a continued return to a singular Super Asia. Recent events such as the Trans-Pacific Partnership and American nuclear submarine sales to Australia suggest that a singular strategic orientation continues to evolve.

However, while the United States plays an important role in maintaining the process of coalescence in Super Asia, just as it played a pivotal role in the fragmentation of the 1960s and 70s, it cannot alone define the strategic contours of Asia. Competition between prominent regional actors that are relatively central to the broader network is key to defining the space.¹⁷ Japan dominated the position of centrality in both the early time periods (Table 4.2), partly due to the United States' backing but also in terms of its overall economic development status at the end of the Cold War. China, however, gained the spot of most central state in the 2001–2010 time period, albeit with a relatively evenly distributed engagement with Japan, India, Indonesia, and Australia.

Rising regional and major powers China and India are at the forefront of the processes that are redefining strategic Asia, albeit remaining within their distinct areas of influence for the time being, as Japan, Asia's other leading power, is already thinking in Super Asia terms as it tries to emerge as a "normal" military power. Furthermore, consistent with previous discussion of the rising economic and security integration over land and sea, this Chinese-Japanese cluster is making in-roads into key historical neighbors of India—Nepal and Myanmar. The reorientation of Japan toward the region is a departure from its previous, extra-regional focus during the Cold War, and it will be interesting to see if Australia likewise follows suit.¹⁸ In particular, Japanese policymakers have shown an interest in developing strategic links with other regional democracies—the United States, Australia, and India—in the form of a "democratic security diamond" to hedge against the rise of China (Abe 2012). Asia's medium powers, such as Australia (Australian Department of Defense 2013) and Indonesia (Natalegawa 2013), are either already making official statements using the term "Indo-Pacific" or are thinking in terms of a broader strategic Super Asia even when not using this term. For example, Singapore has brought India into its idea of strategic Asia out of balance-of-power considerations (Goh 2005), while South Korea had also begun to think in terms of a larger Asia because of its growing energy needs, the North Korea-Pakistan nuclear axis, and because it plans to play a more proactive international role (Chung 2011).

¹⁷ China and Japan are not the only important players in the space, though they are most consistently at the core of the space across all time periods. During most of the Cold War, Australia is completely disengaged and only tangentially engaged in the latter period (and even so, not consistently). Indonesia experiences similar peripheral behaviors, albeit less detached, and India, while important, emerges at the head of a separate South Asian subgroup in the post-Cold War period.

¹⁸ A recent analysis of regional foreign policy engagement by regional and major powers found that Japan was unique as a major power in not engaging in significant activity toward its regional space apart from the international system (Cline et al. 2011).

4.9 Conclusions: Looking Forward

An important contributing factor to regional development appears to be the rise of regional powers and the relative porousness of the region(s) to external major power interference. Rather than taking the region as fixed and looking at state or dyadic behavior (for instance, Solingen 2007), we can evaluate the impact of the broader multilateral behaviors described here on the overall stability, conflict, organization, and architecture that may emerge within the regional space. Applying similar criteria to other regions, whether the Middle East or Europe, and then comparing them to the development of Super Asia may provide insights into the requisite causal factors necessary for attaining certain regional outcomes. As with Super Asia, those implications may be due either to its coalescence or fragmentation. While comparison of regions, independent of identification method, has been of rising interest in IR research, greater attention to the formation of multilateral behaviors over time—or how regions rise and fall—is likely to be a fruitful avenue for future research and, possibly, of great import to the future of the international system.

To the extent a Super Asia is emerging, the evolutionary process still has some way to go. While during no time period does a single Super Asia completely cover the examined space, the closest periods to the ideal are in the 1950s and 2000s (Table 4.1, Fig. 4.1), where the number of regions is limited to only 2, and the proportion of active states in the largest region is at its peak. Though the levels of regional cohesion have not returned to those observed in the first full decade of the Cold War, the latest time period shows significantly higher levels of regional cohesion than any point since, with 71% of all region members falling within the largest regional cluster, which includes China and Japan. However, the remaining 29% of actively engaged states appear within a separate South Asian region that includes India, the most notable difference from the more encompassing regional space from the 1950s, which included all engaged states except for Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Interesting is the behavior of Australia. While loosely involved in the most recent time period in a very peripheral sense, it fails to engage the proximate clique, including China and Japan. While Australia does have ties to other states in the area, it does not have ties uniquely apart from others in the international system, given the relatively dramatic degree of Australian extra-regional foreign policy activity. The result is that Australia remains somewhat torn between the local space and the broader system, not residing within the identified East Asian clique in a majority of years in the ten-year period.

Overall, American conflict appears to correspond with a decrease in the observed levels of regional cohesion. Notably, the most fragmented periods correspond with American military intervention in Southeast Asia. Following the Cold War, where American foreign policy takes on a relatively more cooperative nature, the levels of regional cohesion appear to be somewhat less than the peak of the Cold War, with the 2001–2010 period reaching a cooperative maximum.

Although the current South and East China Seas disputes make the region seem uniquely maritime in its strategic orientation, the two regional powers remain strategically focused on their more proximate naval spaces (India in the Strait of Malacca and China in the South China Sea). This division likely fuels the continued fault lines between South and East Asia in the 2000s. While a full-fledged continental system already exists, a full-fledged maritime system is still emerging. The United States is the only naval power capable of roaming the Western Pacific and the Indian Oceans at will.

Region-making is an avowedly subjective enterprise. However, discerning the contours of the regions that have been made and are in the process of emerging (or re-emerging) need not be equally subjective. We have made a case for the existence of a Super Asian region for most of the last 200 years. Simultaneously, this initial attempt at describing the behaviors of states in the Super Asian geographic space illustrates both the potential of broad regional organization led by a rising China and India and the complexity of parsing out subgroup behaviors and their potential causes. As a substantively interesting level of analysis unto itself, regional coalescence and disintegration have many possible implications for international politics, from the conflict behaviors of states (Volgy et al. 2018), to the development of regional architecture (Powers and Goertz 2011), to the rise and fall of major powers (Volgy et al. 2014). Identifying these subgroups and analyzing their change over time has the potential to supplement existing dyadic and systemic analyses while also more appropriately accounting for the inherent geographic clustering present in international politics.

