

# Preventing conflict by building civil society: post-development theory and a Central Asian–UK policy success story

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## Introduction

The potential for institutions of civil society in Central Asia to resolve the region's social, economic, environmental and political problems, and the role that external actors can play in fostering that potential, is a topic that has generated considerable debate in recent years.<sup>1</sup> At the forefront on many of these discussions has been the question of whether international donors can assist the region in preventing ethnic and other forms of social conflict through the creation of a tolerant, multi-ethnic civil society. Many of the conclusions drawn have been pessimistic.<sup>2</sup> However, most of these deliberations have focussed on the activities of international organisations or Western intergovernmental work in Central Asia. Looking at the question from the other way round, this paper strikes a note of optimism in examining the work of a little-known Central Asian development organisation, the Eurasian Initiative, which works on civil society projects in the UK.

The Eurasian Initiative, formed in 1999 by the governments of Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, is mandated to 'contribute to the development of viable and tolerant civil societies around the world'. It seeks to do this by drawing on what it claims are the twin Central Asian experiences of creating harmonious environments of inter-ethnic co-operation and democracy in the Soviet period,<sup>3</sup> and the consolidation of this achievement in the subsequent period of transition following independence in 1991.<sup>4</sup> Headquartered in Almaty, Kazakhstan, it has thus far devoted its efforts to work in the European Union state of Great Britain. This paper will examine its work, and is divided into four sections. The first is an explanation of why Britain was chosen and an introduction to the country, the second is an outline of the strategy and an account of the work undertaken so far, and the third section is an evaluation of successes and difficulties encountered thus far. The paper concludes with critical reflections on the applicability of post-development theory and critical geopolitics for Central Asia in the light of this case study, and suggests directions for future research necessary to enhance the work of the international development project in conflict prevention and civil society construction.

### **In the tracks of King Arthur: Great Britain's path to the 21st century**

This first section will explain why Great Britain was chosen for the pilot project, by outlining some of the problems facing this transitional economy. It is based on exploratory research conducted by consultants for the Eurasian Initiative, in collaboration with key local informants.

Great Britain is an island of 60 million people situated off the far West of the Eurasian continent, at the end of the fabled 'Great Silk Road' that, in the middle ages, connected Europe and China to Central Asia (see Figure 1). Geopolitically, it is located between the EU, the USA and Russia, and was regarded as a pivot zone of the Cold War. It is 244,755 square km, or approximately a tenth of the size of Kazakhstan. Geographically, it is divided between foggy uplands in the north and agriculturally richer chalk lowlands in the south.<sup>5</sup> Historically, it has been a cross-roads of civilisations, with many different ethnic groups such as Romans, Saxons, Picts, Angles, Celts, Danes, Normans, West Indians, Pakistanis, Turks, Ugandans and others having settled there. Today, over 150 nationalities can be found in its major cities, although the official language of state is English. Its capital city is London. The British have a rich tradition of customs and festivals.<sup>6</sup> They are proud of their history, with world-famous playwrights like William Shakespeare, scientists like Isaac Newton, poets like Lord Byron and leaders like



**Figure 1.** The UK on the Silk Road.

King Arthur and Winston Churchill. Although located in a remote extremity of Eurasia, excellent air and sea connections, as well as a rail link to Eurasia under the North Sea, have enabled Britain to maintain strong trade and cultural links around the world.

Although Britain once prospered as the world's first industrial nation, it has been going through a difficult period of transition with structural adjustment from full employment and a universal welfare state in the 1950s to a more neo-liberal market economy from the early 1980s. While some elite segments of society have benefited from this move, it has led to growing inequalities accompanied by ethnic and racial violence in peripheral towns such as Brixton and Burnley. These tensions have been exacerbated by the fact that there is no special provision for ethnic minority representation in the British parliament and because extremist religious and racist political parties are tolerated by the authorities, with successive governments benefiting from inciting racist sentiments against non-white immigrants.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, there is little state education in minority languages except for Welsh and Gaelic in Wales and Scotland, leaving non-English speakers structurally disadvantaged. Furthermore, religious extremism has led to violence and terrorism in the troubled province of Northern Ireland, and there is also a problem with some Islamic fundamentalists who have introduced forms of radical Islam not indigenous to Britain. The transition has also accentuated a cultural and political divide between richer populations in the south, and poorer people in the north. Public service provision to the poorest has suffered as a result of a decrepit transport system, the gradual marketisation of health-care, and the best professionals being attracted into business rather than teaching. The introduction of fees for university education that has accompanied the transition has excluded the poorest from further education. Intellectually, Britain has long been disadvantaged by the so-called 'brain-drain' of young people to better-paid jobs in the USA.