As for empirically confirming Super Asia's emergence, our verdict is a qualified "maybe". While the initial 1950s description of a unique, large, unified space acting uniquely from the broader international system does appear to be present, the emergence of such a space is occurring to a greater extent than in the 1990s or most of the Cold War; it still has some way to go before being a clear, unqualified reality. First, the most obvious division in the space is between India and China, and if that division continues, it may expand regional fragmentation into the Southeast Asian space as India seeks a more global role. While China's rise is perhaps the most likely driving force behind regional coalescence, challenges from within (Japan) and without (India, United States), as well as continued local hesitance (Australia), may hinder Super Asia's development in the near future.

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Chapter 5

Is There a Central Asia and Does It Matter?

5.1 Introduction

Where exactly¹ is Central Asia? 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 Central Asian states, but is physically on the European continent, part of Central Asia? What about China's eastern province of Xinjiang, which is more Turkophone than Chinese? And there is also the case of Afghanistan, which, though right in the middle of any geographic delimitation of Central Asia, 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 Central Asia scholar (Starr 1997: 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 Central Asia policy. The State Department groups the five former Soviet states of Central Asia 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.²

Why have both policymakers and social scientists not bothered with identifying Central Asia's boundaries? One explanation, as William Zartman has pointed out

¹ This chapter updates an earlier version that appeared as of this work appeared as Leila Zakhirova, "Is There a Central Asia? State Visits and Empirical Delineation of the Region's Boundaries," *The Review of Regional Studies*, 42, 1 (2012): 25–50. We thank three remarkable students who have assisted with data collection. It would not have been possible to make the revisions without the talents and professionalism of Alexandra Trudeau and Brayden Sorenson and the number-loving-pivot-table-genius Hannah Gilsdorf who gave up her summer in order to prepare the dataset for analysis, including generating new tables and updating old data.

² This quote from 2005 about the success in reforming Afghanistan does not take into consideration what followed in subsequent years which were less than successful. Sometimes it pays to wait longer to make such pronouncements.

back in the heyday of the regional studies movement in the 1960s, is that generally “regions tend to be assumed first and identified later” (as cited in Thompson 1981a, p. 213). Another view is that within Central Asia, 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 Central Asian states have not been fully or systematically studied. Thus, three 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 Central Asian states interact at the regional level to resolve various regional problems. Yet a third explanation is that it doesn’t matter what the boundaries really are. We disagree with this view because identifying the boundaries of Central Asia provides useful information about the internal nature of regional international relations that can help us assess the way the Central Asian 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.

The aim of this study is to minimize the distinctions between various ideas of what Central Asia is. In order to stop assuming Central Asia, this study seeks to make a systematic attempt to identify it using concrete data.³ The analysis begins with the commonly assumed boundaries of Central Asia as comprised of the five former republics of the Soviet Union’s southern tier and identify its boundaries based on interstate interaction.⁴ 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).

Whether the five Central Asian states constitute a single region or not is an empirical question. One way to delineate the geographic boundaries of Central Asia is to use a type of interaction data: intergovernmental visits.⁵ 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 relations 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 states for the purpose of obtaining assistance, bargaining leverage, and in some cases compliance (Thompson 1981a). Government

³ The first systematic treatment of Central Asia as a regional unit is found in Buzan and Waever (2003). They describe Central Asia as a distinct regional *subcomplex* within a greater Russian security complex. However, Buzan and Waever’s definition of Central Asia 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 Central Asian states constitute “a loose securitycomplex”.

⁴ Specifically, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan.

⁵ 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).

representatives, however, do not tend to visit all of their counterparts. It is this selectivity which 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 can also 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 regional bloc exists. In other words, is there a Central Asia? If so, what does it look like? More specifically, to what extent are the foreign policies of the Central Asian 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 this study is straightforward. First, the analysis will begin with a brief background on regional subsystems. Second, several theoretical approaches will be discussed about the type of structures one might expect to find in Central Asia. Third, the strengths and limitations of the data will be assessed. The final section will 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 Central Asia.

5.2 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; Sigler 1969; Cantori and Spiegel 1969; 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 1997). 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.⁶ 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 (see for example, Buzan 1997; Lake and Morgan 1997; Buzan and Waever 2003; Salloukh and Brynner 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.⁷

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

⁶ 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 Brynner (2004), Kelly (2007), Allison (2008), Collins (2009), and Powers and Goertz (2011).

⁷ For a critique of the earlier works on regional subsystems, see Boals (1973).

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.

5.3 Structural Approaches

There are a number of prevailing abstract approaches about the type of structures one might expect to find in Central Asia; however, they are not all mutually exclusive. Rather, they are iterative in the sense that first, what is the extent of the interaction in the region: is it high, medium, or low (model I); if the interaction is low, what is 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). Each model will be discussed separately.

Model I: The structure of international relations among the five Central Asian states could be high, medium, or low; however, what volume of interaction deserves the 'high' mark versus 'low' is an arbitrary 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 Central Asian states? To deal with these questions objectively, the obvious solution is to compare the intra-Central Asian 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 Central Asian interaction. Thus, in the absence of comparable information, one is forced to adopt a minimum threshold by which Central Asian intraregional activity can be measured. One straightforward threshold is to view the distribution of state visits in terms of percentages (75, 50, and 25%). While such thresholds are often arbitrary, they do help organize big datasets in such a way as to reveal important patterns of activity. For example, 75% of interaction is greater than 50% and if more than 50% of the Central Asian activity is intra-regional as opposed to extra-regional, it is then possible to argue that Central Asia constitutes a highly interactive regional subsystem, providing support for 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 1996). 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.⁸ Western Europe, ASEAN, and the Mashriq region⁹ 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

⁸ The number of regions that can satisfy high thresholds of interactive autonomy is small.

⁹ 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.

highly interactive subsystem emerging in the region, the Central Asian 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 Central Asian 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 Central Asian 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 Caucasus (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.¹⁰

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 Central Asian states over natural resources such as water and energy will only escalate and could possibly destabilize the region in the future.

¹⁰ For a good summary of Dominguez's argument, see Pickering and Thompson (1998).

Model III: Fragmentation is not the only structural form that regions with low interaction activity can take. An alternative approach is 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 Central Asian states, to Moscow) is likely to characterize the initial stage of regional interactions in post-Soviet Central Asia. 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. At the same time, 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, it makes sense for the post-colonial system to maintain 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 situation 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, in short, is a metropole-centered region. If model III is in operation, the Central Asian 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 Central Asian 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 reducing Moscow's influence. 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 Central Asia, China, Iran, Turkey and to some extent the United States could play this role.

Since systematic empirical analysis regarding all five Central Asian states remains rare, 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 Central Asia. Whether the Central Asian 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 policies.

5.4 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 (Modelski 1968; Brams 1969; Christopherson 1976; Hughes and Volgy 1970; Pearson 1970; Kegley and Wittkopf 1976; Thompson and Modelski 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, three particular databases are used to compile the data: (1) Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS), (2) World News Connection (WNC), and (3) Access World News (AWN).¹¹ 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 fully searchable source that offers daily 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 Central Asia, 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 Central Asian states.

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 Central Asian states emerge as a subsystem. Unfortunately, the existing datasets do not all cover the same time frame in question (namely the 1992–2021 period), nor do they contain complete information on the Central Asian states.¹² Another way to assess the boundaries of Central Asia is to start inductively with the five Central

¹¹ *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. But as with any government funded initiatives, they often get discontinued or morph into something else. Open access to the *FBIS* got discontinued in 1996. Or rather it morphed into *World News Connection*, another open source for foreign news translated into English. It, too, eventually got discontinued in 2013. Thus, data after 2013 came exclusively from *Access World News* which covers news from around the world.

¹² Gary King’s events data (King and Lowe, 2003) is an example of a dataset that lacks information on Central Asian states.

Asian states and then to look at all their interstate interactions with every actor in the world over time. By looking at a region this way, we should be able to discern how well the five Central Asian 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.¹³ Using dyads may potentially blur the distinction between local interactions and the more comprehensive regional interactions among the Central Asian 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 Central Asian states as either visitor or visited.

Third, the timeframe of this study covers the three decades (1992–2021) following the collapse of the USSR. Looking at 30 years’ worth of data rather than focusing on certain points in time help reveal general structural patterns of interaction over time. Furthermore, this period is aggregated into ten-year intervals (i.e., 1992–2001, 2002–2011, and 2012–2021).¹⁴ 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, in the early years immediately following independence, the Central Asian 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 Central Asian 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 of Central Asian state’s foreign policy formulations.¹⁵ At the same time, the region attracted little attention from global powers that were hesitant to commit resources.

¹³ 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).

¹⁴ The 2012–2021 period requires further clarification. Covid-19 certainly hampered intergovernmental visits in 2020 and to a lesser extent in 2021. In the midst of the pandemic most state visits moved online. As a result, there were only 78 intergovernmental visits in 2020. By comparison, there were 254 visits in 2019 and 197 visits in 2018. Virtual visits were excluded from the final dataset simply because the three databases used to collect the data provided uneven or incomplete coverage of online meetings. Thus, including partial data introduced just as much bias as leaving them out altogether. At least, focusing the analysis only on physical intergovernmental visits made data analysis comparable across the three time intervals. The data for 2021 were limited to the first half of the year with a total of 117 state visits recorded. It is conceivable that this number could have been higher (by how much it’s not clear) but at the time of the writing of this chapter, it was not possible to include the data for the entire year.

¹⁵ Olcott (1996) provides a detailed discussion of each Central Asian state’s foreign policy priorities during the early 1990s.

Central Asia was not considered part of the 'developing world' like sub-Saharan Africa, nor the source of security threats like the Middle East, nor of global economic importance like East Asia. International oil and gas companies moved more quickly, but their interest was naturally narrow (Cooley and Heathershaw 2017, 5-6).

By the mid-1990s, however, the leaders of the Central Asian 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 overhyped potential of the region's oil and gas reserves rivaling those of the Persian Gulf, and the consolidation of super-presidential systems¹⁶ 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 Central Asian 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 Central Asia, which became "securitized as a critical front in the Global War on Terrorism" (Cooley and Heathershaw 2017, 5-6). The US "war on terror" has served to revitalize regional alliances with Russia while simultaneously strengthening bilateral relations with the United States. As such, it serves as a good starting point for the second decade of state visits. This decade includes significant political events such as the death of Turkmenistan's president in 2006, the ousting of Kyrgyzstan's 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 structural influences in the region, one could expect more inter-governmental visits in this period than during the previous decade.

5.4.1 Data Restrictions

The analysis of intergovernmental networks is restricted to visits to and from three groups of Central Asian government officials: presidents, prime ministers, and cabinet-level ministers. The deputies of these officials were also included because

¹⁶ 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).

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 by a minister of culture, the following weight scale is applied to the data: a visit involving a head of government (in some states it is the president, in others, it is the prime minister) is scored as ten visit points; a visit by a prime minister (only if he/she is second in command) and or vice president is scored as eight visit points; a visit by a foreign minister or a defense minister is scored as six visit points; a visit by any cabinet level minister (other than foreign and defense ministers) is scored as four visit points; and a visit by deputies of prime ministers or cabinet level ministers is given two visit points.

Based on the weighted scale, all visits in the sample are further subjected to three additional 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.¹⁷ 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 to and from Central Asia are of equal structural interest, they are further restricted to a minimal threshold of one percent of total visit points for any given decade. 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, for example. Thus, any state with less than one percent of the total visit points in a ten-year period is dropped from the 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 country, 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 interactions. For example, a meeting of a hundred foreign ministers

¹⁷ For example, news reports emanating from the Middle East usually list all the important ranking officials, but reports from Russia focus exclusively on whoever is heading the delegation.

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 Central Asian foreign ministers in the region.

5.5 Empirical Findings and Analysis

The final dataset consists of 34 active participants in the Central Asia visit networks. For the purpose of analysis, the paired interactions of each dyad are summed up within each ten-year period so that each unique dyad represents the total number of interactions. For example, if Kazakhstan visited Russia 10 times during the 1992–2001 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 to focus the analysis on the regularity and intensity of interactions between a dyad. Table 5.1 lists the participants in the Central Asia network for each ten-year period listing states in the order of states with the highest number of visits on top to states with the lowest number of visits toward the bottom. As expected, all the Central Asian states are part of the subsystem since the visits data are restricted to the Central Asian states as visitor or visited. However, not all five Central Asian states (in bold in Table 5.1) are as active in the region. At the high end, Kazakhstan is much more interactive than Turkmenistan, for example.