Politically, Britain has a long tradition of democracy, and is a member of many important international organisations such as the United Nations, the World Trade Organisation, and the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe. However, under the excuse of maintaining stability and security in the face of threats from 'terrorism', the Blair regime introduced its 'Anti-Terrorism, Crime and Security Bill' in November 2001. Respected international human rights NGO Human Rights Watch condemned the law for 'contraven[ing] fundamental European and international human rights guarantees . . . threatening basic rights in the UK and providing a dangerous model for other states'.<sup>8</sup> The story on the international scene has been just as depressing. By waging wars on Yugoslavia (1999), Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003) that, because they lacked UN authorisation, were illegal under international law, the Blair regime has back-tracked on early commitments made to the international community to pursue an 'ethical foreign policy'. Furthermore, in spite of formally committing itself to the elimination of weapons of mass destruction, the UK persists in maintaining significant stockpiles of nuclear weaponry, thus contributing to nuclear proliferation worldwide.

Corruption has reached even the highest levels of politics and business. The government of Tony Blair swept the Conservative Party from office in 1997, a party discredited by sleaze and bribery, with even a government minister being imprisoned for corruption. However, frequent allegations of corruption resulting from the close relationship between the Labour Party and business have continued, and political commentators speak of a widespread breakdown in public trust of politicians.

Ordinary people long for a better life, but have been disappointed and frustrated by the behaviour of their leaders in the transition period. Under these conditions, the social fabric of Britain has begun to unwind. In the most comprehensive scientifically rigorous survey of its type ever undertaken, a report by British university researchers and commissioned by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation painted a grim picture of poverty and social exclusion. It estimated that in 1999 26 per cent of the population were living in poverty, roughly 9.5 million people could not afford adequate housing, and 4 million were unable to afford to properly feed themselves. Indicators of poverty had substantially increased over the previous decade.<sup>9</sup> Unsurprisingly, as a result, there have been enormous negative social consequences. Whole neighbourhoods have become 'sink estates'—no-go areas for police. Prostitution and people trafficking have reached all-time high levels. Traditional stable family structures have collapsed as young people have turned their backs on the values of their parents. In spite of a comprehensive electoral system, voter turnout is as low as 25 per cent in some elections, a worrying trend of popular disenfranchisement with democratic politics. Britain has the second highest prison population in Western Europe. The consumption and trade of illegal narcotics is a major problem, particularly as policy failures have driven it into the hands of organised criminals.

Under these conditions some commentators have feared that Britain, in the midst of a host of crises, could become a breeding ground for terrorism and a hot bed of religious extremism. As one expert consultant to the Eurasian Initiative put it, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan are concerned in particular that any conflict in the UK could, in a worse-case scenario, transform the region into 'a breeding ground of civil war, nuclear proliferation, radical Islamic movements, a battleground for Eurasian geopolitics, an ecological wasteland, an economic basket case'. As Britain contains large reserves of oil within its maritime boundaries, disorder in Britain could have serious impacts on Eurasian economies, even dragging neighbouring states into any conflict. As such conflicts could eventually threaten Central Asia and disrupt the world economy, preventing them must be 'job number one' for Central Asia and the international community. It was therefore decided that the first Eurasian Initiative project should take place in Britain.