The most obvious feature of Table 5.1 is that the network size in each of the ten-year period stayed relatively constant. The events of 9/11 and the subsequent invasion of Afghanistan generated significant number of state visits in the region over the past thirty years. The establishment of U.S. military bases in Central Asia 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 Central Asian states—contributed to the overall regional interaction.

A second feature of particular pertinence is that major powers Russia and China (in *italics*), and mid-level powers Turkey and Iran (in *italics*), remain prominent in each decade. They are in the top nine most interactive participants in the Central Asia visit network. To what extent the actors involved in the Central Asia 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.

Table 5.1 Principal participants in the Central Asian visit networks, 1992–2021 (Central Asian states in bold)

(1992–2001)	(2002–2011)	(2012–2021)
Kazakhstan	Kazakhstan	Kazakhstan
Uzbekistan	<i>Russia</i>	Uzbekistan
<i>Russia</i>	Kyrgyzstan	Kyrgyzstan
Turkmenistan	Tajikistan	Turkmenistan
Kyrgyzstan	Uzbekistan	Tajikistan
Tajikistan	Turkmenistan	<i>Russia</i>
<i>Iran</i>	<i>China</i>	<i>China</i>
<i>Turkey</i>	<i>Iran</i>	<i>Turkey</i>
<i>China</i>	<i>Turkey</i>	<i>Iran</i>
United States	United States	India
Ukraine	Ukraine	Azerbaijan
Pakistan	Afghanistan	Afghanistan
India	India	Pakistan
Germany	Azerbaijan	UAE
Azerbaijan	South Korea	United States
Afghanistan	France	Belarus
France	Pakistan	South Korea
Georgia	Germany	Armenia
Belarus	Poland	Germany
Israel	Belarus	Japan
United Kingdom	Japan	Qatar
Armenia	Georgia	Saudi Arabia
Japan	Malaysia	Ukraine
Czech Republic	Egypt	Georgia
Egypt		Hungary
Lithuania		Malaysia
		Latvia
26 States	24 States	27 States

Source Data compiled using news reports from the *Foreign Broadcast Information Service*, *World News Connection* and *Access World News* databases for the years in question

5.5.1 Highly Interactive Subsystem (Model I)

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

Table 5.2 Highly interactive subsystem model

Years	Intra-Central Asian*		Neighbors		World		Total Visit Points
	Visit Points	%	Visit Points	%	Visit Points	%	
1992–2001	890	8.2	3918	35.9	6102	55.9	10,910
2002–2011	630	6.5	3950	41.0	5063	52.5	9643
2012–2021	1616	14.6	3114	28.1	6368	57.4	11,098

*In this table, three categories of bilateral visits are used: intra-Central Asian, neighbors, and the rest of the world. The intra-Central Asian category refers to the interactions among the five Central Asian states. A state is considered ‘neighbor’ if it shares a land border with one of the Central Asian states; thus, Russia, China, Iran, and Afghanistan constitute the neighbor category. The third category refers to all other countries with which the Central Asian states interacted over a thirty-year period that do not fall into the first two categories

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, it is reasonable to expect about 50% or more of the state visits to take place among the five Central Asian states. At the low end, at least 25% of the total visits would have to be intra-Central Asian in order to assume that there is some sense of regional belonging. Overall, the greater the concentration of visits among the five Central Asian states, the greater the support is for model I.

Table 5.2 breaks down the total number of visits into three categories with visits involving (a) only Central Asian states, (b) a Central Asian state and its immediate neighbors, and (c) a Central Asian state and one other state not included in the first two categories. Surprisingly, the visits distribution is less biased toward the Central Asian states. While some Central Asia bias is expected since the visits data are restricted to Central Asian participation as either visitor or visited, the outcome, nevertheless, suggests that there are fewer intra-Central Asian visits taking place than one might expect. The intra-Central Asian visits constituted less than 10% in the first two decades (dipping to a dismal 6% during the second decade). These numbers do not exactly scream “highly interactive regional subsystem.” That said, the data for the third decade suggest that the intra-Central Asian interaction is expanding (accounting for 14.6% of the total visits). It will be interesting to see if the upward momentum of the third decade persists into the future. One could argue that thirty years is perhaps not long enough for a highly interactive subsystem to emerge.¹⁸ Nevertheless, table 5.2 suggests that a pattern of interstate interaction among the five

¹⁸ One of the most highly interactive subsystems in the world today is arguably the European Union (formerly renamed as the EU in 1993), but it began as the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) and the European Economic Community (EEC) back in the 1950s. The original member states of what came to be known as the European Community (Belgium, France, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, and West Germany) grew in size to include twenty-one new members. From the establishment of the ECSC in 1951–2021, the EU subsystem had seventy years to develop into a highly interactive region. Perhaps, the Central Asian subsystem needs more time to develop as did the EU.

Central Asian states is low and therefore there is weak support for model I, at least for now.

Perhaps more indicative of the weakness of the Central Asian region is the presence of an overwhelming support in favor of the neighbors. In each ten-year period, interaction with the neighbors captures at least a third of the total network visits, with the second decade (2002–2011) capturing 41%. This is particularly significant considering there are only four countries that share a land border with the Central Asian states (namely, Russia, China, Iran, and Afghanistan). If a highly interactive subsystem refers to a relatively regular and intense pattern of interactions among proximate states, then the Central Asian subsystem would have to be defined more broadly. What the visit patterns suggest is that any delineation of subsystem boundaries of Central Asia 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-Central Asian interaction levels by constraining the development of a regional subsystem.

However, not all of the 34 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 5.3, three groups of states are distinguished according to the extent of each state’s participation in the Central Asian subsystemic network. The subsystemic core consists of those states which are involved in 10% or more of the total network visits. The subsystemic periphery is composed of those states with at least 5% but less than 10% of total visit points. The third group, the subsystemic fringe, includes those states which constitute less than 5% of the total visit points.

The proportional divisions in Table 5.3 reflect the volume of interaction. They also indicate that relative involvement within the region is characterized by some fluctuation. All five of the Central Asian states plus Russia are consistent members of the core with China briefly joining the club during the second decade (2002–2011). Among the core group, Kazakhstan remains consistently the most interactive state over the 30-year period accounting for 33%, 37% and 29% of all visits in each decade, respectively.