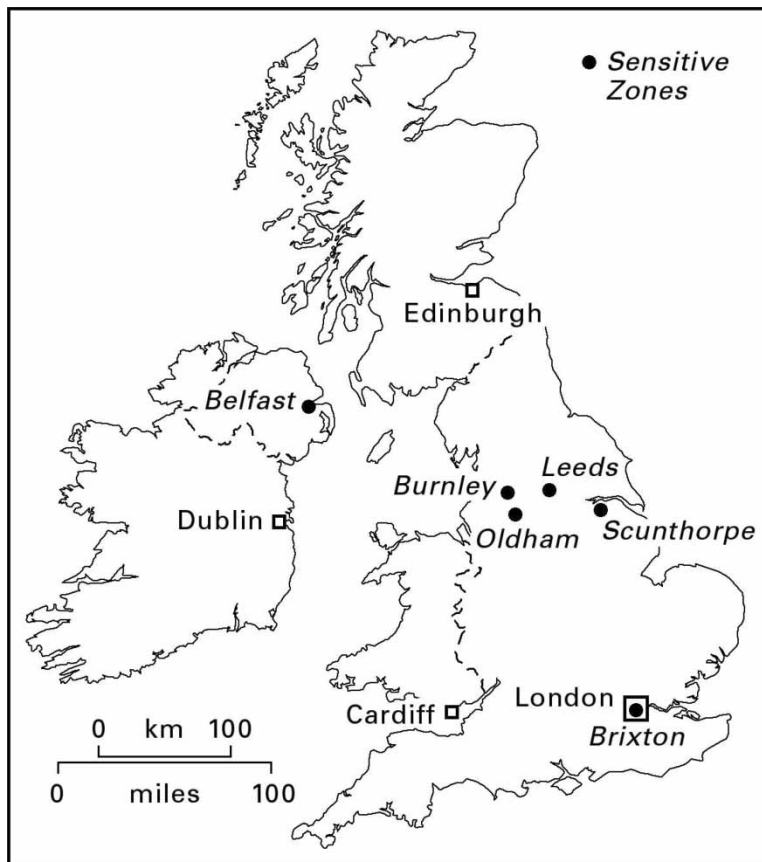
### **Strategy and activities**

This section will outline some of the work that the Eurasian Initiative has been doing to build civil society and foster good governance in Great Britain. Following the exploratory research outlined in the previous section, the Eurasian Initiative

concluded that the problems outlined above needed tackling by a two-fold approach, with both top-down and bottom-up measures. Work has thus far been focussed in a number of designated ‘sensitive zones’, areas that are hotspots of inter-ethnic, inter-racial and inter-religious tension (Figure 2). These include Burnley in the troubled Colne Valley, a fertile but densely populated and culturally conservative powder keg of simmering ethnic tensions at the heart of Great Britain, where the radical Islamic organisation Hezb-ut Tahrir is also known to operate.

*Top-down approaches*

A network of experts were recruited to monitor ethnic and other social tensions in a number of ‘sensitive zones’ across Great Britain. Most of the experts, who tended to be journalists and other existing social commentators known to the Eurasian Initiative through the international community, lacked prior experience and so were taught by Eurasian Initiative trainers. Each expert is expected to do a



**Figure 2.** Sensitive zones in the UK.

number of activities including monitoring local press reports, providing a digest of anti-minority sentiment and conducting field research and interviews. These are condensed into a report for the Chief Commissar for Ethnic Minorities, who passes it on to relevant British government departments, in order to enable them to take action to prevent conflicts arising. For situations that he or she deems particularly grave, the Chief Commissar may request a meeting with the relevant minister. Government officials have assured the Eurasian Initiative that they find these reports very useful.

A major problem exacerbating tensions in sensitive zones is the lack of economic development and opportunities for the young. This needs addressing at the structural level, creating the right opportunities for business to flourish. Economically, great strides have been made away from the failed state planned welfare model of the 1950s–1970s; for instance, the privatisation of utilities and the charging of fair market rates for water, electricity and gas. However, many areas of the economy still remain in state control and suffer from endemic over-employment, and so the Eurasian Initiative has been preparing reports for market liberalisation and employment reductions in the health and education sectors.

Early work by the Eurasian Initiative analysts indicated that a break down in family life was a major cause of social ills in Britain. The Eurasian Initiative has been working with local authorities to produce textbooks teaching children about the importance of kinship obligations and respect for one's family. *Oqsoqols* and *kampirs* (respected old men and women) have been brought to Britain to give seminars entitled 'Families are our wealth', teaching government officials, university lecturers and community leaders the timeless values of family life. Likewise, a survey conducted by the Eurasian Initiative analysts suggested that, in areas naturally prone to ethnic conflict, social contact between different communities is very low. Therefore, a national programme to teach ancient Central Asian values and practices of hospitality has been produced under the slogan taken from an ancient Central Asian proverb, 'A guest is greater than your father'.

### *Bottom-up approaches*

To tackle the manifold social problems, it is not enough merely to influence the political process. For civil society to flourish, the consciousness of the ordinary inhabitants must be raised at the grass-roots level, empowering them to take control of their own lives. It is this belief that has informed the second strand of the Eurasian Initiative's activities, bottom-up work with ordinary communities. Thus far, five main projects have been undertaken.

Education of the young is at the heart of the attempt to nurture civil society at the grassroots level, and two programmes are of particular note. 'Peace and Development Volunteers' from Central Asia are sent for two-year periods to needy neighbourhoods in sensitive zones, to teach in schools, learn the local language (including minority languages), live with host families and generally act as ambassadors of goodwill. As well as working as schoolteachers, they also engage in a range of other capacity-building activities such as discussion clubs and sports

activities, and particularly encourage inter-ethnic contact. They stress the importance of family values and kinship ties. This project has been very successful, and volunteers have often adopted certain slums, sending photographs home and raising resources for the deserving poor that inhabit them.

Second, the 'Emerging Leaders' programme has identified future potential leaders from different ethnic backgrounds and taken them away from frontline situations to engage in meaningful discussion and role-playing games. Two-week residential courses in the peaceful surroundings of the delightful Kyrgyz 'Arslanbob' forest have enabled future leaders to learn to respect each other in accordance with the values of a tolerant and inclusive civil society.

Of particular success has been the 'Religious Tolerance—Lessons from the Silk Road' project. In Central Asia, Russian Orthodox Christians and Sunni Muslims have lived side by side in harmony for centuries.<sup>10</sup> Drawing on this experience, leaders of these groups have toured hotspots of religious extremism in England and Northern Ireland giving training seminars in tolerance and peaceful co-existence to representatives of local religious sects.

Fourth, the 'Families are our Wealth' scheme has targeted the break-up of the family in sensitive zones, and draws on the rich tradition of respect for relatives in Central Asia. The socially excluded are taught to research their genealogical history, to discover the names and stories of seven generations of ancestors, in order to be able to pass on to their children role models of good citizenship.

Finally, grassroots work has also been undertaken in the cultural sphere. A small amount of money is available in grants to support single projects designed to promote tolerance. Beneficiaries have included a radio station in Burnley, 'Radio Tolerant Civil Society', that provides information to the young on civil society; a Leeds-based project to support the construction of better human effluent disposal systems; and funds for a crematorium in Scunthorpe that cremates people of all ethnic groups. Most prominently, a Brixton youth theatre, 'Youth for Drama, Peace and Civil Society', won a grant to stage a production of a play about inter-ethnic conflicts and their peaceful resolution.

## Evaluation

It is always extremely difficult to evaluate a long-term project such as this one. Nonetheless, some success can already be observed. For example, the Chief Commissioner on Ethnic Minorities was alarmed at the almost incessant publication of racist reports on asylum seekers in some sections of the British press, which he feared could lead to prejudice and ethnic conflict. So, he was able to meet the Press Complaints Authority on a number of occasions and draw these to the attention of the ombudsman, who has promised to look into them.

There have been many more tangible successes that can be observed. These include the translation of reports into indigenous languages and their distribution in schools, community centres and government offices, and the establishment of a website and an email discussion list to publicise activities, link experts together, and generate discussion on the problems of building civil society in the UK. As