Turkmenistan remained relatively interactive in the region despite its deliberate attempt to stay out of any regional endeavors, predicated on its neutrality status and even after its self-imposed isolation, which Ashgabat adopted after the alleged assassination attempt on the President Niyazov’s life in 2002. Its position in the subsystemic core would be an empirical puzzle had it not been for Turkmenistan’s colossal reserves of oil and natural gas, which have generated a few visits to and from the outside world.

Russia’s membership in the subsystemic core is probably the easiest to explain. Its share of visit points accounted for 19% and 21% in the first two decades, respectively, before dipping down to 12% in the third decade. Given the interconnected nature of the Soviet Union, all the former republics were dependent on Moscow politically, economically, and militarily. For example, in the period between 1920 and 1991, Moscow made policy decisions in these areas in ways that kept the republics

Table 5.3 Core, periphery, and fringe states in the Central Asian visits network, 1992–2021

	(1992–2001) (% of total visit points)	(2002–2011) (% of total visit points)	(2012–2021) (% of total visit points)
Core (10% +)	Kazakhstan (33%) Uzbekistan (23%) Russia (19%) Turkmenistan (18%) Kyrgyzstan (18%) Tajikistan (16%)	Kazakhstan (37%) Russia (21%) Kyrgyzstan (19%) Tajikistan (19%) Uzbekistan (17%) Turkmenistan (14%)	Kazakhstan (29%) Uzbekistan (24%) Kyrgyzstan (24%) Turkmenistan (20%) Tajikistan (17%) Russia (12%)
Periphery (5–9%)	Iran (9.8%) Turkey (9.7%) China (6%)	Iran (7%) Turkey (7%)	China (8%) Turkey (6%) Iran (5.5%)
Fringe (1–4%)	United States (4%) Ukraine (4%) Pakistan (3.5%) India (3%) Germany (2%) Azerbaijan Afghanistan France Georgia Belarus Israel United Kingdom Armenia Japan Czech Republic Egypt Lithuania	United States (4%) Ukraine (4%) Afghanistan (3%) India (2%) Azerbaijan (2%) South Korea (2%) France (2%) Pakistan (2%) Germany Poland Belarus Japan Georgia Malaysia Egypt Armenia	India (3%) Azerbaijan (3%) Afghanistan (3%) Pakistan (3%) UAE (3%) United States (2.6%) Belarus (2.5%) South Korea (2.5%) Armenia (2%) Germany Japan Qatar Saudi Arabia Ukraine Georgia Hungary Malaysia Latvia France
	26 states	25 states	28 states

dependent on Russia. Moreover, foreign affairs with adjoining states were always the exclusive domain of Moscow. As such, none of the Central Asian states maintained representation abroad during the Soviet period. Shared borders between the republics were managed. The Soviet government also did not permit direct trade relations between the Central Asian states and their non-Soviet neighbors (Webber 1996). Control of energy supplies was and remains an effective sphere of Russian

dominance in Central Asia, whose landlocked geography keeps the states reliant on Russian infrastructure for transit routes. It is therefore not all surprising that 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, thereby maintaining its monopoly through most of the post-Soviet period. 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 where they continue to operate to this day (Olcott 2005).

Apart from the Central Asian core states, of equal interest is the information supplied by table 5.3 on the composition of the periphery and fringe states. Only three states constitute the region's periphery: China, Iran, and Turkey. In addition to Russia, China is another great power whose involvement in the region is fairly easy to explain. Its initial peripheral position (it accounted for only 6% of the total visit points in the 1990s) nearly doubled by the turn of the century but then lessened its centrality in the most recent decade (2012–2021). Sharing borders with three of the Central Asian 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 Central Asia during the first decade after the Soviet dissolution. As long as the Central Asian 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 Central Asian presidents and foreign ministers visiting Beijing and their visits reciprocated by Chinese Prime Minister Li Peng in the early 1990s, 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 among its Turkophone Muslim neighbors in Central Asia. In the 2000s, China began intensifying its security and economic engagement in Central Asia with “the driving priority of modernizing and stabilizing the restive western province of Xinjiang and the surrounding Central Asian region” (Cooley and Heathershaw 2017, 169). Beijing wasted no time in increasing 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 began to court its Central Asian neighbors through various attractive economic aid packages designed to develop the region's energy sector. Increased Chinese influence in Central Asia meant that (a) the Central Asian 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 Central Asia would be less inclined to support Xinjiang's demand for autonomy.

Of the peripheral regional actors, Iran's membership in the regional network starts out strong accounting for almost 10% of the region's total visit points in the 1990s but declines in the subsequent decades to 7% in the 2002–2011 period and then to 5% in the last decade. The conventional view is that Iran's high hopes of becoming a major player in Central Asian states' international relations have been largely unrealized (Roy 2000; Olcott 2005). Tehran views Central Asia as its natural geopolitical sphere of influence, yet the ideological nature of the Iran's theocratic 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 Central Asian leaders. Yet it managed to develop a close relationship with only two of the Central Asian states. Its relationship 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 natural gas resources. However, Tehran's efforts of serving as a transit route for Central Asian energy resources were stifled by the late-1990s due to US policy toward Iran, which denied to Central Asia the least expensive pipeline route. This is arguably a reason for Iran's position in the Central Asian region's periphery. However, Iran has no inclination of reducing its influence in the region anytime soon.

Turkey is another mid-level power in the region whose visit patterns places it solidly in the Central Asian regional periphery all throughout the three decades, accounting for nearly 10% of the region's total visit points immediately following the collapse of the Soviet Union and then dipping down to 6% by the turn of the century and staying there in the most recent decade. Like Iran, Turkey viewed the newly independent post-Soviet states in Central Asia 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. In the 1990s, Ozal gathered the leaders of the new Turkic states for a series of summit meetings both at home and in Central Asia. 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 Central Asian leaders, Turkey's secular model of development was particularly attractive, and they welcomed Ankara's advances to the region with open arms. This sort of thinking was mutual in the early 1990s with the Turkish politicians "attracted to the romantic image of a Pan-Turkic commonwealth of nations, an embracing of the 'Turkic' peoples of CA" (Allison 2001). Ankara wasted no time in dispatching Turkish delegations to the region, among other things, offering scholarships to Central Asian 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 Central Asian 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 policymakers played a major role in putting considerable pressure both on the Central Asian 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 Central Asian states, its trade relations with Russia was much more significant (Olcott 2005). Besides Russia, two additional regional powers, namely, China and Iran, were successful in thwarting Ankara's aspirations to expand pan-Turkism into the region. But that may be changing, according to one analyst, who says two recent developments may be turning the tide in Turkey's favor (Hedlund 2021):

One is Turkey's deepening alliance with Azerbaijan. The latter's rout of Armenia in the Nagorno-Karabakh war last year opened new opportunities for Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan to project geopolitical influence into Central Asia. Turkey's robust military support for the Azeri offensive was a decisive factor. Now, Yerevan must accept a corridor across its territory, from the southern part of Azerbaijan to Nakhchevan, an Azeri exclave landlocked between Armenia and Iran. The route gives Turkey a clear path to the Caspian Sea, allowing Ankara to break free from dependence on Iran and mount a more forceful challenge to Russia.