the young in Great Britain are taught computing from an early age, this was identified as a culturally appropriate form of transmission. The 'Youth for Drama, Peace and Civil Society' play has been staged in all six sensitive zones, to audiences of unemployed youth identified as at risk of perpetrating ethnic violence. Significant numbers of key stakeholders and future leaders have participated in our intensive courses. For example, over 70 seminars in the 'Religious Tolerance—Lessons from the Silk Road' and 'Families are our Wealth' programmes have been staged, and have been attended by numerous local representatives of state and civil society. In particular, our glossy conference packs were well received, especially in the most deprived slums. Thirty-five 'emerging leaders' have been taken to Arslanbob, Kyrgyzstan, for residential courses in inter-ethnic tolerance and some have been subsequently offered scholarships to study in Central Asia, on the condition that they do not remain but take their new-found knowledge home. More than 200 community and religious leaders have taken part on a series of roundtables on the theme of 'Peace and Justice on the Silk Road'. However, perhaps the greatest measure of success has been the impact made on the international community. Leaders of the Eurasian Initiative have been invited to address meetings of the OSCE, NATO, The Council of Europe and the EU, to share their experiences with others working on conflict prevention and resolution in Europe.

Of course, problems have occurred, as would be expected in the early stages of any project. In most cases, the difficulties have been due to local issues of mismanagement, corruption, and cultural problems such as a reluctance to embrace new ways of thinking. For example, some 'emerging leaders' have said that the forests of Arslanbob have little relevance to the ghettos of Northern England's cities, and have found it difficult to transfer their experience back home. This is indicative of a mindset that emerged during the Cold War, and future Eurasian Initiative programmes are being developed to address these cultural problems. Furthermore, there has been a disappointing failure to heed the advice of experts. Uzbekistan's President Islam Karimov has repeatedly warned the UK that it needs to tackle the problem of Islamic fundamentalism. Speaking to journalists in Tashkent on 26 August 2004, he said, 'Take London, for example, where Hizb ut-Tahrir has its headquarters. Party members go about their business unimpeded, collecting money, hiring lawyers, and spreading their views.'<sup>11</sup> Nonetheless, initial work has been promising and the Eurasian Initiative hopes to expand its efforts to other Eurasian countries and the USA. Indicators have shown that tensions in the sensitive zones where the Eurasian Initiative has worked thus far have not only remained unchanged, but even risen in some cases. This demonstrates the importance of not only continuing, but intensifying and extending the work undertaken thus far.

### **Afterword: problematising the power/knowledge nexus**

Of course, it should be apparent to the reader that the 'Eurasian Initiative' is an imaginary organisation generated for this satire of the civil-society and



conflict-prevention industry in Central Asia, but although imaginary, it is not fictional. The activities described and the language used are all precise parodies of Western-funded organisations working in Central Asia, which the author has observed at first hand over the past decade.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, readers versed in the scholarly and semi-scholarly literature will recognise numerous examples of book and article titles and precise phrases lifted from them, and those who know Central Asia well will be familiar with the activities parodied herein. The catalyst for writing this essay was the author's observation of numerous talks and discussions at the October 2003 Central Eurasia Studies Society conference in Harvard, USA. These were marked not only by a sense of pessimism, but a general failure to think theoretically about the issues under discussion. However, it is not the intention of this piece to single out any individual or particular organisation for special criticism, nor to impugn the motives of the often-idealistic people who work honestly and hard within them (which is the reason why none have been explicitly referenced or identified). Nor is the goal to assess how accurate or otherwise these readings of Central Asia are. Rather, it is to problematise the 'conflict prevention through civil society development industry' in Central Asia, by considering it as a discourse, or a set of ideas and practices embedded in power relations. The satirical movement of directly reversing the application of discourse is intended to achieve this in three ways: by demonstrating first the ambivalence of geographical tropes deployed, second, their location in unequal networks of power relations, and third, the way that they depoliticise political questions. This final section of the paper will briefly explain the literatures within which it is located, why satire was chosen as a form to articulate these concerns and suggest ways to rethink foreign engagement with Central Asia.

Epistemologically, this article is located within two bodies of literature, both of which, drawing on Foucauldian concepts of power/knowledge mediated through Said's study of the colonial Western gaze on Islam,<sup>13</sup> seek to problematise the production of knowledge about 'the Third World'. The first is the literature in the 'anthropology of development' that arose in the 1990s as a critique of Western development projects—not to be confused with 'development anthropology' that seeks to make development projects work better.<sup>14</sup> The primary concern of this project is to render the apparently self-evident claims of development discourse problematic.<sup>15</sup> In his landmark study of development specialists in Lesotho, Ferguson suggests that in the second half of the 20th century 'development' functioned like the terms 'God' in the 12th and 'civilisation' in the 19th, setting a central problematic, a dominant interpretative grid that is unquestioned: it is regarded as self-evident that poor countries need 'development'. Institutions generate their own forms of discourse, which simultaneously construct Lesotho as a particular kind of knowledge. On this basis interventions are organised, which invariably fail in their own terms, but have the unintended consequences of entrenching bureaucratic power and occluding politics.<sup>16</sup> Advancing this critique, Escobar frames 'development' as a process by which the 'Third World' has, through the discourses and practices of development, been systematically