These developments have the potential to vault Turkey to Central Asia's sub-systemic core at some point in this decade. Of course, this is contingent on how much the Central Asian states try to distance themselves from Russia's sphere of influence. Until then, Turkey's visits to and from Central Asia remain firmly rooted in the region's periphery.

In the aggregate, the fringe consists of several European states, a South Asian wing (Afghanistan, India and Pakistan), a Middle Eastern wing (Egypt, Saudi Arabia, UAE, Qatar, and Israel), an East Asian wing (South Korea and Japan), 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. 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 1981a).

Table 5.4 summarizes the relative positioning of the five Central Asian states within the subsystemic core, which, except for Kazakhstan, is less than constant. Based on their participation in the visits network, Kazakhstan with a population of

Table 5.4 Relative positioning of the Central Asian states within the region, 1992–2021

1992–2001	2002–2011		2012–2021	
	% of Visits		% of Visits	
Kazakhstan	33.1%	Kazakhstan	37.4%	Kazakhstan
Uzbekistan	22.6%	Kyrgyzstan	19.4%	Uzbekistan
Turkmenistan	18.4%	Tajikistan	19.0%	Kyrgyzstan
Kyrgyzstan	17.7%	Uzbekistan	16.7%	Turkmenistan
Tajikistan	16.3%	Turkmenistan	14.1%	Tajikistan

29.2%

23.8%

23.7%

20.1%

17.3%

over 18 million¹⁹ is clearly the most interactive state among the five states dominating each decade with a share of at least one-third of the region's total visits distribution. Surprisingly, Uzbekistan, with a population nearly twice the size of its northern neighbor (34 million) was less successful in achieving leadership status, although it does remain in second place in two of the three decades examined. Despite being the most populated country to the south of Russia, self-sufficient in energy and gold, and the world's sixth leading producer of cotton, Uzbekistan's share of visit distributions was at best 20% less (in the most recent decade) and at worst over half the size of Kazakhstan (in the second decade). In thirty years of interstate relations, Uzbekistan accounted for between 17 and 24% of the total visit distributions, placing it in the regional pecking order even lower than its resource-poor neighbors to the west (Kyrgyzstan) and to the south (Tajikistan) during the second decade. To the extent that this is indicated by participation in the visit network, regional leadership remained a distant reality for Uzbekistan under President Karimov's 27-year rule during which the country's borders remained relatively closed to international trade and visits.

With the death of Karimov in 2016, the country seems to be going through its version of "Uzbek Spring" under its reform-oriented new president, Shavkat Mirziyoyev (Sobhani 2018). Unlike his predecessor, he seems to have a more active foreign policy. And according to one recent enthusiastic report, the reform-oriented president has reduced forced labor, closed the country's most notorious prison camp, and ended its Soviet era planning in the all-important cotton industry (*The Economist* Oct 23, 2021). According to a Freedom House report, a year after Mirziyoyev's rise to the top leadership position, he began to dismantle his predecessor's policies most notably in the foreign policy area with Uzbekistan "significantly improv[ing] relations with neighboring states" (Nishanov 2017). Figure 5.1 summarizes Uzbekistan's history of visits in the decades following independence. Sure enough, there is an impressive hike in visit points in the five-year period following the leadership change in 2016 with the most visit points recorded in 2019 in all of Uzbekistan's post-Soviet history. The steep drop in 2020 is clearly covid-related with Central Asian states suspending all travels abroad as well as restricting domestic movement of people.

As one regional observer put it:

Among his first steps, Mirziyoyev sought to repair relations with Uzbekistan's neighbors. With multiple trips to Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, Mirziyoyev demonstrated Uzbekistan's desire to cooperate on regional issues long ignored by Karimov. The reopening of the borders and more cordial and friendly intraregional relations have allowed Uzbek citizens to visit their families and trade with the neighboring countries. While under Karimov transport links with neighboring nations were limited, the Mirziyoyev government moved fast to establish new train and plane routes to these countries (Nishanov 2017).

¹⁹ The population numbers for Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan are taken from the World Bank's 2020 assessment.

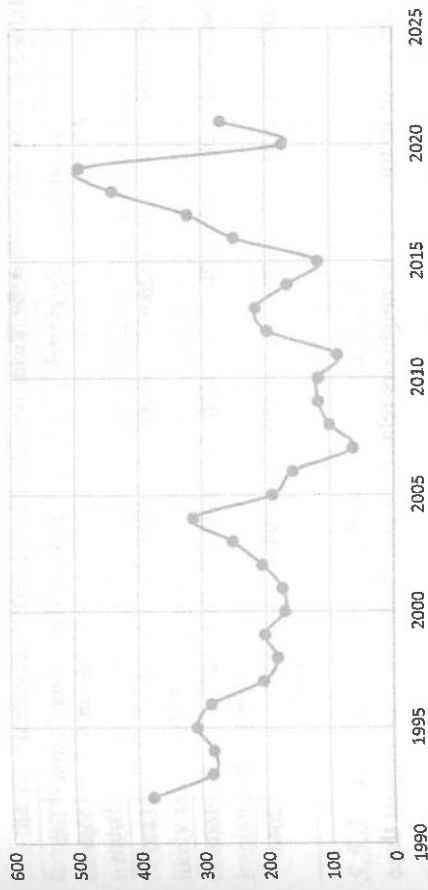


Fig. 5.1 Uzbekistan's annual visit points, 1992–2021

5.5.2 Fragmented Regional 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 Central Asian state's visit share with its adjacent neighbors relative to that of geographically distant states. The assumption here is that if the Central Asian states are interacting mainly with immediate neighbors, they are likely engaged in smaller local subsystems rather than a highly interactive regional subsystem. Table 5.5 summarizes the visits data on the basis of each Central Asian

Table 5.5 Fragmented subsystems model (visits points/percent)

	1992–2001		2002–2011		2012–2021	
	Neighbors	World	Neighbors	World	Neighbors	World
Kazakhstan	1184 (33%)*	2426 (67%)	1336 (37%)	2267 (63%)	1236 (38%)	2004 (62%)
Kyrgyzstan	548 (28%)	1384 (72%)	458 (25%)	1412 (75%)	938 (36%)	1692 (64%)
Tajikistan	440 (25%)	1340 (75%)	418 (23%)	1414 (77%)	528 (27%)	1394 (72%)
Turkmenistan	586 (29%)	1422 (71%)	286 (21%)	1074 (79%)	598 (27%)	1636 (73%)
Uzbekistan	536 (22%)	1934 (78%)	278 (17%)	1330 (83%)	814 (31%)	1832 (69%)

*The numbers in parentheses reflect the share of visits distribution for each country

Table 5.6 Uzbekistan's visit patterns with its neighbors, 1992–2021 (visit points)

	Kazakhstan	Kyrgyzstan	Tajikistan	Turkmenistan	Intra-Central Asian	Total Visit Points
1992–2001	132	126	180	58	496 (20%)	2470
2002–2011	64	70	20	48	202 (13%)	1608
2012–2021	194	206	150	196	746 (28%)	2646

state's visit history with its neighbors relative to everybody else over the past three decades.

Overall, in all cases, interaction with immediate neighbors was offset by an overwhelming interaction with non-neighbors (Table 5.5). The 33% representing Kazakhstan's interaction with neighbors in the first period rose to 37% by the second period and 38% 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 (approx. 57%). Other Central Asian states tended to interact with adjacent neighbors roughly a third of the time (somewhere between 22 and 29%). Uzbekistan in the second period was an exception interacting with neighbors only 17% of the time. Tashkent's isolationist policy under President Karimov explains 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 Central Asian state and to examine its relations with neighbors. Uzbekistan is the only country which shares a land border with all other Central Asian states. According to the fragmented subsystem model, Uzbekistan is expected to interact more with the four Central Asian states than with non-neighbors. Yet according to the visit patterns summarized in Table 5.6, 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 distant states. Out of Uzbekistan's 2470 total visit points in the first period, its share with immediate neighbors accounted for only 20% of the total interaction. Then it dips significantly to 13% in the second period before going up to 28% by the third period. The decreased interaction during the second decade was largely due to Uzbekistan's stance to remain uncommitted to any regional frameworks. Chilled relations with Tajikistan and Turkmenistan also contributed to the decline in visits during this time period. This is also the time period in which the Turkmen president accused Uzbekistan of aiding in the assassination attempt against Turkmen president Niyazov's life.

Uzbekistan's visit patterns provide some support for the Dominguez model. While its relations with adjacent neighbors were limited during most of the 30-year post-Soviet period, Uzbekistan managed to interact with its neighbors on average about 21% of the time in any given decade. Overall, 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 (and to some extent Kyrgyzstan) is operating in a Russia-dominated subsystem, while Turkmenistan seems to be operating in and out of the Iranian subsystem.

5.5.3 Russia-centered Subsystem (Model III)

The visits data have so far revealed that a highly interactive subsystem (model I) consisting only of the five Central Asian 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 Central Asia any time soon. The visits data have also revealed that except for Uzbekistan, several pockets of smaller subsystems (model II) do not adequately characterize the current structure of interstate relations in Central Asia either. While local issues continued to dominate the foreign policies of the Central Asian states, they have consistently sought relatively distant actors to resolve such issues.

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

Table 5.7 summarizes the political importance of Russia for the Central Asian states. Based on information supplied by Table 5.7, it is clear that Russia held a prominent position in Central Asian international politics although its influence has waned in the third decade. When viewed together, Russia's interaction with the Central Asian states accounted for 19 and 21% in the first two decades, respectively.

Table 5.7 Political importance of Russia and other regional powers (visit points/percent)

	1992–2001		2002–2011		2012–2021	
	Visits	%	Visits	%	Visits	%
Russia	2034	19	2008	21	1304	12
China	646	6	960	10	850	8
Iran	1054	10	608	6	634	6
Turkey	1066	10	654	7	602	5

Except for the third period, visits to and from Russia dominated the network of intergovernmental visits compared to other regional powers.

The nature of regional interactions changed in Russia's favor by the mid-1990s, as the Central Asian states began to realize that ties to Russia could not be broken overnight. Russia alone was able to capture more than one-fifth of all Central Asian interstate visits. In the absence of concrete thresholds for what constitutes "centrism" (i.e., what makes a state a high foreign policy priority for the Central Asian states) one can argue that 19%, or 21%, is more "centric-like" than let's say 10%. At the aggregate level, then, when the visits of all the Central Asian states to and from Russia are examined together, Russia emerges as the most active participant in the region's international relations.

Whether all five Central Asian 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 ten-year period. Table 5.8 breaks down the visit points by the most interactive dyads. A quick visual inspection makes it clear that the four out of five Central Asian states Russia-oriented. Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and for the most part Tajikistan displayed Russia-centric tendencies throughout the three periods. The visit distributions of Turkmenistan were more oriented toward Iran rather than Russia.

For Tajikistan, Russia was unequivocally the most important partner during the decade immediately following the Soviet collapse. Russia alone accounted for 30% of all the visits to or from Tajikistan that decade. No other country came close to replacing Russia's dominance. Iran as the second most active partner captured only a third of Russia's share of total visits. 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. During the second decade, Russia maintained its lead position with 19% of the total visit points but managed to slip to second place (after Kyrgyzstan) in the third decade. Nevertheless, long after the civil war ended, Moscow continues to maintain a significant military presence in Tajikistan with an estimated 7,000 troops. The contract for Russia's 201st Military Base in Tajikistan (formerly known as the 201st Motorized Rifle Division), previously set to expire in 2014, was extended to 2042 in 2013 (Putz 2021). Its objective is to protect the Tajik-Afghan border and to prevent extremist Islamic groups from Afghanistan seeking a safe haven in the mountains of Tajikistan.