organized into, and transformed according to, European constructs. This regime of truth suggests that ‘the Third World’ is ‘out there’ and to be known through theories and intervened upon from the outside. According to Escobar, this ‘Third World’ is predicated upon the existence of an underdeveloped subjectivity characterised by powerlessness, passivity, poverty, and ignorance, oppressed by its own stubbornness, lack of initiative and traditions, passively waiting for white Westerners to come along and save it.<sup>17</sup> Using this framework, Cooke and Kothari show how a particular technique, Participatory Rural Appraisal, is a practice maintained by the powerful (academics, practitioners, donors) but which may be so implicated in the unjust and illegitimate exercise of power as to be ‘the new tyranny’.<sup>18</sup>

Academics, as well as employees of external organisations, are deeply implicated in these practices. Contributing to this work of how the epistemological categories of the colonial powers came to be a means of shaping the world, Stirrat studies the role of the expert academic development ‘consultant’. Based on his own extensive work in the development industry, he contends that there is a ‘culture of consultancy’, which sets itself up as a paradigm of European rationality opposed to the irrationality of its benighted subjects. He argues that evaluation of ‘development’ projects is largely circular, with success reckoned in terms of an aesthetics of report production, amounts of money spent, numbers of people involved, ‘projects’ completed, and recognition granted by other organisations and bodies. Although these projects rarely ‘work’ in the terms that they establish, the aesthetics of the evaluation process and the attachment of blame to locals means that the overall discourse of development remains largely unquestioned.<sup>19</sup> While rejecting what they see as the overly polemical stance taken to ‘development’ by such theorists, Crewe and Harrison accept that certain discourses indelibly shape the ways in which reality is managed and acted upon, but that there are winners and losers in every development project.<sup>20</sup>

The second body of literature that informs this essay is drawn from geography. The unifying concept of modern human geography is *place*.<sup>21</sup> Geographers have long argued that places—buildings, towns, regions, countries, continents—are not simple givens, but imagined in different ways by different people at different times.<sup>22</sup> Parallel to the emergence of post-development theory in anthropology and drawing upon a similar intellectual tradition, geographers have studied how Western disciplines and institutions make sense of the world, ‘constructing’ places as different and exotic.<sup>23</sup> Political geographers have used these developments to explore the imagination of place in the context of international politics, in a sub-discipline that became known as *critical geopolitics*. In a series of investigations that began with the study of geopolitical reasoning in US foreign policy, geopolitics was reconstituted as a discursive practice by which intellectuals of statecraft spatialise international politics and represent it as a world characterised by particular types of people, places and dramas.<sup>24</sup> Analysis seeks to ‘denaturalize the global order by portraying it as socially and historically constructed’.<sup>25</sup> A key theme has been the conceptualisation of ‘security’, as a subjective cultural and political

interpretation rather than an objective given.<sup>26</sup> This has explored the cultural and historical reasons why certain places are portrayed as dangerous, in the discourse of intellectuals,<sup>27</sup> governments<sup>28</sup> and in the realm of popular culture.<sup>29</sup> Geopolitical knowledge, reproduced in elite texts, social practice and popular culture, ‘is both knowledge and power, a mode of making sense of the world that facilitates action, asserts identity and justifies both’.<sup>30</sup> That is to say, these constructions of places as dangerous or threatening influence the conduct of policy.

Neither of these bodies of literature attempt to ‘improve’ present practice—they do not ask how development can be done more effectively, in the first case, nor how Western polities can make more accurate judgements of the nature of the international threats posed to them and respond accordingly in the second. Rather, they question and de-naturalise the very discursive frameworks within which such questions are conceivable. It is these two bodies of literature that have informed this essay, but why depart from traditional academic idiom and adopt the style of satire?