Russia was similarly significant for Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. For Kyrgyzstan, Russia was the most important partner accounting for 16, 22, and 13% of Kyrgyzstan's total visits in each period, respectively. As the least militarized of the Central Asian 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 disproportionately Russia-centered. In each period following Kazakhstan's independence, visits to and from Russia account for 19, 24 and 12% of Kazakhstan's total visits, respectively. 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.

Table 5.8 Top Interactive dyads by visit distributions, 1992–2021 (percent)

	1992–2001	% of visits	2002–2011	% of visits	2012–2021	% of visits
<i>Kazakhstan</i>						
Russia	19		Russia	22	Russia	12
Turkey	8		China	9	Kyrgyzstan	10
China	6		Turkey	6	China	8
Iran	5		Kyrgyzstan	4	Uzbekistan	6
USA	5		USA	4	Turkey	5
<i>Kyrgyzstan</i>						
Russia	16		Russia	22	Russia	13
Turkey	10		Turkey	10	Kazakhstan	12
China	9		China	9	China	8
Kazakhstan	8		Kazakhstan	9	Uzbekistan	8
Uzbekistan	7		USA	8	Tajikistan	7
<i>Tajikistan</i>						
Russia	30		Russia	19	Kyrgyzstan	10
Iran	11		Iran	15	Russia	9
Uzbekistan	9		China	10	Iran	8
Kyrgyzstan	5		Afghanistan	9	Uzbekistan	8
China	4		France	4	Pakistan	6
<i>Turkmenistan</i>						
Iran	24		Russia	16	Iran	9
Turkey	15		Iran	10	Uzbekistan	9
Russia	11		Turkey	9	Turkey	7
Pakistan	5		China	9	Afghanistan	6
Ukraine	5		Ukraine	8	Pakistan	6
<i>Uzbekistan</i>						
Russia	11		Russia	14	Russia	13
Turkey	8		China	12	Kyrgyzstan	9
Tajikistan	7		Afghanistan	5	China	9
Kazakhstan	5		Ukraine	5	Turkmenistan	9
Kyrgyzstan	5		South Korea	5	Kazakhstan	9

Second, due to its sizable Russian population (approximately 30%), 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 depends on Russia for transportation of its massive crude oil reserves to the open seas.

Uzbekistan, too, interacted more with Russia than any other state in the post-Soviet period. Tashkent began the first years of independence Russia-oriented, with Moscow accounting for 11% of Uzbekistan's total visits. Russia gained more significance in the subsequent decades with its share increasing to 14 and 13% respectively.

For Turkmenistan, regional powers other than Russia (namely, Iran and to some degree Turkey) were more important for most of its post-Soviet existence. In the first time period, 24% of Turkmenistan's interactions occurred just across the border with Iran, compared to its 11% visits with Russia. While Russia does manage to topple Iran from its leading position by the turn of the century, its lead remains short-lived with the resurgence of Iran by the third decade. Russia by the third decade does not even make up the top five most interactive states in Turkmenistan's visits network. 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 more cost-effectively. It is therefore not surprising that Turkmenistan's relationship with Iran remained significant throughout the three periods.

In short, the visits data as summarized in Table 5.8 suggests that Russia was the most interactive partner for four out of five Central Asian states, dominating international relations in the region. Thus, we can conclude that the data provide strong support for the presence of model III.

5.6 Concluding Thoughts

Two objectives were pursued in this chapter. First, the delineation of the Central Asian subsystemic boundaries was treated as an empirical question. Rather than assuming that the Central Asian borders stop with the five Central Asian states, original data were collected over a 30-year period to identify the main actors involved in the region based on interstate interaction. As a result, 34 actors emerged and their intergovernmental visits were analyzed for the 1992–2021 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 Central Asian 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 30 years after gaining independence from the Soviet Union, the five Central Asian states have not yet evolved into a highly interactive regional subsystem. A semblance of a regional subsystem emerges only when intra-Central Asian 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 Central Asian states and their geographically proximate neighbors. Four major powers in the region, Russia, China, Iran, and Turkey continue to exert significant influence in

the Central Asian states' international relations. Since more than half of the total intergovernmental visits took place between the five Central Asian states and their largest neighbors, any attempt to delineate subsystemic boundaries of Central Asia has to include at the very minimum Russia and China. While no analyses of regional delineations of Central Asian can ignore Russia and China, the existence of the two major powers in the region is arguably the reason for the lack of high interaction among the five Central Asian states.

Model II: Fragmented Subsystem: The visits data also revealed that several pockets of smaller subsystems do not accurately characterize the Central Asian 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 Central Asian 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 Central Asian perspective as either visitor or visited, this conclusion remains less than robust.

Model III: Russia-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 region²⁰—this study's contribution to the existing knowledge on the subject is its attempt to quantify this phenomenon. However, the findings reveal one important caveat: not all five Central Asian states were equally Russia-oriented during the period examined. Turkmenistan was the only state that turned toward Iran that Russia. 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 Central Asian 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 Central Asian 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 its war in Afghanistan—is an example of how Russia's influence over Kyrgyzstan can shape the latter's relations with the outside world.

²⁰ Moscow-centrism 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.

In short, on the basis of the visits data, the international relations of the Central Asian states seem to have consolidated over the past thirty years. It is important to note that while conclusions provided by visits data alone are likely to be preliminary, they have provided an initial look at the structure of international relations in Central Asia. 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 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, sources of future conflict in this volatile yet strategically significant region of the world.

Is Central Asia's emerging structure likely to be reproduced in other regions, one might ask? That remains an empirical question. We really do not know all that much about regional structures. Based on the data examined, there is likely to be considerable uniqueness to each subsystem, as opposed to a standard model. And that we do not know enough about how much distinctiveness there is to be able to proceed with comparison. Yet how many neighborhoods have emerged from relatively recent imperial melt-down in which the imperial center has retained or revived a respectable proportion of its former strength? Two come to mind: eastern Europe and the Caucasus. The latter shares some of the attributes of Central Asia and may also share some of the same type of subsystemic structure. Eastern Europe, on the other hand, is a different kind of neighborhood with a longer past, less subordination, and stronger pulls from the West that are absent in either Central Asia or the Caucasus. Of the two, our guess is that only the Caucasus might correspond to Central Asia's structure. But, as we have noted, that remains an empirical question.

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