There are a number of reasons why satire (the use of irony, sarcasm, ridicule, etc., to highlight folly) was selected as the most appropriate method to make these points. Most obviously, it is an arresting way to demonstrate the three central arguments advanced above. Demonstrating that the geographical—and temporal—tropes used to construct Central Asia as dangerous can easily be re-appropriated and applied to the UK (with judicious citation of published material) reveals their vacuity as explanatory or even background variables, and should lead us to question their deployment in the Central Asian context. The method employed in this paper arguably establishes that more pointedly and economically than would traditional academic discourse. Second, the sheer absurdity of the idea that Central Asian states could have either the financial resources or the cultural and political legitimacy to implement large scale programmes to reconstruct a core site of the civilised West, is a vivid demonstration that the discourses of conflict prevention by civil society promotion in Central Asia are intractably embedded in grossly unequal power relations. Western-based organisations and institutions committed to refashioning Central Asian society abound, but one can find not a single counterpart in Central Asian bodies dedicated to the investigation and reconstruction of Western societies.<sup>31</sup> Third, the satire demonstrates how problems that are at root political may be re-identified as cultural or social, narrowing the discursive resources for the struggle for just political settlements.

There are also a number of other factors that justify the use of satire in this context. It refuses to engage with the discourse of conflict prevention in its own terms, enabling more fundamental questions about the nature and provenance of the discourse of conflict prevention in Central Asia to be raised. It also allows serious questions about practices in Central Asia to be raised without compromising the security of either questioner or questioned. In this sense, it is a literary form sometimes deployed by Central Asian writers.<sup>32</sup>

Nonetheless, a satire of this form is not without its own dangers and two reasonable objections in particular may be considered. The first is that this article might

be interpreted as an unduly polemical attack on well-meaning individuals. To avoid this, no individual authors or programmes have been explicitly identified. Second, this paper is open to the charge of non-specificity—if a particular target is intended, why not identify it and initiate a process of detailed and reasoned scholarly exchange? In part, this concern has already been addressed: this piece is an explicit attempt to resist the pressure to be confined within such an epistemology. If this article were an isolated foray into an otherwise unknown field, such a complaint might bear more examination. However, it is not. It is based upon research and experience (including formal involvement in a number of projects intended to prevent conflict by fostering civil society) in Central Asia over the past decade. As such, it is part of a sustained project by the author to explore the production of geographical knowledge about Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan as dangerous places and the different modalities of the exercise of power in which the practices of this knowledge are embedded.<sup>33</sup> As its inclusion in this special issue indicates, this is also a collaborative, cross-disciplinary project.

Interrogations of development such as these inevitably raise the question about how it can be done ‘better’. This is a misunderstanding of the theoretical position articulated above. The pressing need is not to chart a better way to do conflict prevention by the creation of civil society in Central Asia. That may or may not be a reasonable question: whether it is remains to be seen. Rather, the pressing need is to liberate Western discourse about Central Asia, including academic Central Asian studies, from the spaces mapped by the engagement with the conflict prevention industry. This should enable us to better tell whether this is in fact the most appropriate question and begin to generate relevant answers to the social and political problems that manifestly exist in Central Asia. This process can be advanced in a number of ways, including the type of research characterised by this special issue. It will include ethnographies of the conflict prevention industry, especially when aid exacerbates tensions and degrades existing expressions of civil society.<sup>34</sup> It will involve listening to those Central Asian commentators who have repeatedly expressed hostility and opposition to the power/knowledge nexus of foreign development ‘aid’ to Central Asia.<sup>35</sup> In order to draw on their experience, it will necessitate hearing the voices of indigenous scholars, by addressing their marginalisation in East–West engagements that are ostensibly designed to facilitate equal exchange.<sup>36</sup> Whatever, it must critically and reflexively assess the methods by which knowledge of Central Asia as a dangerous place to be rescued from itself by the intervention of foreign developers is constructed and the way that power relations sustain and are sustained by that knowledge. The old proverb insists that ‘charity begins at home’: so, in more ways than one, does the Central Asian conflict prevention industry.

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